

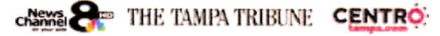


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Harrison Street makeover

Staff photo by MICHAEL EGGER



Methodist Place is going through major renovations including new windows on the north side.

By **KATHY STEELE** | The Tampa Tribune

Published: December 10, 2010

Updated:

DOWNTOWN - A church-owned senior living facility is undergoing its first major makeover in 40 years, while a historic church next door soon will have new life as a community center and history museum.

Though the projects are unrelated, they share the same development company, Sage Partners. And there is hope the projects together will establish a sense of community after construction is completed in 2012.

"There will be a lot of interaction between the two," said company President Debra Koehler.

One link could be the community center at the former St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, which will bring together neighborhood children and seniors from the Methodist Place Apartments.

"The potential is to be almost like a foster grandparent program," said Koehler's partner, Gary Welch. "We'd like to encourage that. They [seniors] bring so much. It's a classic win-win."

The target completion dates for both projects are two days apart, possibly setting up a shared ribbon-cutting ceremony, Koehler said.

The 96-year-old St. Paul AME, at 506 E. Harrison St., is among the

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city's oldest black congregations. But a dwindling membership found itself unable to repair and preserve an iconic landmark whose visitors included Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., baseball legend Jackie Robinson, singer Ray Charles and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall.

Sage Partners is renovating the church as a community center and preserving the congregation's history. A six-story apartment building – Metro 510 – is being erected next to the church and will be leased as affordable apartments.

At the same time, the company is renovating the 200-residence Methodist Place Apartments at 400 E. Harrison St. The projects together will cost about \$45 million, with more than \$18 million invested in the Methodist Place apartments. More than 500 jobs are being created.

The projects are supported by public and private partnerships and include local, state and federal funds. "It needs this work to bring it into the future," said senior pastor Michael Frazier of First United Methodist Church. But because of a lack of funding, he said, "The church is not in the business of doing this themselves."

Sage Partners was founded in 2007 and specializes in affordable, environmentally-friendly housing. Koehler said the company especially likes to partner with religious groups and churches.

About 84 percent of the Methodist Place tenants are eligible for Section 8 federally-subsidized rents – on average about \$187 a month or one-third of their Social Security benefits. Koehler said one condition of the project is to ensure the apartments remain under the Section 8 program for 20 years, and must be offered at affordable rates for 50 years.

During the nearly 18-month construction at Methodist Place, tenants will move to vacant apartments for about 30 days before moving back into their renovated apartments.

The transformation will take the building from 1970s institutional to 21st century environmentally-friendly.

Mercedes Longo, 72, was a relatively new arrival to Methodist Place, having moved in about 10 months ago. She was among the first tenants to have her apartment updated, and added decorative touches to a new feature – open cherry wood kitchen shelves.

A few doors down Marianne Ordogh, 75, was offering tips on longevity: eat one jalapeno pepper, one tomato and one yellow onion a day. A Snickers candy bar probably won't hurt, either, as Ordogh, "The Candy Lady", is known to pass out the sweet treat almost daily to friends at Methodist Place Apartments.

And the Hungarian-born widow recalled how instantly apartment residents embraced and welcomed her and husband, Alex, to the apartment complex 32 years ago.

"I love it. I love it," said Ordogh.

As for the apartment re-do, Ordogh was adjusting. She missed her olive green carpet. And Ordogh preferred a closed pantry to the open shelves that Longo decorated.

Each apartment is being painted and new stoves and refrigerators installed. Plumbing also is being upgraded as bathrooms get "grab bars" for the bathtubs and sink areas. New bathroom vanities will have storage drawers – a feature lacking in the old vanities. New low-flow toilets and shower heads will be installed.

Windows will be energy efficient and tinted.

A sprinkler system in all apartments and commonly-used areas will bring the building up to fire safety standards.

In the details, residents will find unexpected senior-friendly touches such as knobs to the front rather than the rear of the stove top.

A small kitchen area on the first floor will support special events, such as parties or holiday gatherings. And the complex's office space, which now is tucked in a small room off the first floor hallway, will be moved closer to the lobby.

Security is being upgraded with more video cameras. Residents will have access on their televisions to channels announcing upcoming

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events and displaying activities in common areas. "We think that is going to be a popular channel," said Koehler.

In a first for the complex, some apartments on the first floor will be designed to aid visually- and hearing-impaired tenants. Residents also will get a fitness center with new equipment including treadmills, a computer lab with free Internet connection and WiFi access, a library, an upgraded laundry room, and a crafts room with sewing machines.

Outside, there will be a bocce court and a community garden enclosed behind decorative fencing. Inside, a brick-walled lobby will add more glass to bring in light. Fish will swim about in a built-in wall aquarium.

"Residents will care for it [the aquarium] and feed the fish," Koehler said.

Residents also can decide what they plant in the garden – flowers or vegetables.

"We're creating the environment for them to do whatever residents enjoy doing," said Welch.

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