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Gibson Plaza project to break ground this month in Coconut Grove

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On April 28, the city of Miami, working with the Coconut Grove Collaborative, will break ground on the Theodore R. Gibson Apartments & Thelma V.A. Gibson Educational Center.

After decades of enduring neglect and broken promises, residents of Miami's West Grove neighborhood will soon see a bricks-and-mortar commitment to the notion of a more prosperous future.

On April 28, a nonprofit developer will break ground on Gibson Plaza, a \$15 million, five-story apartment building that will be the first significant construction project in the heart of the West Grove in half a century or more.

The new development will consist of 56 rental apartments, most of them affordable housing units tailored to elderly, low-income tenants, along with a job-training center run by Miami Dade College on the ground floor.

That development cost works out to about \$264,000 per taxpayer-funded unit.

The structure will feature architectural motifs from the Bahamas, a nod to the neighborhood's first settlers in the 1880s.

"It's been a long time coming," said Thelma Gibson, 87, perhaps the neighborhood's most visible figurehead, whose last name the project bears. Over many years, she and her late husband managed to buy 11 lots from their neighbors, and it is on that land, now owned by the Theodore R. Gibson Memorial Fund, that the structure will be built. "It's long overdue. We've been waiting for it."

Another development in the West Grove, much larger than Gibson Plaza and first proposed in 2008, is going ahead after running into various roadblocks, the most recent being last year's moratorium on sewer hookups, said developer Peter Gardner, chief executive of Pointe Group Advisors. His plans call for six square blocks of businesses and homes at the east end of Grand Avenue at a cost of about \$200 million, a reduction from its first reported price of more than \$300 million.

"Pointe Group is moving ahead with our Grand Avenue investment and development projects in Coconut Grove," Gardner wrote in an email. "We are on plan and moving as fast as circumstances allow."

Sandwiched between its well-off neighbors, Coconut Grove and Coral Gables, and having long struggled to emerge from their reputational shadow, the West Grove's residents consider themselves the forgotten stepchildren of Miami and its environs, an area that for the most part has seen spectacular growth in the last century. The West Grove has not, despite sporadic and sometimes well-intentioned efforts to the contrary.

"The residents here have never gotten what they deserve," said Jihad Rashid, president of the Collaborative Development Corp., the nonprofit entity that helped get the Gibson project off the ground. It is also working with partners to buy a half dozen dilapidated and condemned houses in the West Grove, pull them down and build new ones in their place.

"This community has aspirations," he went on. "We want jobs, revitalization. We want to engage commerce and entrepreneurship, just like everybody else does. We want coffee shops and bakeries and other businesses that are going to make this community better."

On Grand Avenue, a thoroughfare whose humdrum condition belies its elegant name, news that something concrete might actually be happening to nudge the neighborhood's fortunes along was met the other day with an "I'll believe when I see it" ethos.

"Really?" asked Walter Daniels, the owner of Mr. Walt's, a barbershop and shoe-repair store, who had not heard about the Gibson project. "I hope they have room for me."

Daniels, who opened his first business, a clothing store, on Grand Avenue 46 years ago, has seen a lot of promises come and go. "You can't stop progress," he said, almost wistfully, as though there had been any progress that might need stopping. Then, buoyed by the idea that Gibson Plaza and other potential developments might raise the tenor of the neighborhood, he said, "I'm looking forward to all those tourists coming down here."

That is one of the goals of Rashid and his cohorts in the neighborhood, a place with a distinctly different look and feel from Coconut Grove's downtown, the Center Grove, a few blocks to the east, where visitors stroll through boutiques and yacht owners dock for lunch by the bay. "The stark contrast is embarrassing to both sides," Rashid said. "It doesn't speak to the equity that America promises for its citizens."

Rashid foresees a West Grove revived not only by Caribbean-themed restaurants and stores but by a housing stock designed to appeal to workers — concierges, waiters — from Coconut Grove's hotels, restaurants and condominium towers. In addition, Rashid is an avid proponent of renaming his neighborhood "Village West," a moniker suggested years ago that has never truly taken hold. "It's branding," he said. "We want to establish a new cachet."

In any case, no project being contemplated for the West Grove comes close in scope to some of the other developments in the Miami area, at least one of them within easy walking distance. Construction workers on the site of the former Grand Bay Hotel in Coconut Grove are toiling on a pair of spiraling, 20-story residential towers to be called the Grove at Grand Bay, which will include "customizable" penthouses with 10,100 interior square feet and every conceivable amenity. A unit in one of the towers was advertised recently for \$4.4 million.

Gibson Plaza, on an acre of land across the street from the shuttered Ace movie theater, a hair salon and a deli, is being funded largely by Miami-Dade County using bond money approved by voters in 2004. The project also will get money from a city of Miami housing subsidy and tax-credit equity from Wells Fargo Community Lending and Investment.

“There’s a wonderful opportunity here to create something truly transformational in a moribund part of Miami-Dade County,” said Homer Whitaker, an aide to Miami-Dade County Commissioner Xavier L. Suarez, who helped push the financing. “The history of Coconut Grove is really quite unfortunate, but better times are coming.”

A granddaughter of Bahamian immigrants, Thelma Gibson said she insisted that any new development on her family’s land include an educational component. The original idea was to have it be operated by the University of Miami School of Education, but when that plan foundered, Miami Dade College stepped in. The college is receiving \$1.5 million in “operational support” for the educational center from the Mitchell Wolfson Sr. Foundation, named after the college’s co-founder.

“It’s exciting for people to know that there will be opportunities in their own backyard,” Gibson said. “We will be doing some exciting things for the residents who will be able to come in and get some additional skills, like learning to use a computer.”

Juan C. Mendieta, a spokesman for Miami Dade College, said the new building’s educational space will “directly serve the residents in that community with job and technology training, and other related services still being finalized.” He said it will be a “model facility with immense potential that could be replicated elsewhere in the community.”

Gibson Plaza’s builder is Pinnacle Housing Group, which specializes in affordable housing projects in partnership with community organizations. Pinnacle was heavily involved in projects in Little Havana and Wynwood more than a dozen years ago that proved to be “catalysts for change and improvement,” said Michael Wohl, the company’s president, who envisages a similar path with the construction of Gibson Plaza, which could be ready to open in about 15 months.

“There hasn’t been any residential development there,” Wohl said, referring to the West Grove in general. “There’s a lot of blight and frankly not a lot of resources from the country or the city for residential development in the area.”

Louis Wolfson, a partner at Pinnacle Housing and the grandson of the Miami Dade College co-founder, said the Gibson project could have long-lasting effects.

“When you put millions of dollars into a neighborhood, it increases the value of the surrounding land, and then other developers see that,” he said. “They feel comfortable investing.”

Richard Suarez already did. After arriving two years ago with his family from the Dominican Republic, where he had owned a small hotel and restaurant, Suarez opened a convenience store in January across the street from the Gibson lot without knowing that a new development was to be built there. He said he simply believed that the area — full of shuttered businesses — would improve with time.

“I’m going to give the public here something they don’t have,” he said in Spanish. “I’m going to put three little tables out on the sidewalk so that they can eat their sandwiches and drink their juice. I have faith in the development of this place. It’s like a little island between two land masses of wealth, but we have the seed for something bigger.”

As he spoke by the curb, a cream-colored Bentley glided by in the direction of Coconut Grove, a blonde woman wearing sunglasses at the wheel. She was not looking for a place to park.

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