

Developer to add first market-rate apartment complex to Tampa urban renewal project

The Independent at Encore gives fresh impetus for Tampa Housing Authority's efforts to complete the Encore project on the edge of downtown, officials say.



An architect's rendering of The Independent at Encore, a new five-story, market-rate apartment complex planned for the Encore urban renewal project in Tampa. [Transwestern]

TAMPA — In the eight years since its first apartment complex was dedicated, about 660 apartments have been built in Encore, a 28-acre urban renewal project on the edge of downtown Tampa.

But the development, which replaced the Central Park Village public housing

complex, still lacks the restaurants, hotels, businesses and a grocery store that were promised to residents.

Tampa Housing Authority officials are optimistic that is set to change with construction of the community's first privately built apartment complex now underway and construction on another vacant lot about to be sold.

The Independent at Encore — a five-story building with 266 apartments — is being built by Transwestern. The Houston-based developer paid \$4.6 million for the 2.1-acre lot.

And California-based Legacy Partners on Monday put pen to paper on a \$4.1 million purchase of another Encore lot, said Leroy Moore, the Housing Authority's chief operating officer. Legacy is planning a 224-unit apartment complex.

The two buildings will be the first in Encore with all apartments rented at market rate. The community's other four buildings were constructed with a mix of public and private funds and include subsidized housing and low-cost accommodation for seniors.

"This signifies the private sector buying into the brand of Encore, literally buying into the brand we've created," Moore said.

Those who have lived at Encore for several years have endured several false starts.

Publix considered buying two Encore lots in 2013, but decided against the project. Two years later, Publix decided to build a 37,600-square-foot store less than a half mile away at Twiggs Street and Meridian Avenue in Channelside.

Walmart entered into talks for two lots at Encore in 2014, but Housing

Authority officials balked at the retail giant's request to fill a neighboring lot with parking spaces.

Developers interested in buying Encore lots for a hotel and a grocery store also have come and gone.

A barbershop and a pizzeria came to Encore, and in 2018, renowned Cuban sandwich-maker Michelle Faedo opened a 1,450-square-foot diner selling signature dishes, such as deviled crabs, empanadas, yellow rice, black beans and Cuban sandwiches.

But her relationship with the Housing Authority turned sour when the diner closed earlier this year. Faedo's Tampeño Cuisine stopped paying rent soon after she opened a second location in the lobby of the Hillsborough County center on Kennedy Boulevard, Moore said.

Faedo said she was forced to give up on the Encore location because of numerous problems that the Housing Authority failed to address. Residents took up all the diner's parking spots, she said, and there were no signs to let motorists know the restaurant was there. The diner's air-conditioning also did not work, she said.

"I don't think they're ready for retail," she said. "We were doomed from the beginning."

Faedo said she wanted to make the diner work and said the addition of new apartments will help Encore.

"I wish them the best," she said.

Instead of looking for a developer to build a grocery store, the Housing Authority plans to build its own store with about 100 apartments on top. The agency will look for a retailer to lease the store during construction, Moore

said. Sixty of the apartments will be designated as affordable housing.

Transwestern's apartment building will include street-level retail units. The developer also is behind a 490,000-square-foot logistics center built in Lakeland.

Housing Authority officials believe growing the community and the promise of nearby development will help draw more interest to its remaining vacant lots. That includes Ybor City developer Darryl Shaw's purchase of 12 acres of neighboring Tampa Park Apartments.

"He has touted his development as a linchpin. I think Encore works in that same capacity," said Jim Cloar, chairman of the Housing Authority's governing board. "Collectively, it will help tie downtown and Ybor City together."