

Gas Worx to link Tampa's past, future

Land once home to the city's Afro-Cubans, altered by urban renewal, is slated to become a walkable, bikeable community.

BY SUE CARLTON

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TAMPA — It's not every day a routine meeting of elected officials getting a look at a developer's plans turns into a love-fest. But for a project called Gas Worx, it did.

In August, the master plan for an urban community slated to rise between Ybor City and the Lee Roy Selmon Expressway — land now largely vacant or occupied by old warehouses — went before the Tampa City Council for a rezoning request crucial to moving it forward.

It turned out to be a pretty safe bet.

In a town currently undergoing transformations from Water Street to West-shore, Gas Worx is slated to have up to 5,000 residences in the city's urban core with 500,000 square feet of office space and 140,000 of retail. Also included: 325 units of affordable housing — which developers called the largest such private commitment in the city to date.

Details in the 41-acre plan reflect Tampa's ongoing makeover: A park with a bandshell and green space replacing a traffic roundabout (subject to city approval). A warehouse repurposed into a food hall, maybe a brewery, with a cool industrial vibe. An area once altered by urban renewal remade into a bike- and pedestrian-conscious community with condos and apartments, tree-shaded streets, miles of sidewalk, wide multiuse trails and a stop for residents to catch the free streetcar.

Council member Lynn Hurtak said her favorite thing about the renderings of the project was "how I never saw a car in it."

Janet Scherberger, president of the nonprofit Walk Bike Tampa, told the council that when the group met with developers and looked at the plans, "a few of us were literally brought to tears by what we saw."

"This is a project that really has the potential to be one of Tampa's best in terms of people-centric planning," she said.

Gas Worx is a joint venture between real estate investor Darryl Shaw, who retired as CEO of the BluePearl national veterinary company this year, and Kettler, a Washington D.C.-based real estate firm.

The project is expected to reconnect Ybor City, Tampa's historic Latin quarter, with the thriving Channel District neighborhood along the port, the tony new high-rises of Water Street and Encore, the mixed-use redevelopment district at downtown's edge. The city's historic grid would be restored with nearly 2 miles of new streets.

"That's what's so neat about that project — you can fill in those spaces and really connect those parts of the city again" that over time had been divided by highways and large industrial projects, the Tampa Bay History Center's Rodney Kite-Powell told the Tampa Bay Times.

In fact, the area is steeped in the city's past.

Historically, the western portion was home to Tampa's Afro-Cuban community from the 1890s through the 1930s, Kite-Powell said. Its Sociedad La Union Marti-Maceo was the only mutual aid society building in the area to be demolished as part of the urban renewal program to tear down old structures and build new ones, with the club moving to a less opulent location. The Gas Worx name is a nod to the gas company and the gas storage facility that once stood there, a local landmark that was sometimes painted with ads for cigars.

In the 1960s, an apartment complex was built at the eastern edge of downtown as housing for longshoremen who worked at the nearby port. For years, the Tampa Park Apartments were low-income housing in one of the last military barracks-style complexes in the city. The Gas Worx site was a planned location for a new Rays stadium before the deal

This rendering shows a pedestrian promenade at Gas Worx, a proposed mixed-use development between Ybor City and downtown Tampa. An initial master plan for the project is being filed with the city by real estate investor Darryl Shaw and lead developers Kettler, a Washington, D.C., real estate firm. *Design Collective | Kettler*

The site of the now-vacant Tampa Park Apartments, shown in 2021, will become part of the Gas Worx development. *Luis Santana | Times (2021)*

broke down.

Support for Gas Worx at the meeting — no one spoke in opposition — drew some notables.

Retired appeals court judge and former state attorney E.J. Salcines, a Tampa native, called the plan “a massive transfusion that will revitalize an area that has been not only dormant, but almost dying.”

Restaurateur Richard Gonzmart of the Columbia, Ulele and Goody Goody restaurants spoke of how urban renewal came through and how children of the families once there had moved out to the suburbs. Ybor-born council member Charlie Miranda talked of the demise of a community with cigar factories gone dormant and an expressway coming through, among other factors.

The Gas Worx project will be “history repeating itself,” Gonzmart said, turning the area back into a place where residents walk, bike and ride the streetcar. “I just can’t wait,” he said.

Shaw and his partners have spent at least \$70 million putting together the land since 2014. The project is bordered by Adamo Drive on the south — including the Four Green Fields Irish Pub that reopened in an old warehouse at the edge of the Channel District — by N 15th Street on the east, E Fifth Avenue to the north and Scott Street to the west.

The tallest structures will be built closer to the expressway, with buildings gradually getting shorter toward the Ybor historic district, which encloses a piece of the project and has height and architectural restrictions.

“We are committed to preserving the unique sense of place and history that makes Ybor City special while still providing true transit-oriented development, a diverse mix of housing and retail, and a purposeful home to the arts,” Shaw said in a statement.

He has said he hopes to see a “very material transformation” there within five years and the project built out in as few as 10. Developers are set to break ground on the site of the old Tampa Park Apartments in September with plans for two five-story residential and retail buildings.

Before City Council members unanimously approved the rezoning — something they would do again weeks later at a second public hearing — they expressed their own enthusiasm.

“This is something that we need along with Water Street, what’s happening in the Channel District, in Tampa Heights,” said council member Guido Maniscalco. “This is going to complete that puzzle.”

“Viva Ybor,” said council chairperson Joe Citro.

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One part of the planned site for the Gas Worx stretches along the Lee Roy Selmon Expressway between Channelside Drive and the Nick Nuccio Parkway. *Times (2019)*

A rendering shows the planned Gas Worx development between Ybor City and the Selmon Expressway. *Design Collective | Kettler*

Business

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