

Worker housing projects move forward

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July 3, 2020



Construction of an additional 57 units at The Quarry Apartments continues on Rockland Key. (ROB O'NEAL/The Citizen)

Several important affordable housing projects in the Lower Keys are moving forward despite the coronavirus creating a downturn in the local, state and national economy.

Late last month, the developers of the Quarry Apartments at the old Toppino concrete company property on Rockland Key broke ground on its latest project at the old burrow pits there.

Members of the Toppino family and the Jacksonville-based development company Vescor have started building 57 one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments at the old quarry, said

Richard Toppino, a principal with the project. The project is being funded in part by tax credits through the Florida Housing Finance Corp., Toppino said.

Once completed, the project will be a mix of 16 one-bedroom units, 25 two-bedroom units and 16 three-bedroom units, Toppino said.

"It's an unbelievable undertaking with everything going," Toppino said. "But you can't let that sway you. We have to keep moving forward on these projects. It is more important now than ever to provide housing."

The project starts less than a year after the Toppinos and Vescor completed and opened the first phase of the Quarry Apartments on the border of Big Coppitt and Rockland keys. The 208 units are a mix of one-, two- and three-bedroom units serving several different income levels for workforce housing with monthly rents going from \$600 to \$2,400, depending on unit size and resident income.

On Stock Island, the developers of the 280-unit Wreckers Cay apartments are moving forward on their plans. The Miami-based development firm Integra has secured already secured a development agreement from the Monroe County Commission for the project and will go before the county's Planning Commission on July 22 for a site plan approval.

On Wednesday, July 15, the developers will go back to the county commission for approval of a request for the county to abandon a waterfront section of Laurel Avenue to the developers.

In 2008, Integra purchased the Tropic Palms, Water's Edge and Snead Property mobile home parks a year ago and wants to turn the 95 units there into the 280-unit affordable apartment complex called Wreckers Cay.

The Monroe County Commission has also already agreed to increase the allowed density to roughly 40 units per acre and add a third story to the new units while keeping the buildings within the county's 38-foot height limit. The development will be a mix of one, two and three-bedroom units serving low, medium and moderate income levels.

The Florida Keys Community Land Trust, a non-profit organization, is continuing its mission of providing hurricane-resilient houses for working families based in the Florida Keys.

Earlier this year, the Land Trust was approved for more than \$5 million in Community Development Block Grant funding from Florida Housing Finance Corporation. The funding will allow the grassroots housing group to increase the number of units its developing at the Seahorse mobile park on Big Pine Key from 17 to 26, units, said Lindsey Anderson, group executive director.

The project is being called Seahorse Cottages and it will also have a children's playground and public space. An additional grant application was approved to build five additional single-family homes known as The Avenues at Big Pine Key.

The Community Land Trust will partner with Rural Neighborhoods, a not-for-profit developer founded after Hurricane Andrew, for the development of the Seahorse Cottages community, which could occur later this year

"We are thrilled that this financing from the state of Florida will finally allow us to do large-scale community development, which is still needed after Irma hit," said Maggie Whitcomb, founder of the Florida Keys CLT. "We will continue to rebuild and restore our communities, not just of renters but neighbors."

The Land Trust has already built four townhomes in the Avenues neighborhood on Big Pine Key and continues their advocacy for affordable workforce housing in Monroe County. To donate or for more information on the Land Trust, visit <http://www.affordablekeys.org>.