

THE SUN-GAZETTE

Mixed-use Project Fortifies its Position on Several Fronts

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In the last two weeks, The Lofts at Ft. Visalia mixed-use project has been approved by the planning commission and expanded with support from the city council

By Reggie Ellis

VISALIA – One of the most innovative housing projects in Tulare County history got another step closer to construction last week.

At its Dec. 9 meeting, the Visalia Planning Commission unanimously approved The Lofts at Ft. Visalia mixed-use project that will combine affordable housing, create a community art hub and commemorate the city's history. The project, which covers an entire city block at the corner of Oak Avenue and Garden Street in downtown, is being proposed by nonprofit homebuilder Self-Help Enterprises (SHE), which provided drawings and additional details about the project at the meeting.

"We think this is a win on all levels," Collishaw said.



This rendering was made for a different project that proposed recreating the fort to scale as an outdoor museum in the middle of park. According to the Tulare County Historical Society, the 60-foot by 60-foot fort had 14-foot walls. Rendering courtesy of the Tulare County Historical Society.

Paul Scheibel, principal planner for the city, said the project is the first three-story multi-family and first below market rate housing in downtown since a 60-unit senior housing tower was built

in 2000. The Lofts includes three three-story buildings totaling 81 units, of which 73 would be apartments, seven would be art lofts and one would be an on-site manager's residence would be art lofts and one would be an on-site manager's residence. The units would include 51 one-bedroom apartments, ranging from 600-650 square feet, and 22 two-bedroom apartments, ranging from 850-925 square feet. The project will include a variety of sustainability features to reduce utility payments and to make these residences neutral to the electricity grid. There will also be a laundry room and computer lab on-site to avoid car trips.

At least 20% of the apartments, or 17 units, would be set aside for permanent supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness. Tom Collishaw, CEO of Self-Help, said the permanent supportive housing will receive "wrap around services" including case management for mental health, substance abuse, employment assistance, life skill courses, etc.

The project was a good location for affordable housing because it is within walking distance to the Transit Center, health care, as well as downtown shops and restaurants.

Art hub

The art lofts would be located on the ground floor of the main building and range from 600-650 square feet but would include roll up doors facing the street for artists to display their work. While there is no statewide requirement that these be rented to artists, Sheibel said SHE would be working with the Arts Consortium to find artists who qualify for the housing.

The intent, Sheibel said, is to build upon the success of Arts Visalia, Dance Arts, the Garden Street Art Studio and Arts Consortium office by extending an "art walk" along East Oak Avenue. SHE said the extension should strengthen the arts community while providing affordable residences above the lofts.

The ground floor of the largest of the buildings includes 3,500 square feet of commercial uses including office space, gallery space and community meeting space. The Arts Consortium will use the space to provide arts programs to residents of The Lofts.

"It's a permanent home for arts consortium and program they provide," Collishaw said, "and it's part of an emerging art district within the city."

The Visalia Arts Consortium, whose current building will be demolished, has already given its support to the project. In a May 21 letter to Collishaw, the Arts Consortium's board of directors stated that they have occupied the lot for several years and were looking forward to partnering

with SHE to continue its existing art training, gallery shows and community services as well as pursue an Arts District designation with the city for this area.

“This partnership will benefit your organization in that our constant labor will increase the quality of life for your residents who will have the opportunity to participate in our art sessions, take part in activities that we put on in collaboration with our downtown community, and they will be able to interact in positive ways with the numerous Tulare County residents and visitors who regularly attend our events,” the letter stated.

A historic site

The former Copeland lumber yard will also commemorate the landmark of the city’s first non-native structure. The block is believed to be the site of Fort Visalia, a 60-by-60 foot structure built in the fall of 1852. The fort, with its 14-foot high walls, was used by the area’s first European settlers until it was abandoned and torn down by 1855. It was home to many historical figures including Nathaniel Vise, whom the city was named after, Nathan Baker, the city’s first general store merchant, and Ruben and Osee Matthews, whose grist mill was the first to provide wheat and flour to the area. Mill Creek and Visalia’s first road, Mill Road (now known as Main Street), were both named after the Matthews Brothers Grist Mill.

Collishaw said SHE is also planning a large mural to commemorate Ft. Visalia. No mock ups of the mural have been presented and will still need approval from the city’s mural committee. SHE has also agreed to install a new monument at the corner of Bridge and Oak streets with signage that describes the historic site, relocate the existing historical marker at the corner and relocate it somewhere on the site, and to consult with the Tulare County Historical Society on the mural.

