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Something to Gain

Gainesville celebrates new mixed-use project

— *Randall Shearin*

The accolades have been pouring in for Gainesville, Florida in recent years. The Gainesville region has been ranked the number one area to live and work in the nation by Cities Ranked and Rated. The city was also included in National Geographic Adventure's Best Places to Live list. Forbes magazine ranked Gainesville number 12 in its list of best places for business and careers. The city was included in Fortune Small Business magazine's 100 Best Places to Live and Launch.

With a vibrant and vital civic and social landscape, an enthusiastic population of active and conservation-minded outdoor enthusiasts, and a healthy professional climate with an expanding health care industry sector and a growing reputation as a tech-friendly business hub, that kind of national recognition was perhaps inevitable. And, as college sports fans know, Gainesville is also home to the University of Florida, an institution that is not only the eighth largest public university in the nation, but whose sports teams seem to perpetually be in the limelight. The school's 2,000-acre campus is both literally and figuratively a big part of Gainesville: the center of an educational, research and cultural hub that is home to more than 50,000 students and 28,000 full-time employees.

As one of the hottest up-and-coming cities in the Southeast, Gainesville seems like



Celebration Pointe will have 300,000 square feet of retail when it opens in Spring 2016. The Project also includes apartments and office space.

a natural fit for new commercial development. But, as Tonya Creekmore, principal with the Toronto-based Avison Young explains: "Historically, Gainesville has not been an easy market for either developers or retailers to penetrate." Creekmore's past tense phrasing is noteworthy, because Avison Young is responsible for the leasing and asset management of a project that is poised to break through and become the kind of iconic and defining mixed-use project that Gainesville has been missing.

That project is Celebration Pointe, a \$170-million development that is about to commence work on certain public infrastructure for the initial phase of what Ralph Conti, principal of Atlanta-based RaCo Real Estate

Advisors, one of the partners in the project, expects to quickly become the place to go, gather and shop for Gainesville-area residents.

"This will clearly be one of the more prolific mixed-use projects to come out of the ground since the recession," says Conti.

The size of the project has opened eyes and raised expectations. Located on nearly 140 acres on the northwest corner of Interstate 75 and Archer Road, a completed Celebration Pointe is slated to include approximately 300,000 square feet of retail; a wide range of dining and entertainment options; close to 1,000 residential units, a boutique hotel and conference facilities; and approximately 300,000 square feet of Class A office.

The project's first phase is scheduled to come online around Spring 2016.

Work will soon begin on Celebration Pointe's grand main entry on Archer Road, where a new four-lane primary access road with a dedicated mass transit lane will connect the project to Archer Road and Interstate 75. Another important connective element is located on the eastern side of the site, where a grand vehicular and pedestrian bridge will span across Interstate 75. The presence of these major connective elements to and from points west as well as the City of Gainesville is appropriate for a project that is one of the first projects to be designated transit-oriented development (TOD) in the state of Florida. Multimodal transportation, ease of access, and powerful connectivity are themes that appear throughout the Celebration Pointe master plan. Close coordination with Alachua County and the City of Gainesville has led to the creation of a number of new rapid transit stops both inside of and adjacent to the project. Dedicated lines will connect the project to downtown Gainesville, including such noteworthy destinations as UF Health Shands Hospital and the Univer-

sity of Florida campus. Just minutes away from downtown, adjacent to a cluster of complementary retail, and close to an existing cluster of regional health care facilities that includes UF Health Shands Hospital, the Malcom Randall VA Medical Center and the North Florida Regional Medical Center, Celebration Pointe hopes to benefit from a location that is almost literally "at the center of it all."

In keeping with the sustainable sensibilities of Gainesville, the Celebration Pointe master plan preserves 100 acres on the west side of the project, which carves out a winding network of hike and bike trails that connect the project to surrounding wilderness and recreation areas. Approximately five miles of outdoor trails in and around the project will link Celebration Pointe directly to the 460-acre Lake Kanapaha Conservation Area and the 240-acre Split Rock Conservation Area, and will serve as the foundation for a planned network of what will one day feature over 40 miles of off-road trails.

For all of the integrated recreational elements and appealing civic resources, it is the project's commercial potential that has

Tonya Creekmore most excited: "Retailers and restaurants perform very well in Gainesville. The desire to expand into Celebration Pointe is driven by the project's strong demographics, mix of residents, hospitality and entertainment uses, the office park and the walkable environment."

In a city on the rise, it seems that Celebration Pointe has the potential to be a regional crown jewel: an extraordinary new mixed-use community resource that is both uniquely Gainesville and a powerful regional draw. That potential is on the cusp of being fulfilled with construction preparation underway and anticipation of coming out of the ground soon. Conti says that many of the project details will be unveiled in the very near future: "We have tremendous momentum going into the RECon show in Las Vegas and we look forward to making some very significant announcements in the coming weeks." ■