DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION

Artspace project breaks ground

Apartment complex will provide affordable housing for artists

By Luis Carlos Lopez
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Wednesday's groundbreaking of the Downtown Artspace El Paso Lofts that will provide affordable housing to artists and their families, was not without a splash of creativity.

Officials and artists posed for photographs holding decorative shovels next to a table with a leg also made out of a shovel dug firmly into the ground. That marked the future home of painters, sculptors and other artists.

"I think it's great," said local artist Jason Lucero. "I think it's important because it's going to create a hub for artists to gather, live and...develop a community Downtown."

The groundbreaking of the four-story housing complex at 601 N. Oregon next to the DoubleTree Hotel will include 51 units ranging from one- to three-bedroom apartments.

The $12.6 million project is scheduled to be completed by fall 2016. Artists who wish to live there can submit an application next summer, said Artspace director of property development Sarah White.

Rent for the apartment complex will follow the federal guidelines for area median income

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El Paso artist Grave Herrera shows his artfully decorated shovel at the groundbreaking ceremony for the Artspace El Paso Lofts Wednesday in downtown El Paso.

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established by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development.

For example, rent for a one-bedroom apartment could range from $295 to $491 a month based on federal guidelines, Artspace officials said.

The apartment complex also will have about 5,000 square feet of commercial space.

Artspace President and CEO Kelley Lindquist said the artists who live there will host workshops and educational programs. These opportunities are expected to increase pedestrian traffic in Downtown El Paso and will encourage coffee shops, restaurants and other businesses to open in the area, he added.

"It tends to have a good effect on community revitalization," Lindquist said.

Artspace El Paso is a joint project of Artspace, a nonprofit real estate development group based in Minneapolis, the city of El Paso, and the El Paso Community Foundation, a public charity group that helps establish permanent charitable funds and promotes local giving.

The Texas Department of Housing and Community affairs, which provides funding through tax credits, approved the project last year after it faced several funding snags.

Eric Pearson, president and CEO of the El Paso Community Foundation, said the group had applied for the tax credits in 2013 but the department of housing denied the funding because the costs for the complex was too expensive.

The original plan was to make the apartment complex five stories instead of four, Pearson said.

The cost per square foot for a five-story building was about $120.

Pearson said they adjusted their plan before reapplying for the tax credits last year to make the apartment complex four stories high, bringing the cost per square foot just under $100. The cost for the project went from $14 million to $12.6 million when they reapplied for tax credit, Pearson said.

CIC Limited donated the land to the El Paso Community Foundation.

Pearson said the development of the apartment complex will help revitalize Downtown, especially in the evenings, by putting people at the heart of it.

"This is an opportunity that we've been working for six years now," Pearson said. "After 6 p.m., it is quiet. I ride the bus most days Downtown and if I'm out after 6, I'm on the bus alone. It's nice to know that we are going to have a living, breathing community Downtown. That's the one thing that has been missing."

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