

New apartment building brings hope to West Grove

By Nick Madigan
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CARL JUSTE / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Charles Gibson, president of Theodore Gibson Memorial center, listens closely to the words of his mother, Thelma Gibson, left, as she thanks individuals for their support. The groundbreaking ceremony for the Gibson Plaza was held in Coconut Grove on Monday, April 28, 2014.

With an almost palpable optimism in the air, residents of one of Miami's most forsaken neighborhoods watched Monday as ground was broken for a development project that they hope will be a catalyst for the kind of growth that much of the rest of South Florida has long taken for granted.

Construction of the five-story apartment building, to be called Gibson Plaza, is expected to begin Tuesday in a vacant lot on Grand Avenue in the West Grove, a neighborhood founded by Bahamian immigrants in the 1870s. Gibson Plaza will have 56 apartments, most of them for the elderly, and an educational facility run by Miami Dade College that is intended to provide training and workforce programs for residents of the area. The \$15 million building is scheduled for completion in about 15 months.

"I'm overwhelmed with joy," said Henry Givens, the 73-year-old former director of the Coconut Grove Economic Development Center, who was not directly involved in Gibson Plaza but has tried over the years to get various projects off the ground in the area. "This event today will make something happen. I think it's a spark."

Under a white tent on the site of the project, fans blowing to ward off the rising heat, a large crowd heard community leaders and politicians take stock of the development's significance.

"Hope lives once again in beautiful Coconut Grove," the Rev. Barbara Baptiste-Williams, an assistant priest at Christ Episcopal Church, intoned in her invocation. "Be proud, Coconut Grove; be proud, city of Miami, because a jewel is being formed before your very eyes."

Once it's finished, Gibson Plaza will be the first multi-family, so-called "affordable housing" structure to go up in the West Grove in some five decades, according to its builder, Pinnacle Housing Group, which is working on the project alongside the Collaborative Development Corp., the Theodore Roosevelt Gibson Memorial Fund, which is leasing the land to Pinnacle; and Miami Dade College, whose activities on the site will be funded by the Mitchell Wolfson Sr. Foundation.

"This is a game-changer for the city of Miami and the West Grove," Mayor Tomás Regalado told the crowd. "We're sending the message that progress comes to every neighborhood."

Anyone looking at the West Grove in years past would have thought that statement at odds with reality. It was one of the last places in Miami to get sewer hook-ups, and its housing stock was dilapidated at best. For years, almost no one opened a new business on Grand Avenue, the main thoroughfare, even as it continued to be the easiest route from Dixie Highway to Coconut Grove's tonier district by the bay.

The new housing project is being named after Thelma Gibson, 87, and her late husband, Theodore, who were instrumental in assembling 11 parcels of land into the single acre on which the construction will take place. "This is a big day that's been a long time coming," said Thelma Gibson, who recalled going to her grandmother's on one of those lots to fetch freshly made bread with her brothers. More recently, she insisted that any development on the site include an "educational component" with job-training programs that might lift some of the area's residents out of poverty.

"It has always been a dream of ours to have affordable housing, continuing education and after-school programs for children running side by side," she said. The new development, Gibson went on, will bring one step closer the improvement of the West Grove.

Gibson and others had kind words for Miami-Dade Commissioner Xavier Suarez, who pushed \$9 million in bond funding toward the project, and Jihad S. Rashid, president of the Collaborative Development Corp., a nonprofit entity based across the street from the Gibson project that helped to make it happen.

After waiting for a standing ovation to die down, Rashid reminded the crowd that there had been a "history of disinvestment and disenfranchisement" in the West Grove, and remarked on the irony of expensive hotels and condominiums perfectly visible only a few blocks to the east. Rashid also cautioned against the danger that the neighborhood's longtime residents will be pushed out by construction projects and investors looking for profits.

"If they get gentrified out in the name of progress, I don't think that's progress," Rashid said. Still, he concluded, Gibson Plaza is a huge step forward.

"This is a beginning," he said. "It's a victory over inertia."

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