



The groundbreaking ceremony for the Gussie Belle Commons on Thursday, Jan. 9 (Ardeshir Tabrizian/Salem Reporter)

COMMUNITY

As Salem's housing crisis persists, another affordable development signals hope

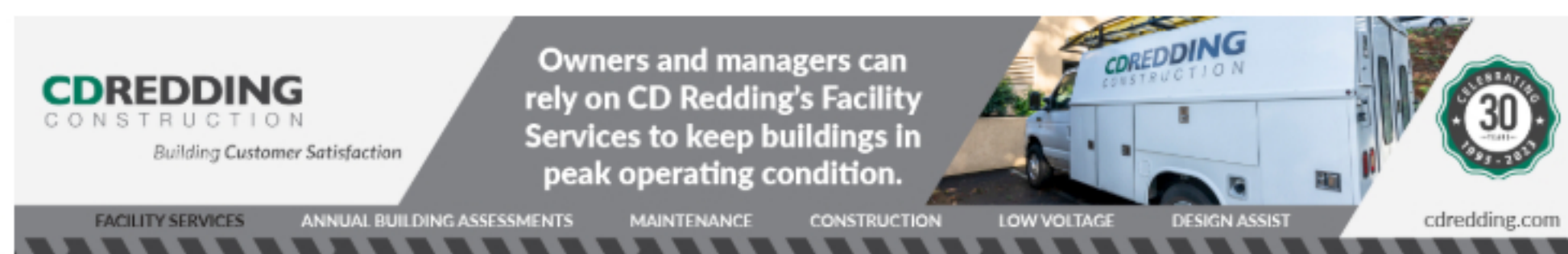
by Ardeshir Tabrizian — on January 10, 2025



Ardeshir Tabrizian
Author

Evelyn McCoy-Harris knows what it's like to be homeless as a single mom, unsure where she's going to sleep on any given night.

"I understand what it means to not have anybody to come alongside and say, 'How can I help you?,'" said McCoy-Harris, chief operating officer of Seed of Faith Ministries.



She made her remarks at the groundbreaking ceremony for the Gussie Belle Commons, an affordable housing development in Salem's Northeast neighborhood that could be home to as many as 500 people within two years.

The construction at 891 23rd St. N.E. is led by Home First Development and Green Light Development.

Nearby Seed of Faith will lead outreach work and coordinate resident referrals for up to 25 of the new apartment homes. The church will have an office in the complex's community building to help residents and property managers.

Because of McCoy-Harris' personal experience, she said the project means more to her than just building housing.

She will work with prospective renters to remove barriers, such as a low credit score or previous evictions, to help get them approved for housing.

The Portland developers began work Dec. 5 on what is slated to be 120 apartments. Of those, 90 will be family apartments with two, three or four bedrooms, according to Ben Pray, owner of First Home Development.

Pray said the total number of residents could be between 300 and 500 people. They expect to start welcoming residents by the third quarter of 2026.

Developers plan to eventually build an additional 60 apartments by late 2026, according to Tim Lawler, development manager for Green Light Development.

Every apartment will include a washer, dryer, air conditioning and heating, 9-foot ceiling and counter.

"When people walk in, they're going to feel like they're home," Pray said.

The complex will include a "dazzling" 3,000-square-foot community room for residents and their families, Pray said at the ceremony.

Outdoor amenities will include bicycle paths, a dog play area, a playground and electric vehicle charging stations.

The project is part of a [surge in apartment construction](#) in Salem, with several downtown developments planned or in progress. It also comes as the city and state continue to face [a housing crisis](#), with rental costs on the rise and a shortage of available units.



McCoy-Harris, chief operating officer of Seed of Faith Ministries, speaks at the groundbreaking ceremony for the Gussie Belle Commons on Thursday, Jan. 9 (Ardeshir Tabrizian/Salem Reporter)

At the event, Mayor Chris Hoy said he's proud that attending the ceremony will be his "last official act" before he leaves office on Monday, Jan. 13.

"I couldn't have scripted it any better," he said. "There's nothing sad about that. This is a glorious, glorious day, because if you think back to 2017 and the things that we were doing with affordable housing and supportive housing in Salem, there wasn't much going on."

Salem Health previously owned the land until the city of Salem "stepped in to support the project" by buying it short-term, according to Pray. Developers bought the property from the city on Dec. 4. Hoy said the project almost didn't happen. He declined to elaborate on the specifics of the land transfer but said it took "some mayoral jiu-jitsu" to make Gussie Belle Commons a reality.

