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\$20M housing project offers hope to Frenchtown

[TaMaryn Waters](#), Democrat staff writer Published 5:42 p.m. ET Feb. 12, 2017 | Updated 9:11 p.m. ET Feb. 12, 2017



(Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

By the end of the year, a \$20-million affordable housing project in Frenchtown is expected to be complete and ready for leasing. It will mark a new dawn for the historic black neighborhood that sits steps from the governor's mansion.

Hard hat crews and heavy-duty excavators are clawing at land near the 2.3-acre corner of Brevard and Macomb streets. Days are filled with beeps and bangs. It won't be long before those sounds are replaced with giggles and rushed footsteps of children headed to school and adults patronizing businesses that may finally be attracted to the area. At least that's what some in Frenchtown are hoping.

Others cringe at the inevitable traffic and influx of residents.

What's coming is Casanas Village, a five-story, 88-unit apartment building that's designed to cater to low and moderate income families. Each apartment will feature granite countertops and hanging light fixtures. Amenities include a clubhouse, elevators, a gym, a computer lab, a playground and covered picnic area.

Construction began late last year and project coordinators hope to have residents moved in by November.



Casanas Villages, a five-story apartment building for mixed incomes. Amenities within the 88 units include granite counter tops, hanging light fixtures. The property will also have a clubhouse, elevators, a gym, a computer lab, a playground and covered picnic area. Construction began late last year and project coordinators hope to have residents moved in by November. (Photo: Courtesy of the Big Bend Community Development Corporation.)

“Frenchtown hasn’t had a \$20-million development ever,” said Tom Lewis, executive director of the Big Bend Community Development Corp., formerly the Frenchtown Community Development Corp. The group partnered with Pinnacle Housing Group, which also built Goodbread Hills on Edgehill Circle a few blocks away.

Funding wouldn't have been possible without \$16.2 million in federal tax credits from the Florida Housing Finance Corporation.

Lewis, who retired four years ago as the city of Tallahassee's director for economic and community development, said the second most expensive development in Frenchtown was the nearby \$14-million Renaissance building, where the city and county house several departments.

“From the point of view of an urban core and affordable housing,” he said, “this development is the largest ever in the city of Tallahassee.”



A five-story affordable housing complex is under construction at Frenchtown Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2016. The Casanas Village, located near the intersection of Macomb and Brevard streets sits on 2.73 acres. (Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

With a population of less than 5,000, Frenchtown once upon a time was home to more small businesses than now dot Macomb Street and nearby connector streets.

Over the years, stalled growth has been a sore subject for Frenchtown residents. Crime and poverty blighted their neighborhood, while other areas, such as Midtown and Gaines Street, were transformed by explosive commercial and retail development.

This project could breathe new life into Frenchtown.

But it's also been contentious. Residents have attended several meetings with project developers and planners trying to find common ground.



A five-story affordable housing complex is under construction at Frenchtown Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2016. The Casanas Village, located near the intersection of Macomb and Brevard streets sits on 2.73 acres. (Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

Annie Harris, an artist and Frenchtown resident, said the project is too large for its location.

'You're talking about a tremendous amount of traffic. It's about safety and the number of units,' Harris said. "It's extremely high density."

Some compromises include placing the entrance and exit to the complex on Brevard and Macomb streets instead of Georgia Street, which leads to Carolina Oaks. Parking also will be built under the building instead of on-street parking.

Gerri Seay, a critic of local government operations and owner of B Sharp's Jazz Cafe on Brevard Street, said the project doesn't impact her as much as it does residents. She doesn't anticipate it driving up traffic inside her jazz club, which in 2010 was put on the National Register of Historic Places.

But she questioned the need for a housing project of this scale without neighborhood basics, such as a grocery store.

"I think this project was something that the city decided it wanted to have," Seay said.

That may be true.

Casanas Village will add affordable housing units to Tallahassee's inventory, which prompted a special city-county workshop on the affordable housing challenges in October. At Casanas Village, rents will range from \$316 for a one bedroom/one bathroom unit to \$880 for a three-bedroom/two bathroom unit. Most rents will fall between \$645 to \$880 per month or 60 percent of the area's median income.

By comparison, in Tallahassee, the average monthly rent is over \$1,050, with the average one bedroom renting for more than \$700 per month and the average four-bedroom residence renting for about \$1,900 per month, records from the Office of Economic Vitality indicate.

City Commissioner Curtis Richardson said Casanas Village could be the jump-start Frenchtown needs to see more development.

"That's what everyone has told us. You have to have the population density in order for that to happen. Commercial development follows housing development," Richardson said.

The City Commission provided \$341,000 to the Casanas Village in an effort to support the application. In 2007, the then Frenchtown CDC acquired a \$680,000 city loan for purchasing former businesses and houses on the property for a commercial and retail complex called the Frenchtown Square.

However, the project never happened due to the Great Recession, Lewis said. The loan, he added, will be repaid in full. Lewis said he took it as a personal duty to ensure the city was repaid.

"When I left the city, this project had started on my watch. The money was left to the Frenchtown CDC on my watch. I was committed to seeing the city got paid back its money," Lewis said. "That was my own personal commitment."

Contact TaMaryn Waters at tlwaters@tallahassee.com or follow @TaMarynWaters on Twitter.

More details on Casanas Village at Frenchtown Square:

- 20 one-bedroom units.
- 53 two-bedroom units.
- 15 three-bedroom units.
- 8 units of the total are unrestricted and available at market rate rents.
- 2 market rate units with ground floor commercial space for "live-work lofts."
- On-site gym.
- Computer lab.
- Outdoor recreation with playground and barbecue.
- Public art.