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Encore project reviving neighborhood and economy

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JIM REED/Staff

This view of the Encore project is from the roof of the senior high-rise Ella apartment building.

Central Tampa is undergoing a long overdue revitalization that will boost small businesses and lift our neighborhoods and downtown. Many of us remember Central Park Village on the north side of downtown: old, dilapidated public housing that scared off investment in the area. Crime was a problem. Much of the neighborhood was synonymous with blight. There was little sense of hope. Our neighbors who lived there and the local small businesses surrounding Central Park deserved better. Some of us also remember the Central Avenue of the 1930s, '40s and '50s, a thriving neighborhood with a rich sense of community and music. Central Avenue was dotted with clubs, restaurants, movie theaters and businesses. Ray Charles, a resident of Central Avenue, recorded his first song there. Downtown Tampa and Ybor City were alive and well. Construction of the interstate carved up the vibrant area and changed that part of town. Housing projects of the 1950s, like Central Park Village, concentrated poverty over time. Traveling across America over the past decades, you couldn't help but notice that cities were being reborn. Why not Tampa? Many mayors and community leaders took positive steps, yet that energized, dynamic neighborhood of decades ago proved difficult to re-create. Plans to transform Central Park Village back into a thriving community met obstacle after obstacle. Lack of full support from elected officials. Valid concerns over relocation of residents. Funding challenges, denials and more. Our community did not give up, however. Why? The new Encore redevelopment sits at the critical intersection of downtown Tampa, Ybor City, the Channel District and Tampa Heights. With blight in the middle, how would these areas modernize and grow? Fortunately, the Tampa Housing Authority was interested in remaking the community by turning affordable housing into a contemporary community. Over time, the vision grew and community partners joined to lift the effort, including the Banc of America Community Development Corporation, the City of Tampa, Hillsborough County, and experts in housing finance. Successful redevelopment hinges upon an understanding of how to connect housing to jobs, transportation and education. The old Central Park Village was isolated, but the new Encore neighborhood will tie together downtown and surrounding neighborhoods. The vision, commitment and progress provided me with the leverage to fight for federal investments that I often saw go to other cities. At the heart of the recession in 2010, we successfully convinced the Obama administration to use \$38 million from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to create jobs in Tampa and keep the redevelopment vision alive. President Obama and Vice President Biden announced \$2 billion for Florida High Speed Rail at the University of Tampa shortly thereafter to boost jobs and economic activity in the Sunshine State. The first High Speed Rail terminal would have been constructed right next to Encore if Gov. Rick Scott had not sent the monies to other states. Nevertheless, Encore was on track to transform the area. With the addition of \$38 million stimulus funds and the support of Mayor Bob Buckhorn, the vision for Encore spurred a larger partnership, including the Hillsborough public schools, Hillsborough Community College, University of South Tampa and Tampa Family Health Centers. Last week, the Obama administration awarded our community an additional \$30 million through the competitive Choice Neighborhood initiative – the largest such grant in America. The dollars match the resources of our community for a revitalized downtown, modern housing and transformation of a downtown gateway. Small businesses will see a boost, and economic development will improve. The urban core should not contain housing that is rundown. Instead, we can have a thriving, mixed-use development in the heart of Tampa, linking downtown, Ybor City, the Channel District and East Tampa. We can have what other reborn cities have. We can have a new library, community health center, African-American history museum in a restored church, apartments, senior housing, condos, hotels, grocery store, town square, early childhood education center and a redeveloped park – all over 12 city blocks. We can have an Encore for this neighborhood, as this development is so appropriately named. As Ray Charles sang, "Get On the Right Track Baby." Tampa is on the right track now.