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Encore Project: Rebuilding A Tampa Neighborhood

BY ALEXIS QUINN CHAMBERLAIN | TUESDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2012

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The vision first described by Tampa business and community leaders as part of the city's 2012 Olympic bid more than a decade ago is now rising from the ground just north of downtown in the middle of a neighborhood once marked by nothing but poverty and blight.

The Encore Project, stretching over 12 city blocks and costing upwards of \$450 million, will become home to families with children, the elderly, small shops, a grocery, schools, parks and police and fire services rivaling the best available anywhere in Florida.

With a musical theme reflecting the rich cultural history of the neighborhood long before poverty took its toll, the project is designed to attract a diversity of people who value living within walking or bicycling distance to the arts, museums and food common on the downtown scene while staying close to Ybor City's creative culture.

"I really think Encore will become one of the most unique, innovative and coolest developments that Tampa has seen in a while," says LeRoy Moore,

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senior VP and COO at the Tampa Housing Authority.

First to open its doors on Wednesday: The Ella, a 160-unit senior housing facility, named after singer Ella Fitzgerald who performed in local honky-tonks. Fitzgerald wrote her 1938 hit "A Tisket, A Tasket" while living on Tampa's Central Avenue. Back then, it was known as "Harlem South" among African-American musicians.

Next up? The Trio, a 141-unit apartment building designed for families with children. The Trio is expected to open in 2013.

Then The Reed, another apartment building for seniors that is expected to open in 2014-15.

Also in the works for the much-anticipated project is a grocery store, two office buildings, 300 condos, two parks, a hotel and a new museum. The 100-year-old [St. James House of Prayer](#) Episcopal Church will be converted into the African American History Museum.

The entire [Encore](#) project is a major community investment leveraging public-private partnerships built through local, state and federal collaboration.

The [City of Tampa](#), the [Tampa Housing Authority](#) and the Banc of America Community Development Corporation are the key players financing the 28-acre development.

Located immediately north of downtown Tampa near the intersection of Cass Street and Nebraska Avenue, the project will become a sustainable, mixed-use, mixed-income community incorporating local, affordable workforce housing and recreation opportunities. The project officially broke ground in 2010.

"At the time, when everybody else was dead in their tracks, about three or four years ago during the recession, we had major traction going on at Encore by landing a \$38 million stimulus allocation to build \$28 million worth of infrastructure," says Moore. "That has sustained businesses in this community for the last three years, keeping a lot of families employed."

By seeking out local contractors such as [Baker Barrios Architects](#), [Hardin Construction](#) and [CORE Construction](#), \$90 million worth of residential construction and \$28 million worth of infrastructure was awarded to local contractors employing local workers. Nearly 1,000 people have been employed at the Encore site over the last four years.

Reviving Tampa's Rhythm

Prior to becoming the city's Old Central Park Village in the 1940s, the neighborhood just north of downtown was called the "scrubs," a community known for low-income housing and independent black-owned businesses.

Ultimately developing and flourishing into an entertainment district with music halls, jazz clubs and restaurants frequented by performers from the [Chitlin' Circuit](#), big name African-American entertainers such as Ray Charles and Ella

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Fitzgerald were attracted to live, work and play. Charles lived in the neighborhood for more than three years in the late 1940s -- about a block and a half away from Encore's Ray Charles Boulevard. His first three recordings were made in Tampa in 1947 and included "Guitar Blues," "Walkin' And Talkin'," and "Wonderin' And Wonderin'".

"As we started to redevelop the area from Central Park Village, we wanted to reach back to what existed prior and recreate that synergy and positive energy that once was," Moore says. "That's why we named it Encore. We're bringing the area back for a repeat performance of the Central Avenue days."

An Encore State of Mind

Before the Encore development emerged, city leaders considered the neighborhood for potential Olympic housing and later as part of Civitas, a larger proposed development that also would have encompassed the Hillsborough River and a significant swath of Tampa Heights.

"That area was starting to develop and here was Central Park, a giant 'hole in the doughnut,' that could have impeded further development had we not chosen to redevelop the 70-year-old vintage public housing area," Moore says. "It was our most distressed property at the time and was in great need of redevelopment."

The five new residential buildings (The Tempo, The Ella, The Reed, The Trio and a to-be-named complex) are designed to be 100 percent green with each building receiving U.S. Green Building Council LEED Silver certification or better; the entire development is a LEED Gold neighborhood.

"Encore is evidence that an environmentally sensitive and conscious redevelopment in a transit-oriented city core is possible. It's near a major job center, integrating affordable, workforce housing," Moore says. "All of these elements make for a successful, sustainable community."

The Future at Encore

Pre-leasing has already begun at The Ella with leasing beginning at The Trio complex by February 2015. Plans for The Tempo at Encore, a 203-unit family apartment building also are underway with funding efforts in the works.

The City of Tampa sees greater potential in the surrounding area, having created a Community Redevelopment Area (CRA) for a 120-acre parcel of land north of the Encore project, where I-275 crosses Nebraska Avenue. Encore is in this CRA district.

"The CRA designation gives business and development incentives to future developers of that land, encouraging improvement of the surrounding area," Moore says.

The project plans to create 955 permanent jobs, supporting 1,374 jobs post-construction.

Alexis Quinn Chamberlain, a Florida native and freelance writer, can often be found barhopping on South Howard Avenue, walking around her North Hyde Park neighborhood and daydreaming with her boyfriend and Chihuahua at Curtis Hixon Park.

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