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\$12.1 million renovation work begins at Midlothian Village Apartments; complex to be renamed The Belt Atlantic

By ALEXANDRA CLINE Richmond Times-Dispatch 16 hrs ago



Midlothian Village in tRichmond, VA Tuesday, July 31, 2018.

BOB BROWN



Rehabilitation work at the former Midlothian Village Apartments is underway, marking the start of a more than \$12.1 million project that will seek to transform the high-crime residential community in South Richmond.

Community Preservation Partners, a California-based affordable housing rehabilitation company, acquired the 216-unit property for \$17.5 million earlier this year and has started remodeling work on about a dozen vacant units.

“We’ve been on site analyzing and reviewing and doing some repairs to units,” said Joe Doohan, on-site superintendent for Katerra, a California-based technology-oriented construction company working on the project. “We thought to go ahead and do the vacant apartments before starting full renovations.”

Renovation work on the property, located off Midlothian Turnpike across from George Wythe High School, was originally projected to cost about \$9.7 million.

But after gaining full access to the complex, Community Preservation Partners determined that other improvements would be needed, including upgrades to fire and safety systems and new doors and drywall.

The additional changes will add more than \$2.1 million to the total renovation cost.

Work at the complex — it is to be renamed The Belt Atlantic — is expected to begin in earnest in September. The project is largely expected to be completed by August 2019.

“When you get into these [properties], you’re not always shown the worst,” said Seth Gellis, vice president at Community Preservation Partners who is heading the company’s East Coast growth initiative. “The vast majority of the units were in far worse condition than we anticipated.”

Residents of the aging apartment complex, which was constructed in 1971 and last remodeled in 2002, have recently voiced numerous complaints about problems in their units, which they say have mold, leaks and broken appliances.

“My oven doesn’t work, my refrigerator’s old, the central air and the heat does not work,” said Malacha White, who has lived at the complex with her two daughters, ages 8 and 6, for about two years.

Despite the pending renovations, she still wants to move. “I’m hoping to get out of here soon,” she said.

Construction plans call for in-unit renovations to provide updated kitchens and bathrooms, new windows and flooring, and energy-efficient HVAC systems and appliances.

Improvements to the community's common areas will provide new security cameras and perimeter fencing, parking lot repairs, new landscaping, and a revamp of the playground, basketball court and seating areas. The complex has been wired for internet access, but it hasn't been turned on yet.

The expectation is to renovate 12 apartments every 10 working days, or essentially every two calendar weeks. While crews work in each existing unit, residents will be relocated to already renovated units in a sort of rotation, meaning they won't have to move off-site.

After renovations finish, residents will have the option to either move back into their previous unit or stay in the unit into which they were relocated.

"We don't want to be impacting residents any more than we have to," Gellis said.

"Renovations are never easy for anybody."

Rents will not be affected by the renovations, Gellis said. The apartments are Section 8 housing, so tenants will continue to pay the 30 percent of their adjusted income as defined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

As part of the rehabilitation effort, the company also decided to rename and rebrand the apartment complex as The Belt Atlantic. The name comes from a combination of Belt Boulevard, a road located nearby, and the Atlantic Coast Railroad, now part of CSX, that once ran behind the property.

"[The name change] is partly so that the old connotation can kind of go away with time," Gellis said. "You can start to feel that you're in a new place and start to treat it differently."

The project will be financed predominately through low-income housing tax credits from the Virginia Housing Development Authority, which will amount to about \$13 million over a 10-year period. The first transfer of the low-income housing tax credits took place last week.

The federal tax credit program is sponsored by the U.S. Treasury Department and is administered in Virginia by the housing authority.

Though the rehab work is expected to transform the high-crime complex aesthetically in the near future, a change in outlook among residents and the surrounding community will be a work in progress, Gellis said. In 2017 alone, four homicides occurred either on the property or just outside its boundaries.

“Everyone needs to have a home, and they should be proud of where they live,” Gellis said. “It’s also important to stress that this won’t be a short-term turn around. You can’t immediately change attitudes and minds.”

To beef up security, Community Preservation Partners will add a new camera system and full perimeter fencing, and will implement new protocols for guest check-ins on the property. New landscaping also will ensure that no one can be hidden or obscured by overgrown plants.

The company also plans to continue working with the Richmond Police Department to optimize security staffing at certain times each day and to make sure that areas of the property are well-lit and safe.

Some of the work pertaining to neighborhood safety, however, is also expected to come from the residents themselves.

Community watch activity and greater vigilance among residents, Gellis said, will be key parts in the revamp effort, especially since residents have the most insight into who should and who shouldn’t be on the property.

“We’re creating a newness to the community ... and a feeling by residents that this is home,” Gellis said.

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