

A downtown poised to thrive

It seems every third building in Norfolk's downtown will soon host apartment homes.

New construction looms on Granby and Boush streets. The old James Madison hotel and the Union Mission are slated for conversion. Some already call the Wainwright building home.

To that mix, developer Buddy Gadams, who owns all of the buildings listed above, has announced plans to convert to high-end apartments the Trader building at 100 W. Plume Street. Another developer plans to build apartments in a long-abandoned warehouse on the water near PETA headquarters, and to construct another apartment building nearby.

People create a vibrant downtown; a vibrant downtown needs people. Apartments are the building blocks to fuel that cycle. Urban planners note that cities must focus on downtown housing to support all the other aspects and amenities that make urban living desirable.

Apartments build a densely populated community in the place best-equipped to support it. Residents can walk to amenities such as restaurants and entertainment venues; many can also walk to work. Downtown dwellers can take advantage of public transportation like The Tide to reach further flung destinations. Sadly, they can no longer walk to a grocery store. But more downtown residents create more need for one. Perhaps an announcement of a revamped downtown grocery store will soon follow.

Mayor Paul Fraim singled out Gadams during his State of the City address last week. Gadams has nearly single-handedly rejuvenated downtown's housing district; his company, Marathon, is downtown's biggest landlord. Gadams wisely jumped on opportunities to fill a void.

Fraim said nearly all the apartments in the Wainwright have been leased, more than 80 percent of them by people 30 years old or younger. Along with retirees and single professionals, they are exactly the demographic that is drawn to and sustains a bustling downtown.

City Manager Marcus Jones' vision for Norfolk's urban waterfront also got a boost with the announcement of apartment developments along Front Street. A warehouse that has long been a highly visible and woefully decrepit part of the city skyline finally will have new life. With another new apartment building nearby, the city again has a chance to create some synergy, connecting downtown through Freemason over the Hague to a walkable waterfront.

Norfolk should be wary of overbuilding apartments, especially in areas less well suited for high-density development. It must also ensure that residents of every income have access to housing they can afford; not every apartment must be preceded by the word "luxury."

But having more apartments downtown offers more evidence of a city emerging from a recession, dedicated to nurturing and growing a neighborhood that is also one of its biggest economic engines.

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