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Developer proposes 72-unit artist lofts for 14th Street West

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BRADENTON — In spite of the economic woes, a developer wants to invest in a 72-unit artist loft project on 14th Street West near downtown.

Michael Kennedy, director of the Downtown Development Authority, said Wisconsin-based Gorman & Company was chosen over two other national firms to construct a mixed-income complex of residences, storefront galleries and studios.

"We were thrilled that three nationally known developers were interested in developing in downtown Bradenton and especially that one was Gorman," Kennedy said. "Gorman ranked first because of its track record and the proposal to build 72 residential units for artists and the creative class community."

Gorman won over Beneficial Communities and The NRP Group.

The 25-year-old firm has completed similar projects in other cities, especially urban renewal areas, where it designs, builds and finances the development.

The project will be patterned after the Gorman-built complex Park East Enterprise Lofts in Milwaukee.

Tom Capp, the chief operating officer of the company, said he was excited about doing work in Bradenton.

The firm has a record of including the community in developing the design for the project.

"Our role is to work hand-in-hand with the community," Capp said.

He said the Realize Bradenton study the DDA and arts community have been doing drew his company to Bradenton.

"The way to accomplish affordable housing is to work with the creative class," Capp said, "and that's what the Realize Bradenton process is all about."

Also, Gorman works with the local sub-contractors in hiring and training as many people in the immediate neighborhood as possible, he said, using job fairs and area agencies to connect the two groups.

The project will be built on the 3.4 acres in the 1400 block of 14th Street West the DDA purchased in late 2005, early 2006, where the Manatee Inns motel was located.

"This removed a really bad influence on the other businesses of 14th Street," Kennedy said.

Robert Chandler, owner of Chandler Classic Cars, 1308 14th Street West, hoped this project and more like it will help in cleaning up the business district.

"I'm glad to see something going on down here," said Chandler, who has been in this location for 35 years. "It'll bring different people down this street."

The 14th Street West corridor, lined with bustling tourist motels in the 1950s and 1960s when the street was a major highway, has changed over the years, becoming crime-ridden.

In the fall of 2005, the DDA embarked on a revitalization project, Tamiami Tomorrow, to clean up the area and create a residential and storefront gateway to downtown.

"It also will become a western gateway to the Village of the Arts," Kennedy said.

This is great news for Kevin Webb, president of the Artist Guild of Manatee, which established the artist community between Ninth and 14th streets west, and south of Ninth Avenue West.

"It's great. It will bring people to the village," Webb said. "I like the idea of a place to live, work and sell — that's the whole idea and vision of the Village."

Clel Smith, owner of Jeffcoat Blueprinting, 1325 14th St. W., said he likes what the city has been doing in the Village of the Arts.

"It's brought people into the area that would have never come here otherwise," Smith said. "I think the live-work concept will be good because it will give people a vested interest in the neighborhood."

His business, which he has owned for 15 years, is located across the street from Our Daily Bread soup kitchen, which feeds the poor and homeless, and the Manatee Glens Walk-In Center emotional- and mental-health clinic.

Kennedy said the DDA planned to close on the purchase of those two properties within days, providing more opportunities for the revitalization of the corridor.

"When this (Gorman) development happens people will see others are willing to invest," he said. "The right project can go a long way to tip the development of the area."

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