

Ground sprayed for West Main apartment complex
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The symbolic start of a construction site is traditionally marked with a groundbreaking, but the developers of a new apartment complex on Charlottesville's West Main Street opted to celebrate Tuesday by spray-painting a parking lot with the words "Six Hundred West Main," the name of the project.

"We've had probably about two years of design, construction entitlements and approvals," said Jeffrey Levien, who is developing Six Hundred West Main with his wife, Ivy Naté Levien. "We're ready to go."

Six Hundred West Main will include 53 units of market-rate rental apartments that will be constructed behind two buildings, one of which will continue to house the Blue Moon Diner. Four additional residences will be built above those structures.

"I come from an urban planning background somewhat and I think about placemaking a lot," Levien said. "The new building wrapping around the two existing buildings will kind of blend the Main Street of old with the Main Street of new."

The project is the latest example of new construction in the city's core. A rezoning in 2003 increased

development rights throughout the city but encouraged density in corridors such as West Main.

“When you see a crane, that means the project has gotten through the preliminary process, they’ve got the financing and they’ve started to build something,” said Chris Engel, the city’s economic development director. “To be an observer of our skyline over the last few years, we’ve had four to six cranes in the air at any one time.”

Six Hundred West Main is across the street from the new Hotel Quirk, which also is being built behind two protected historic structures. The Autograph hotel at 1106 W. Main is nearing completion, as is the Standard near the intersection of 10th Street West and West Main Street.

“We are tracking on schedule for fall delivery,” said Cody Nicholson, a spokesman for Landmark Properties, the developer of the Standard.

The Leviens bought a farm in North Garden several years ago and soon after learned about the development opportunity on West Main. When Levien met with his design team, he said he wanted his building to say something new.

“I think Charlottesville is a progressing city and I think it’s seeing a lot of growth,” Levien said. “It’s ready for some new architecture and it’s ready for some new design.”

Levien has developed similar projects in Westchester, New York, and Quincy, Massachusetts. He said he did not want another Jeffersonian-type project with red brick. Architects at Bushman Dreyfus agreed.

“We as a team agreed we wanted a building that was forward-thinking for Charlottesville,” said architect Jeff Dreyfus. “We all see what’s going up in and around us on West Main Street elsewhere in Charlottesville. Taking Charlottesville forward into the 21st century has been our real goal here.”

The design will prominently feature glass and steel rather than red brick. Other architectural features include high ceilings, 8-foot-tall windows and private terraces.

“We’re trying to think more toward the expanse of Charlottesville,” Levien said. “The benefit of having those existing buildings is you can hold onto the old and the heritage of Charlottesville and then behind it still be able to build something that’s a little more progressive.”

There will be a mixture of studio, one-bedroom and two-bedroom units. Studios will be about 450 square feet and the largest two-bedroom space will be about 1,700 square feet.

Levien said he did not have prices available at this time. He said they would be priced “higher than the general market” but wouldn’t be the most expensive units in town.

Levien said he opted to pay into the city’s affordable housing fund rather than build units in-house. The exact amount won’t be calculated until the project has a building permit but he estimates the payment will be more than \$100,000

“I think we do our part on a macroeconomic scale of increasing the real estate taxes on this property, which will fund Charlottesville’s budget further,” he said.

Engel said he anticipates the project will bring in \$200,000 to \$250,000 a year in additional property taxes for the city.

The project's parking requirements are being met with a mixture of on-site spaces and rented spaces at the Jefferson School City Center.

The project only proceeded after a market study was conducted.

"We looked at supply and demand, which is huge," Levien said. "If you look around here, there is an enormous amount of student housing and hospitality rooms being built. The only recent vintage of residential is the more suburban City Walk, which is in a much more spread-out environment."

The 300-unit City Walk was developed by Riverbend Development as a by-right project. That means the project was built without a rezoning or a special-use permit and relied upon the underlying zoning.

Levien had to get a special-use permit to exceed the residential density allowed by-right on West Main Street.

"It's all how the public and private work together and how developers are incentivized," he said. "Density is not bad if it's placed correctly and used correctly. You'll see our new building sets back along the way from West Main Street."

The city has spent several years planning a \$31 million infrastructure project for West Main Street.

"That's an entire streetscape renovation with new trees, sidewalks, street furniture and complete undergrounding of all utilities," Engel said. "That's a significant project, and the purpose of a project like that is to not only enhance the environment for existing residents but to help contribute to the continued development in partnership with the private sector."

At Tuesday's groundbreaking, Levien said his development team will donate 600 hours of their time to community service projects in the area.

Levien said the goal is to have the project completed before the fall of 2019.

The owners of the Blue Moon Diner hope they will be able to reopen sooner.

"Any progress is good progress, so groundbreaking means that we're that much closer to getting to reopen and feed Charlottesville," said Laura Galgano, who was on hand with diner co-owner Rice Hall to serve coffee at the groundbreaking.

"I can't wait to see our space tidied up and ready for customers again," Galgano said, adding that she hopes they can reopen by the end of the year.