

Austin American Statesman

Affordable apartments in downtown Austin on track for October opening

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By [Esther Robards-Forbes](#) - American-Statesman Staff

As the sounds of hammering echoed through the concrete shell that will become Austin's newest affordable housing complex, musician Evan Johns leaned on his cane and talked about how a similar development has helped him get back on his feet.

The Grammy-nominated rockabilly guitarist battled alcoholism for decades. A few years ago his health declined precipitously.

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“When I left rehab I had nowhere to go,” said Johns, who is in his 50s. “I was sick and confined to a walker. I obviously hadn’t worked in a while and couldn’t. I couldn’t afford to live in this city anymore.”

Then he applied to the Foundation Communities efficiency apartment complex, Skyline Terrace, near Ben White Boulevard and South First Street. Six months later, in October 2011, he moved into his own apartment. An on-site social worker and substance abuse counseling helped him put his life back together.

“It has been the solution to so many of my problems,” Johns said. “I feel like I can get completely well there.”

A similar facility is being built by Foundation Communities, an Austin-based nonprofit affordable housing group, just one block from the Capitol at 11th and Trinity streets. Capital Studios will include 135 efficiency apartments for single adults making less than \$26,400 a year. Rents will run \$400-\$650 a month, depending on income. A comparable apartment in the same neighborhood normally runs \$1,500 a month, said Alyah Khan, spokeswoman for Foundation Communities.

Ten units have been set aside for artists and musicians, like Johns, and 35 units have been set aside for people who have experienced homelessness. Tenants can stay as long as they like, but most eventually move on to find a bigger place.

Leasing for the building will begin in August, with the first residents moving in around October. Capital Studios will be the 15th housing complex built by Foundation Communities in Austin, and the first affordable housing community to be built in downtown Austin in nearly half a century.

With the climbing rents and housing prices in Austin, affordable housing like Capital Studios is important to make sure that hardworking Austinites are not pushed out of the city they love, said state Rep. Elliott Naishtat, D-Austin.

“I’m not a fan of exclusivity,” Naishtat said. “I believe in inclusivity. Austin should be accessible to all, including folks that are working hard, but are not earning a decent wage, seniors on fixed incomes and individuals with disabilities.”

Several pots of money are funding the \$20.5 million development. UnitedHealthcare provided \$11.7 million for the project in exchange for federal tax credits. Other investors received tax credits from the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs, while the Austin Housing Finance Corporation provided \$4.7 million in the form of a forgivable loan. The rest of the funding came through financing and private donations.

About 80 percent of Foundation Communities’ operations are funded through rent revenue. The rest comes from grants and donations.

Back at Capital Studios, Walter Moreau, executive director of Foundation Communities, shows off an unfinished 400-square-foot efficiency apartment. All apartments will be furnished and utilities will be included in the rent.

Just outside, there is a common area with a large kitchen, an exercise room, a computer lab and laundry facilities. Downstairs, there are offices where social workers and financial advisers will help residents. There will be on-site fitness and nutrition classes, job skills courses and a food pantry.

Johns said he hopes the new complex will help others like him. Since getting his apartment, he’s been able to write music again for the first time in years. He has enough for two albums’ worth of songs and hopes to make enough money to move to a bigger place.

“I feel like I’m getting a second chance at life,” he said.

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