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SUBMITTED PHOTO

This artist's rendering shows the Lofts at City Center, a mix of student housing and retail. It will replace Wood Square, which was destroyed in the April 27, 2011, tornado.

Construction begins on \$100M development

The Lofts at City Center will replace Wood Square

By Jason Morton
Staff Writer

TUSCALOOSA | With a ceremonial flip of a shovel, construction on the largest development within the tornado path of Tuscaloosa was celebrated Monday on McFarland Boulevard.

The Lofts at City Center is replacing Wood Square Shopping Center, the 13.5-acre shopping center that was leveled by the tornado that ripped a 5.9-mile path across the city on April 27, 2011.

And with a price tag of about \$100 million, the Lofts at City Center was the first development to gain approval for construction under the city's mixed-use, or MX, zoning codes approved earlier this year.

"I think it's an extreme honor to even be in the position to bring such a remarkable, high-quality development into the recovery zone," said Robert W. Buchalter, the president and chief real estate officer of Capital Growth Buchalter Inc., which owned the site long before the storm reduced it to rubble.

The development is a partnership between Birmingham-based companies Capital Growth Buchalter Inc., which owned the Wood Square Shopping Center, and Capstone Collegiate Communities, which has developed or manages more than 30 similar apartment complexes in colleges towns Gainesville, Fla.; Baton Rouge, La.; Columbia, Mo.; and Auburn, among others.

As dignitaries and elected officials from Washington to City Hall looked on, Buchalter explained that the development at the corner of 13th Street and McFarland Boulevard will feature retail and residential components, with the retail taking up about 50,000 square feet of the estimated 500,000 square feet of developed space.

The construction alone is expected to bring in 500 new, but temporary,

construction-trade jobs with a payroll of about \$20 million. Once complete, the development is expected to employ more than 150 full-time workers and contribute an annual \$1.2 million in new city sales taxes, officials said.

Buchalter said that negotiations with potential retailers and restaurants had not progressed far enough to name which ones would be setting up in Tuscaloosa by the fall of 2014, which is when the majority — if not all — of the retail space will be complete.

However, he did say that most of the businesses with which Capital Growth Buchalter is talking will be new to the Tuscaloosa market.

"There are several that we are in serious conversations with," Buchalter said.

For the residential component, for which construction is already under way, the complex will be a 1,226-bed, upscale student housing community.

The units will consist of two, three and four bedrooms, with each resident having his or her own bedroom and bathroom.

Per-bedroom rent rates will start at \$575 per month, and college students already have begun signing leases for the development's Phase I, which is expected to open with 608 beds in fall 2013, officials said.

Like other student housing complexes across the city, The Lofts at City Center will have residential common areas, including a 24-hour clubhouse with fitness center, business center, lounge areas, tanning bed, televisions and video gaming systems. There will pingpong and foosball tables in the commons area.

In the private courtyards, there will be both a large, resortstyle swimming pool as well as a lap pool. Other amenities include community grills, sunning decks with lounge chairs and a poolside fireplace.



STAFF PHOTO | MICHELLE LEPIANKA CARTER

T To see more photos from the groundbreaking of the Lofts at City Center, visit www.tuscaloosaneews.com.

Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox speaks during a groundbreaking ceremony for the Lofts at City Center along McFarland Boulevard on Monday. The development is being built in the former Wood Square Shopping Center, which was destroyed in the April 27, 2011, tornado. **WHAT IS IT?** The complex will include a student housing community as well as retailers and restaurants.

Setting The Lofts apart from other complexes is its building arrangement and parking placement.

The project will consist of four five-story buildings built around parking decks and open courtyards, and the street network within the development has been designed for both pedestrians and bicyclists while offering on-street parking for visitors.

In keeping with the city of Tuscaloosa's design guidelines for MX zones, the buildings are placed closer to the street, while sidewalks and trees and street lamps are designed to aid in walkability, and residential parking will be shielded from view

behind the buildings in parking decks.

Buchalter praised the leadership of Tuscaloosa, including Mayor Walt Maddox, the City Council and John McConnell, the director of the city's Department of Planning and Development Services, for implementing a progressive and modern vision of a future Tuscaloosa, which he said was evidenced in the Tuscaloosa Forward redevelopment plans.

"What you see now is progress at work," Buchalter said. "And the finished property you'll see at this site will be that of (the developers) and the city of Tuscaloosa."

U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby, RTuscaloosa, agreed with Buchalter's assessment of Tuscaloosa's leaders and the vision that has been laid out for Tuscaloosa's recovery zone.

"I like what the council and the leadership and the mayor have done," said the state's senior senator who is from Tuscaloosa, and who has known the Buchalter family for 50 years. "This is a 100-year opportunity, and I think they're on the right road."

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