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Evans Towne Center apartment plan moves forward

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An Augusta developer has acquired the former Marshall Square property in Evans for a high-end, mixed-use development with more than 300 apartment units.

Apartments are coming to Evans Towne Center.

Augusta-based Southeastern Development is moving forward on a nearly \$50 million mixed-use project that aims to give Columbia County's nascent "downtown" what it needs most: people.

The upscale neighborhood, featuring ground-level retail, 301 residential units and a possible hotel will occupy the former Marshall Square retirement community, which Southeastern acquired June 26.

The yet-to-be-named complex planned for the 8.6-acre tract on Ronald Reagan Drive will cater to young professionals and empty nesters seeking an urban atmosphere in the heart of the suburbs.

Southeast Development Vice President Matt Mills said the development, scheduled to open in late 2021, could inject as many as 500 affluent residents into an area that has been slow to take off.

"We believe this will create the downtown that everybody is hoping for," Mills said. "I think it's going to be very well-received."

Southeastern says the project will have 10,000-square-feet of ground-level retail amid six, four-story apartment buildings similar in style to the high-end communities it has developed in Knoxville, Tenn., Hilton Head Island, S.C. and Arlington, Va.

The company also developed the Grand Oaks at Crane Creek apartment community in Augusta near the intersection of Walton Way Extension and Interstate 20, an amenity-rich property whose rents are among metro Augusta's highest, with one-bedroom units priced from \$1,200 a month to two-bedroom units exceeding \$3,000. A California-based real estate company purchased Grand Oaks last year for \$58 million.

Construction in Evans is scheduled to commence this summer, with the hotel property at the corner of Ronald Reagan Drive and North Belair Road at a later date. Southeastern owns and operates Marriott- and Hilton-branded hotels in the Carolinas and Florida.

The company's tentative name for the new "Class A" development is The Premier, a homophone for "premiere" to acknowledge its next-door neighbor: the Columbia County Performing Arts Center.

The \$32 million entertainment complex, expected to be complete during the fourth quarter, is the eastern anchor to 26 acres of county-owned property stretching west across Evans Town Center Boulevard to Evans Towne Center Park, home of the Lady A Pavilion.

The area has been the focus of an ambitious public-private partnership to create a neo-urban district in the mostly suburban and rural county's population center. So far, the only development has been The Plaza, a mostly vacant 58,000-square-foot office and retail building Augusta-based Meybohm Real Estate opened in 2018. The company has options to develop more buildings on the county-owned tract but has not yet exercised them.

Although Southeastern's mixed-use development is not on public-owned land, the county is incentivizing the development through a revenue bond property tax-abatement deal. The front-loaded, 20-year agreement approved through a Development Authority of Columbia County memorandum of understanding will save Southeastern an estimated \$5.1 million in property taxes.

Development Authority Executive Director Robbie Bennett said the incentive will help offset costly pre-construction site work at the property, whose previous occupant, the Marshall Square retirement community, was destroyed by fire in 2015. The land requires significant concrete removal, utility rerouting and soil remediation.

Southeastern purchased the land for \$4.5 million from Georgia MFM Properties, a limited-liability company affiliated with the owners of Evans Fitness Club, which bought the property from Marshall Square's Nebraska-based parent company for \$2.8 million in 2017.

"The property, as it stands now, wouldn't generate much revenue over the next 20 years," Bennett said. "With the abatement, the property will generate 10 times more revenue. (Southeastern's development) is a catalyst project for us because it creates a nice density of what should be high-income earners that could help catapult the rest of The Plaza development forward without putting a burden on the school system."

Southeastern's discussions with the county started in early 2018 when former Columbia County Commission Chairman Ron Cross sought Southeastern CEO Vic Mills' advice on how to accelerate commercial development in Evans Towne Center.

"He said you have got to have the people there to support the other entities," Cross said. "And that was what we were lacking."

Southeastern pitched its high-density development proposal to the historically apartment-averse county commission in late 2019, requesting zoning changes to increase the number of rental units and eliminate the 55-and-older age restriction on residents. Commissioners approved the rezoning 4-1 in January 2020.

"It was a long and arduous process to find a development partner that would work for the site," Columbia County Commission Chairman Doug Duncan said. "We knew the whole concept could fail if we couldn't find a developer with a high-quality residential construction product."

Vic Mills said Class A amenities such as a pool, business center and a clubhouse with yoga rooms, pet spas and coffee bars wouldn't have been economically feasible without the tax abatement and high-density zoning change.

He calls the project a "win-win-win" scenario for the county, the company and future residents.

"The county wins with now having almost 500 live within walking distance of the many recent county improvements," he said. "The community wins by having a multifamily community with a high standards and quality housing at competitive prices."

Southeastern's proposal shows one-bedroom, one-bathroom units ranging from 613- to 894-square feet and two-bedroom, two-bathroom units ranging from 1,018- to 1214-square feet. Design plans show surface parking lots will occupying the center of the property, enabling more than 94% of the units to have street-facing balconies.