

New apartments raise the bar on USF housing — and maybe the neighborhood



Tampa — Ultra-modern, high-rise apartment buildings are soon to be the norm in neighborhoods that flank the University of South Florida, a response to out-of-state enrollment that has tripled since 2010.

In the past year, four new or rebuilt student housing projects sprouted blocks from campus: Uncommon Tampa apartments on 42nd Street, Haven 46 apartments on 46th Street, **The Ivy on Jefferson Commons Drive** and IQ Apartments on Bruce B. Downs Boulevard.

Combined, they will house more than 2,700 tenants by fall 2017, some drawing students with perks such as wall-mounted flat-screen televisions, quartz countertops and Bluetooth shower heads for streaming music.

The off-campus development coincides with on-campus construction of a mixed-use residence hall — attached to a planned Publix — that will house another 2,165 students, boosting the current capacity to about 7,000.

“It already feels like more of a college town from 10 years ago, and with all of the new housing and the new students around here it will definitely have that big college feel,” said James Santana, 18, a freshmen at USF who grew up in the university area.

Students may not be the only people benefitting from the building boom.

Civic boosters for low-income communities in the shadow of the university say the influx of new residents could help breathe new life into the area.

“USF is like the yolk of an egg where everything feeds off it,” said Hillsborough County Commissioner Victor Crist, a USF graduate and founder of the nonprofit University Area Community Development Corp.

“It’s right in the middle of the county in a very convenient location, and the area around it is a very affordable site that is grossly undervalued.”

In recent decades, two distinct neighborhoods have emerged around the campus: one that draws scholars and another so linked to blight, crime and homelessness that it is pejoratively called “Suitcase City.”

But revitalization in the area has brought a new University Area Community Center, community park, public health center, two magnet schools and a new community library set to open next year, Crist said.

University Mall, off Fowler Avenue, is also undergoing major renovations, and businesses including Starbucks and World of Beer have opened shops in the areas around Fletcher Avenue and Bruce B. Downs Boulevard.

The surge in commercial development stems from more students calling the area home, Crist said.

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"It allows that intellectual stimulation to commingle with the rest of the community there, and when you live in that kind of environment it pulls you up," Crist said. "You improve the environment and it improves you."

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Ana Hernandez, assistant vice president of USF Housing & Residential Education, said she began noticing a culture change on the campus in 2008, with the arrival of the 230,000-square-foot Marshall Student Center as the new hub for students.

The following year, USF opened a 1,000-bed dorm facility called Juniper-Poplar Hall, bringing the number of on-campus residents to about 5,300.

Since then, the university has expanded incentives for students to live on campus. That includes the creation of 13 "living-learning" communities since 2009, grouping students in dorm rooms by field of study.

It has also increased its academic profile, drawing more students from out of state and overseas. Since the spring 2010 semester, the number of out-of-state students has jumped from 2,222 to 6,710.

USF Housing has struggled to keep up with demand, Hernandez said. Dorms have operated at 100 percent capacity for several years, and the school has doubled up occupancy in single-student rooms.

"We have, in the past, not been able to accommodate many transfer students," she said. "Traditionally, we've had 150 to 200 transfer students out of the 6,000 or so that arrive on campus every year. There's definitely a pent up demand."

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That demand attracted developers such as Rip Panos, vice president of CBG Building Co., which has worked on CA Student Living's prefabricated, 161-unit Uncommon Tampa apartments since last July and expects to open the project Aug. 14. Less than a block from campus, it is already nearing capacity.

"USF is such a large and well-known school, and CA Ventures was attracted to the large demand here," Panos said. "There are lots of apartment buildings in the area, and as a result the economy is doing a little bit better and a lot of developers are seeing this great cost-effective area."

Uncommon Tampa brings luxury amenities — Bluetooth shower heads and wall-mounted TVs — along with a retail coffee bar, a game room, a courtyard with kitchens and grills, and a swimming pool with fountains.

Haven 46 opens in fall 2017 with its own coffee bar, as well as a cyberlounge and tech-enabled study rooms, a covered parking garage and shuffleboard courts. **The Ivy**, a renovation of an existing complex, is already pre-leased for this fall and has a yoga room, spin room, outdoor spas, outdoor theater pavilion, dog park, and cabanas with televisions and gaming systems.

The Collier Companies' IQ Apartments, across the street from USF next to the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital, opens this fall with a saltwater pool, tanning beds and Bluetooth-equipped door locks that allow residents' smart phones to wirelessly unlock their front doors.

"While there is a decent supply of student housing in the area, there hasn't been a plethora of new projects in the last five years of housing with a certain level of what students are looking for in today's world with all the bells and whistles," said Jay Williams, co-founder and president of Haven Communities.

"We fulfill a need."

The new apartments, which rent from the mid-\$800s to the low \$1,000s, range from a village of about 20 three-story buildings at **The Ivy** to multiple six-story, midrise buildings at Uncommon Tampa.

They exemplify the kind of walkable community Crist and others in groups such as the Tampa Innovation Alliance have envisioned for the USF area.

Still, there is work to be done before the area is seen as a safe, stable community, Crist said.

That's why parents Mary and Bill Battles sought out a USF police officer last week for advice about off-campus safety while their 18-year-old son talked to other students about campus life at his orientation.

"When we got outside the immediate area it was a little 'eh,' so I feel a bit better now," said Mary Battles, of Daytona Beach.

"When we came for his tour, they told us about all the changes going on and all the new construction, so we're excited to see it come in. We were really excited when he chose USF, and we still are."