

Lofts on Lemon affordable and workforce housing project progressing

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Sarasota Housing Authority applies for site plan's approval

The Lofts on Lemon affordable-housing project took another major step forward with the submission of an application for administrative site plan approval, the city of Sarasota said Wednesday.

The Sarasota Housing Authority's plan to build a five-story, multifamily structure with 130 units is designed to help alleviate downtown's scarcity of inexpensive housing.

Lofts on Lemon will sit on three acres in the Rosemary District bounded by Cohen Way, Lemon Avenue, Ninth Street and condos to the south. Groundbreaking is expected later this year.

Sarasota Housing Authority CEO William Russell called the site "the last opportunity for affordable and workforce housing in the downtown area."

Sarasota City Commissioner Hagen Brody put Lofts on Lemon in a broader perspective. "I'm sure the workforce housing conversation will continue, but putting bricks on the ground and roofs over the heads of those that want to live in the community they serve is one of my highest of priorities," he said. "I think this project is a huge step in the right direction and could be a blueprint for the future."

The site plan is scheduled to be considered Feb. 6 at a meeting of the Development Review Committee.

The application was filed Dec. 28, just before the expiration of the Rosemary Overlay District, which allowed 75 units per acre as opposed 25 units per acre.

The project would add 76 units of affordable housing and 54 units of workforce housing to downtown with a street address of 851 N. Lemon Ave.

The workforce apartments are aimed at "hometown heroes," such as teaching, nursing, law enforcement, fire/EMS and other professionals who serve the community in essential positions but lack the income to live close to where they work. The 54 units are reserved for them, Russell said Wednesday, and are for families earning under the median income of \$70,000. Their rent for two-bedroom, 1,080-square-foot apartments would be \$1,266 per month.

The affordable housing apartments are designed for families of three with incomes of less than \$37,980 per year, or 60 percent or below of the area's median income. Their rent for the same size apartments would be \$949 a month.

The development also will include a public park of about one acre.

The surface parking lot has around 123 spaces.

"The community park and 'Hometown Hero' units included in this application will be an exciting addition to the Rosemary District," Brody said. "Most importantly, the application submission secures the increased density the rosemary district zoning overlay offers which makes this project even possible."

In its application, the housing authority included a proposal for a future Phase 2, though it has not asked for its approval yet. That plan adds a second five-story building with 65 units and a parking deck over a portion of the surface lot that would add approximately 65 vehicle spaces.

Project partners include public entities, private interests and one of the region's largest foundations.

The Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation invested a \$1 million grant in the project with a commitment to designate 15 apartments for Sarasota County School District teachers and a second \$1 million grant for 15 more apartments for teachers and other professionals. Those donations will help leverage \$30 million in financing for the entire development.

The city of Sarasota pledged \$3 million for the project in October 2017.

"We are most appreciative of the funding committed to this critical development by the city of Sarasota and Charles and Margery Barancik Foundation," Russell said.

Plus, he cited the Florida Housing Finance Corp. Board's decision to grant the project "very competitive" tax credits. The housing authority and its development partners won 9 percent Low Income Housing Tax Credits "that we expect to be able to sell to investors to raise over \$14 million in equity to help build the 76 affordable apartments," Russell said.

The development partners are Gardner Capital, an affordable housing and renewable energy developer, investor and tax credit syndicator, and Duvernay + Brooks, a New York-based developer of and financial consultant to affordable and mixed-income housing initiatives.

"We are still trying to raise the final \$2 million for the development," Williams said.