The project was supported by the Historical Society, which appointed historian Terry Ommen as its point of contact for historical questions concerning the project after the board approved of the project at its Nov. 2 meeting. On Nov. 6, Ommen sent SHE a letter outlining the society’s support for a project.

In the letter, Ommen stated that SHE and all construction contractors working on the project will be informed of the historical importance of the site and they will incorporate special care during demolition and excavation, especially during underground work. Any underground structures, footings or artifacts will be reported to the historian who will also be permitted to make periodic inspections of the site during excavation.

“As a historian and a past president of TCHS I believe that the project as outlined above is in keeping with my wishes for the site and is in harmony with the society’s mission of promoting

interest in the history of Tulare County and preserving the heritage of our area for future generations,” Terry Ommen wrote in the letter.

Public hearing

The only person to speak out against the project was Brad Maaske, a local realtor and candidate for the District 3 seat on the Tulare County Board of Supervisors. Maaske, who is campaigning on solving the homeless problem, said he had great respect for SHE and its projects but was concerned that those living in affordable housing would not be able to afford to shop and dine in the downtown area.

“My concern is this, you can’t make downtown succeed if they are the place where you bring people who don’t have enough money to go out to dinner and don’t have buy-in in the community,” Maaske said.

Sheibel explained that that area had already been designated for supportive housing so the commission did not have any discretion to deny the project based on its inclusion of housing for those struggling with homelessness.

Collishaw clarified that although the project is for people making 60% or less the median income for Tulare County, they would in fact be paying rent, but at a reduced cost. He said if a family of three is making \$50,000 per year, by living in affordable housing they have more money to spend in downtown shops.

“One of problems with a lack of affordable housing is that people can’t afford to live if they are spending too much of their income on housing,” Collishaw said. “They have to pay rent for this to work.”

City Councilman Greg Collins also spoke during public comment on the project. He said the project is an important step forward in meeting the city’s need for more affordable housing, but said he thought the brick façade of the building could have been more thoughtful.

“This is in a historical part of community and once this is constructed, people will drive by or have a positive opinion or not so positive opinion,” Collins said. “You always a need to have some context. If the project sticks out like a sore thumb, I think that’s an issue.”

Architect Renner Johnston, principal of Mogavero Architects, said his team tried to incorporate elements of the Spanish Mission style seen at the Transit Center, The Depot restaurant, Visalia

Chamber of Commerce and Family HealthCare Network as well as the more brick industrial buildings that house Arts Visalia and Dance Arts across the street.

“Part of idea of brick is to connect and we wanted it to be historic because it is a historic site,” he said. “Brick is a nice metaphor, but with a more modern touch. We added a historic mural and it ends up functioning as both monumental art and inside space for residents. We tried to find the place between the two.”

Check 1, 2, 3

Collishaw has repeatedly said the mixed-use project “checks a lot of boxes” in terms of government funding, but SHE announced on Monday night they wanted to check even more. Separate from the housing funding the project is already in line for, Betsy McGovern-Garcia, director of real estate development for SHE, said the nonprofit is also applying for an Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities (AHSC) grant administered by the Strategic Growth Council. The \$550 million funding is solely based on a project’s ability to reduce greenhouse gases and is not tied to housing directly. That’s why SHE is proposing other improvements around the project including connecting sidewalk gaps and extending bike/pedestrian trails, pilot projects for fixed route and on demand bus service, and offering free transit passes to residents. Projects can earn up to \$30 million depending on the diversity of projects within their application.

“We need to put together as many programs in the application to compete with projects with more robust transit systems,” McGovern-Garcia said. “But it also promotes disadvantaged communities.”

More specifically, the list of improvements include filling in sidewalk gaps within a mile of the project; connect the bike/pedestrian trail behind ImagineU with the Santa Fe Trail along Center Avenue; extend the Santa Fe Trail bike/pedestrian path all the way to Houston Avenue to create a north/south trail system; provide Sequoia Shuttle with passes for an “artists to trees” program for three years and free city bus passes for every resident for three years; expand SHE’s partnership with California Vanpool Authority to purchase smaller passenger vans to service The Lofts; and even pilot an on-demand, fixed route service to an area not served by existing bus routes and a shuttle service between The Lofts and Kaweah Delta Medical Center.

The council unanimously approved a letter of support saying it would partner with SHE to make the improvements “with the shared goal of mitigating greenhouse gas emissions through the reduction of vehicle miles traveled.”