

# New Robert Smalls development to transform living conditions for Norris Ridge residents

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# New 190-unit affordable housing development to raise standard of living for some of Spartanburg's poorest residents



One of the many devastating impacts of the novel coronavirus has been the risk to homeowners, renters, and landlords alike as the nation's economy has buckled and its unemployment rate has risen.

But long before the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problem, housing officials had been grappling with a growing affordability crisis. And while the affordable housing crisis in many large metropolitan areas has received significant media attention, similar stories are playing out in cities of all sizes and in all parts of the country. Indeed, as property values and housing prices have risen — often rapidly in and around desirable downtowns and school districts — gentrification combined with the removal of large numbers of distressed postwar public housing units in other neighborhoods have left many people out in the cold.

All too often, literally.

Spartanburg to date has been spared the worst of the nationwide crisis. While housing prices and rental rates have risen steadily in recent years, the growth has not mirrored the most extreme, exponential increases seen in many communities in the Southeast. And Spartanburg's median home price remains well below both the national and state averages: the average home value in the city of Spartanburg is about \$160,000 compared to \$230,000 statewide and \$307,000 nationwide.

At the same time, much of the city's housing stock — including both its publicly subsidized and "market-rate" affordable units — are aging. Little in what could accurately be described as affordable housing had been built in the city limits since the 1970s until very recently.

Nearly 150 affordable units have been built or are under construction in the Northside, between the [Brawley Street Model Block \(21 affordable units\)](#), the two phases of [Northside Station \(90 affordable units\)](#) and [Northside Townhomes \(32 affordable units\)](#).

Now a developer, new to Spartanburg but not to subsidized and workforce housing development, has broken ground on the Robert Smalls Townhomes at Midtowne Heights project in the Northside. A

replacement for the obsolete Norris Ridge complex in the Highland neighborhood, the Robert Smalls Townhomes will include 190 units, community center, clubhouse, playground, greenspace, and a trail that will connect to The Dan, Spartanburg's master trail network. (For more on the plan to replace Norris Ridge apartments, [listen to our podcast with City Manager Chris Story.](#))

Highland residents and stakeholders recently worked with city planners to create a master revitalization plan that called for the removal of Norris Ridge, a privately owned, federally subsidized complex that has long been beset by high rates of crime. Responding to the expressed wishes and long-term goals of the Highland community, the Robert Smalls development team acquired Norris Ridge in March of this year.

Robert Smalls at Midtowne Heights will provide a new opportunity for current Norris Ridge residents and scores of other families. The \$30-plus million development will include a mix of 1-, 2-, 3- and 4-bedroom units. Each will include its own front porch, back patio, modern kitchens with appliances, and a washer and dryer. The development's 3,000-sf clubhouse will provide an increased capacity computer center to allow for a range of distance learning, continuing education, and job training/application opportunities. The site is adjacent to the location of the city's planned new police station 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 once they open in the fourth quarter of 2021. The project is subject to a project-based Section 8 Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) Contract with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which covers 100 percent of the units and provides rental assistance payments to residents.

The project's development team is led by EquityPlus, LLC, an experienced affordable housing developer with offices in Mississippi and Virginia. And while private developers doing subsidized housing may seem like a novel concept, it isn't.

"There's actually no other way to do this — Congress cut off the spigot years ago for these types of housing developments," explained EquityPlus Managing Director Avram Fechter.

Indeed, the old notion of "government housing" is not only antiquated, it doesn't really exist anymore. Instead of money flowing directly from Washington, D.C., down to local housing authorities who would handle construction, management and maintenance, today private companies partner with local governments and housing agencies to scope out a project, then use a combination of tax credits, free or reduced-cost land, and other layers of financing and incentives to develop subsidized and workforce housing.

The Robert Smalls project will include both subsidized (Section 8) housing, in which people receive a voucher from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development to pay their rent, as well as

workforce units targeted for people who make up to 60 percent of the area's median income. For example, a person making \$29,000 a year qualifies for a 1-bedroom apartment at Robert Smalls; \$35,000 in annual income qualifies for a 2-bedroom unit.

"These are people who have a job — they are your community's teachers, police officers, sanitation workers, restaurant workers," Fechter said. "It can be difficult to find quality housing, especially close to downtown on their salaries. You have to have housing available to your entire workforce."