

Old Norwood school in Jacksonville converting to senior housing

The nonprofit developer focuses on affordable living for families in its mission to rebuild the Norwood community.

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The renovated Norwood school is expected to accommodate 60 apartments, as well as businesses that serve seniors.

By Tia Mitchell

Jacksonville's Norwood neighborhood could see its first large-scale, new construction project in decades now that the City Council has indicated it will approve plans to convert an abandoned school into senior housing.

The council's Land Use and Zoning Committee already has signed off on the \$17 million proposal to renovate Norwood Elementary School into a commercial development and build two apartment buildings on the 2-acre site. That bodes well for the full council vote Tuesday.

Bishop E.M. Johnson, executive director of Grace and Truth Community Development Corp. and pastor of the church that founded it, said the project would be the largest task undertaken by the 9-year-old organization, which has focused on helping low- and moderate-income Jacksonville families purchase their first homes.

"We knew that housing would be the anchor and the beginning of what would help restore the community," Johnson said about his church's decision to start the nonprofit to address the issues members witnessed in the surrounding areas.

The organization has established a neighborhood association and business association in the Norwood community in Northwest Jacksonville. But the focus has been homes, and so far the organization has built 30 in its target area. Three more homes are under construction and eight existing structures are being rehabilitated.

The apartment buildings, scheduled to open by fall 2012, could quadruple Grace and Truth's impact. There would be 45 one- or two-bedroom units in each of the two buildings, with rents ranging from \$306 to \$613 a month, according to the website. The organization purchased the 84-year-old property two years ago from the school system for \$200,000.

Phase one of the project is a \$2 million renovation of the school building into commercial space that will be leased. Johnson said he expected to attract businesses that cater to the elderly residents or the surrounding community, such as a day care, medical office, barber shop or beauty salon. The auditorium will be revamped into a 5,000-square-foot multipurpose room.

Johnson said he hopes the commercial space, to be called Norwood Business and Development Center, will open by spring 2012.

Phase two, apartments called Grace Manor, would open a few months after and cost \$15 million. Grace and Truth is applying for local, state and federal financing programs. The organization already has received a local and a state loan to help it purchase the school property, conduct surveys and create site plans.

Councilwoman E. Denise Lee, whose district includes the school, said she is supportive of the project because of the organization's track record in building affordable housing in Jacksonville.

"They have shown that they will come in and make major improvements to the community in terms of housing," Lee said.

Grace and Truth set its sights on purchasing Norwood as soon as the school system began discussions about closing the facility. In fall 2008, Norwood, Lola Culver and North Shore elementaries consolidated into the newly built North Shore K-8 school.

The school district also found a buyer for Lola Culver's 93-year-old building, selling the property for \$370,000 to operators of a private school. The old North Shore building located on the same property as the new school was torn down.

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