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Ocala apartment building boom helps fill the need

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Several apartment complex projects are either in progress or planned within the city limits, filling a need for more housing in Ocala.

Still, the need is greater than what's in the pipeline, according to city planners.

Right now, the project furthest along is 27 apartments overlooking Tusawilla Park. Developers of the Tusawilla Apartments hope to have the \$3.1 million project completed by December.

Plans for a 286-unit apartment complex are pending with Ocala for almost 23 acres near the 3200 block of Southwest 42nd Street. Tentatively named The Retreat at 42nd, the complex would include a community clubhouse, pool, open spaces and almost 195,000 square feet of living space.

But the biggest project in the city is the redevelopment of the 200-plus acre Pine Oaks Golf Course at 2201 NW 21st St.

Last year, the Ocala City Council entered into a redevelopment agreement to bring up to 1,400 new homes to the area, about half either townhomes or apartments. The massive project is still winding its way through the zoning process, and construction is not expected to start until early 2023.

David Boston, planning and zoning manager with Ocala, said while the distribution of apartments and single-family homes in the city are well proportioned, there is an overall

housing shortfall.

Boston said studies show about 35% of people would rather live in apartments, while 65% prefer a single-family home. In Ocala, apartments make up about 36% of the available housing.

However, Boston notes that the city's population swells by almost a third during the day as people come to Ocala for work. Ocala's daytime population is about 91,000 and drops to about 61,000 in the evening.

"What that tells us is we don't have enough housing in the city. People need to come here from other places to work," he said. "What we would like is to have people working closer to home."

He estimates Ocala could add another 12,000 homes to fill the gap, with about 4,200 being apartments.

"Developers could try to target redevelopment where the jobs are. Instead of targeting more greenfield development, they could try to do more high-density," Boston said, using the term for building on open land.

In the city's Midtown Master Plan, planners identified several areas north of Silver Springs Boulevard near downtown where mixed-use projects, including apartments, make sense.

In the county, due to its large size, apartments make up only about 8% of housing. While there are only a few areas of the county with population densities to support apartments, there are opportunities, Boston said.

Marion Oaks, in southwest Marion County, is growing rapidly. The development of the nearly 1,000-acre Florida Crossroads Commerce Park, which includes the massive Dollar Tree distribution center and hundreds of workers, is a prime candidate, he said.

The Pine Oaks project was, in part, targeted at the growing number of workers at the nearby Ocala/Marion County Commerce Park located north of U.S. 27 and east of Interstate 75.

Since 2016, FedEx, Chewy, AutoZone and Amazon opened distribution and fulfillment centers at the park.

Another concern in Ocala is the lack of affordable housing.

"Even if we can reach a surplus of housing, we will still not have a surplus of affordable housing," Boston said.

The Pine Oaks project will include 20% affordable housing, but it is not enough: About 39% of the households in Ocala are considered low-income, meaning they earn less than 80% of the area's median income of about \$39,000, according to a 2017 housing report from the Florida Housing Coalition.

Further, 40% of low-income households are severely cost-burdened, meaning they spend about 78% of their income, on average, on housing and transportation costs combined.

"It's exactly why we want for people to live close to where they work," Boston said. "I think it is catching on. Lately, we're starting to see more applications for multi-family developments. Not much more, but more."