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## Lamplighter Inn redevelopment awaits state processing of HUD grant

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Yvette Medina with The Life Link gives a tour in 2022 of the former Lamplighter Inn on Cerrillos Road. Anchorum purchased the property for \$3.5 million to convert it into low-cost housing to help get people out of homeless shelters. The conversion was initially expected to take between 12 and 15 months, but nearly two years later, construction has yet to begin.

Jim Weber/New Mexican file photos

After a lengthy process of obtaining approval from the city of Santa Fe, the Lamplighter Inn redevelopment project is now waiting for the state to process several million dollars from the federal government for construction and rehabilitation of the former Cerrillos Road motel.

“It’s moving forward,” city Affordable Housing Director Alexandra Ladd said of the project. “It’s not moving forward as quickly as anyone would like, but it is moving forward.”

The property was purchased in May 2022 by a consortium of partners to be converted into affordable housing units, about a quarter of which would be earmarked for people with special needs.



The sign at the former Lamplighter Inn on Cerrillos Road in 2022. A letter from the company’s director of development, Jeff Curry, to members of the Casa Alegre Neighborhood Association said the project has been “longer and more challenging than anticipated, primarily due to the city’s administrative approval process.”

Jim Weber/New Mexican file photo

The conversion was initially expected to take 12 to 15 months, but nearly two years later, construction has yet to begin.

Officials say the multiple funding streams for the project, including federal funds that come with stringent requirements for accessibility and energy efficiency, have complicated the process.

“These things always take a while, and when you have multiple bureaucracies involved it adds more steps,” Ladd said.

The city’s own design approval process also took longer than expected, according to

officials from JL Gray Co., the director and general manager for the project.

A letter from the company’s director of development, Jeff Curry, to members of the Casa Alegre Neighborhood Association said the project has been “longer and more challenging than anticipated, primarily due to the city’s administrative approval process.”

The letter was read to members of the association during a March 11 meeting on behalf of Curry, who was not able to attend, by Life Link CEO Michael DeBernardi. The Life Link will provide support services at the apartment complex, already named Bella Luz.

The letter said the developer is in the final stages of completing the engineering documents and will move forward with the bidding process “as swiftly as possible.”

“This milestone brings us closer to our goal of starting construction in the coming months,” Curry wrote. “Initially we will focus on the 16 units along Luana Street. Our strategy is to make these units available for rent in phases, ensuring that we can welcome our first residents even as we continue to rehabilitate the main buildings.”

The \$4.5 million for construction is coming from federal CARES Act funding allocated to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The money must be processed by the New Mexico Department of Finance and Administration, Ladd said, adding the agency is responsible for handling all HUD Community Development Block Grant money that goes to the state.

The city has approved the building plan and the contractor is ready to pull permits as soon as it receives a funding agreement from the Department of Finance and Administration, she said.

City Manager John Blair said at a City Council meeting Wednesday city officials had met recently with state finance officials and Daniel Werwath, the governor’s new housing policy adviser, to discuss the project. Blair described the meeting as “super productive.”

“We’re looking to meet with them on a regular basis going forward to see that we can’t try to stand up the Lamplighter as quickly as possible,” he said.

Department of Finance and Administration spokesman Henry Valdez wrote in an email the meeting included a discussion of the project’s finances and “its adherence to federal funding guidelines, given its reliance on various federal funds.”

“We feel positive about the project’s trajectory,” he wrote. “The state remains dedicated to collaborating with local governments to develop affordable housing solutions, like the Lamplighter project.”

Curry wrote in his letter JL Gray wants Bella Luz “to be a positive contribution to the neighborhood” and welcomes feedback from people living in the surrounding area.

At the Casa Alegre meeting, DeBernardi addressed concerns about a shortage of parking, which had been raised previously by some neighborhood residents.

“What I’ve heard is that city requirements around open space are so dramatic that they actually are going to end up losing parking places there,” he said.

People who live at the complex will be expected to park in the lot and not on the surrounding streets, he said. The Life Link employees will likely park across the road at the nonprofit's offices.

The apartments will be open to people who make up to \$51,000, which is 80% of the city's average median income of \$64,000, he said. The 25% of residents who are qualified as having special needs will have vouchers through The Life Link.

DeBernardi said the intention is not to segregate the two groups of residents.

"Our goal is to make it a community," he said.



**Conversion of Lamplighter Inn into affordable housing awaits design OK from Santa Fe**

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