

## In Spartanburg multi-family construction boom, Robert Smalls development stands out

THURSDAY, JULY 22

### Replacement for substandard Norris Ridge apartments currently under construction



It's a fact borne out in conversations of longtime residents throughout our community astounded by a rate of progress not seen in living memory and evidenced by a rapidly changing physical landscape in downtown and beyond: the largest multi-family residential building boom in the City of Spartanburg's history is underway. Eight projects that will bring more than 1,000 new apartment and townhome units into the city limits are currently under construction, and several more projects on the drawing board could push that number significantly higher.

"As our local economy continues to stand out regionally, developers have identified Spartanburg as a city with a current need for more housing and a healthy long-term growth picture," City Manager Chris Story said. "When you factor in the revitalization of our downtown and the prospects for its continued growth and evolution into a regional destination, Downtown Spartanburg and its surrounding neighborhoods have become very attractive to multi-family developers. We expect that to continue to be the case for the foreseeable future."

But how in the midst of that housing boom does Spartanburg ensure that residential development benefits people at all income levels? One project that stands out on that front and several others is the Robert Smalls at Midtowne Heights Townhomes, a development that will aid two of the City's important community revitalization efforts. The Highland Neighborhood will benefit because the Robert Smalls development will serve as a replacement for the substandard Norris Ridge Apartments, allowing that development to be demolished and clearing the way for much-needed new and diverse housing stock as envisioned by the community's [recently adopted transformation plan](#). Meanwhile, the new Robert Smalls development and its 190 affordable residential units are a welcome addition to the Northside community, whose own [master plan](#) with its emphasis on creating a mix of affordable and market-rate residential housing is coming into clearer focus with every passing month.

The Robert Smalls project also distinguishes itself from the other multi-family projects underway in the city for another, highly innovative reason: the units are largely being constructed off-site, in a factory, before being transported to Wofford Street where they are assembled and finishing touches applied (such as cementitious siding and interior appliances).

This kind of modern, modular construction is a cost effective, risk mitigating means for building high-quality housing used throughout the country, and while the image the phrase “manufactured housing” conjures is typically not flattering, the reality is a construction site on Spartanburg’s Northside filled with units that are indistinguishable from other modern townhomes. The building materials and the design elements would be familiar to anyone who has driven by any other multi-family construction site in Spartanburg or elsewhere.

“There are real advantages of modular homes in terms of the construction timeline and in being able to ensure that building materials are kept out of the elements,” explained Avram Fechter, a partner with EquityPlus, the project’s developer. “While modular construction has become increasingly popular in all kinds of residential and commercial projects, we believe this is the first example of an affordable housing project utilizing modular construction in South Carolina. We are very pleased with how the project is progressing.”

Once completely finished, the interiors will feature modern, energy-efficient appliances and spacious kitchens. Among a slew of other improvements, Norris Ridge families have voiced particular excitement that each unit at Robert Smalls will come equipped with a washer and dryer — the cinderblock-walled Norris Ridge units do not have washer and dryer hookups. Another notable feature will be modern, high-efficiency heating and air conditioning systems, a major upgrade over the window units that the sole source of heating and cooling in Norris Ridge units today.

Indeed, Norris Ridge residents who move into the new Robert Smalls townhomes will enjoy a significant boost to their quality of life. Norris Ridge was constructed in the years after World War II, originally to help house veterans returning from the war. Over time, the apartments were converted to Section 8 housing and acquired by a succession of private companies that performed minimal maintenance during the last several decades.

That is, until the team at EquityPlus came along and acquired the property in March 2020. EquityPlus is a national affordable housing developer with a strong track record of working with local residents to create developments that support the community’s broader goals and vision. In this case, EquityPlus worked with City officials and community leaders to identify the Midtowne Heights area of the Northside as the ideal location for the \$30-plus million Robert Smalls development after the Highland community’s resident-led transformation plan called for the demolition and removal of Norris Ridge.

Robert Smalls at Midtowne Heights will provide new opportunities for current Norris Ridge residents and scores of other families. The development’s 3,750-square foot clubhouse will provide an increased capacity computer center to allow for a range of distance learning, continuing education, and job training and application opportunities. The site is adjacent to the city’s planned new police station, across the

street from its new fire department headquarters, and within a mile of Downtown Spartanburg's central business, cultural and entertainment district.

Existing Norris Ridge residents will be given first priority for units at Robert Smalls at Midtowne Heights once they open in the fourth quarter of this year.

"The Robert Smalls at Midtowne Heights Townhomes will provide a new start for families who have been stuck in poor living conditions for far too long," said Fechter. "Our team is also proud to be able to support the wishes of the larger Spartanburg community with a project that supports two neighborhood revitalization plans. We are committed to building stronger communities and helping families by providing only the highest quality affordable housing. This project supports those goals."