

After false starts, grocery store, hotel deals signed for downtown Tampa housing complex

By Christopher O'Donnell, Times Staff Writer



The Ella at Encore is one of three apartment blocks built at the public housing complex. The Tampa Housing Authority has signed deals with two developers to bring a grocery store and hotel to the complex on the edge of downtown Tampa. [TIMES FILE PHOTO]

TAMPA

An "urban" grocery store and a major hotel chain could soon be in the works for the Encore public housing complex on the edge of downtown Tampa.

St. Petersburg firm J Square Developers has signed a \$2.2 million contract to buy a parcel from the Tampa Housing Authority to build a midsized grocery store at Encore. The housing agency also has a California developer moving ahead with a \$4.3 million deal to build a flagship boutique hotel.

The deals could mark a major step forward for the urban renewal project, which was planned as a walkable community but has struggled to entice surrounding development. About 1,000 people already live in Encore, many of whom are elderly and do not have their own transportation.

"(Encore) has established a diverse socioeconomic population that is now encouraging to retail and commercial interests," said Housing Authority chief operating officer Leroy Moore.

Still, agency officials are staying cautious until the deals close. The contracts give both developers a 120-day inspection period.

Two potential buyers have already walked away from buying the roughly 2-acre lot at the northwest corner of Nebraska Avenue and E Harrison Street that is earmarked for a grocery store.

Publix passed on the site and a deal with Walmart fell through after the Housing Authority balked at the retail giant's request to fill a neighboring lot with parking spaces.

The contract with J Square does not disclose what grocery chain is involved.

Moore said the store would likely be 15,000 to 20,000 square feet, smaller than a full-sized grocery store. For example, the Publix store under construction in nearby Channelside will be about 37,000 square feet.

Local real estate experts have predicted that it could be a grocer that caters to lower-income shoppers, such as Lidl or Aldi.

J Square's other developments include Quattro Beach Drive and a Trader Joe's in St. Petersburg. President Jay Miller would not comment on what retailer they might partner with. "We are in due diligence and studying the location with a few prospects," he said.

The roughly 2-acre lot under contract for a hotel is on the northwest corner of Cass and Hank Ballard streets. It is one of two hotel sites in the Encore master plan.

Moore said he could not disclose the buyer but said the deal would bring a major hotel brand to Encore.

The contract lists CRMS LLC, a legal entity set up in California. State records show it shares an address with ICM USA, a subsidiary of the Maltauro Group, an Italian infrastructure and development firm.

The hotel would include some retail and would have about 200 rooms.

"It's a very stable, very recognizable brand," Moore said. "We're pleased."

Encore, which replaced the aging Central Park Village public housing project, still has a few other vacant parcels earmarked for development.

Selling those may have just gotten easier.

The Ybor City site now touted by the Tampa Bay Rays as their choice for a new ballpark is just a third of a mile from Encore's eastern edge.

That could drive up land values and make remaining vacant Encore lots more desirable to developers. In recent months, the housing agency has had offers on every available lot, Moore said.

"The market is definitely stronger," he said.

Contact Christopher O'Donnell

at codonnell@tampabay.com

or (813) 226-3446.

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