The space has sat empty for many years, he said. Now, it will provide affordable homes for people who have been living on the streets or at risk of doing so.

The \$45 million project is primarily paid for by tax credits, state money and a recently announced \$24.2 million loan, which is backed by the state to help fast-track affordable housing development through a competitive grant process. The project received a \$17.9 million state grant in July 2023.

The developers also own land that's adjacent to the property and are considering building a daycare for working families in Salem.

The complex will be open to people earning at or below 60% of Marion County's median income, Pray said. That's \$38,400 for a single person or \$54,780 for a family of four.

Developers also plan to reserve at least 24 units for people earning 30% or less of the median area income – \$19,200 for a single person and \$27,400 for a family of four.

Rent costs would vary based on a resident's income.

The apartments will be named after Gussie Belle Brown, who moved to Salem in 1968 and worked as a certified nursing assistant at Salem Hospital for over 30 years, according to [an obituary](#). Brown also served as a pastor at State Street Church of God for around 15 years and had a reputation for working with homeless people, particularly senior citizens, to connect them with service providers and get them into housing. She died on Dec. 19, 2022.

The site is also next door to two service providers – Seed of Faith and the Mid Willamette Valley Community Action Agency. Both providers plan to refer prospective renters to the complex and provide services to help them stay housed.

Lawler said services will include utility assistance, childcare, early childhood education and help with college preparation.

In recent years, inflation has strained low-income people in Oregon and across the country like never before, said Jimmy Jones, executive director of Community Action.

He said at the event that such conditions force people to choose between paying their rent, their light bill, buying gas to get to work, clothes for their children, medicine for their grandparents and "a whole other list of horrible choices that people have to make when they don't have enough to get by."

"The need for these kinds of projects has never been more acute," Jones said. "In Oregon, we have not had enough of these kinds of answers, these kinds of solutions to those problems."

He said the true impact of the project won't be known for generations to come.

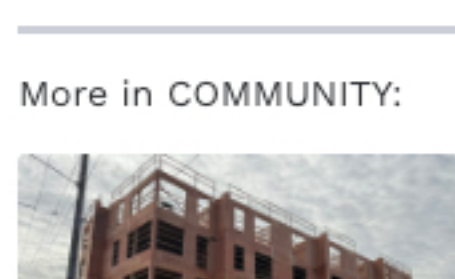
It will provide an opportunity for families with children who haven't been born yet to have a place to live, a roof over their heads and a warm bed to lie in, he said.

"There will be a knock-on effect that will echo down through time of the promise that we are keeping here today – that those folks will have the opportunity for an equal, just and better life."

Contact reporter Ardeshir Tabrizian: ardeshir@salemreporter.com or 503-929-3053.

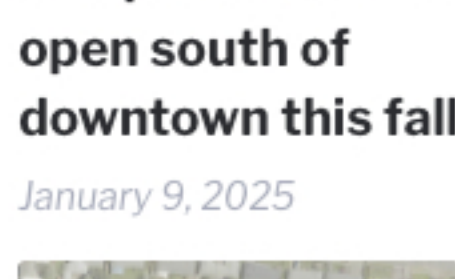
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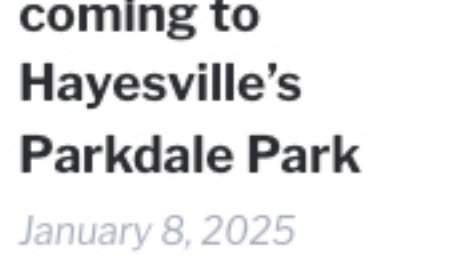
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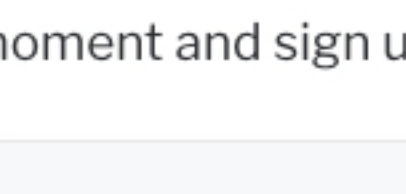
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Ardeshir Tabrizian

Ardeshir Tabrizian has covered criminal justice and housing for Salem Reporter since September 2021. As an Oregon native, his award-winning watchdog journalism has traversed the state. He has done reporting for The Oregonian, Eugene Weekly and Malheur Enterprise.

TAGS: AFFORDABLE HOUSING, downtown development, HOUSING

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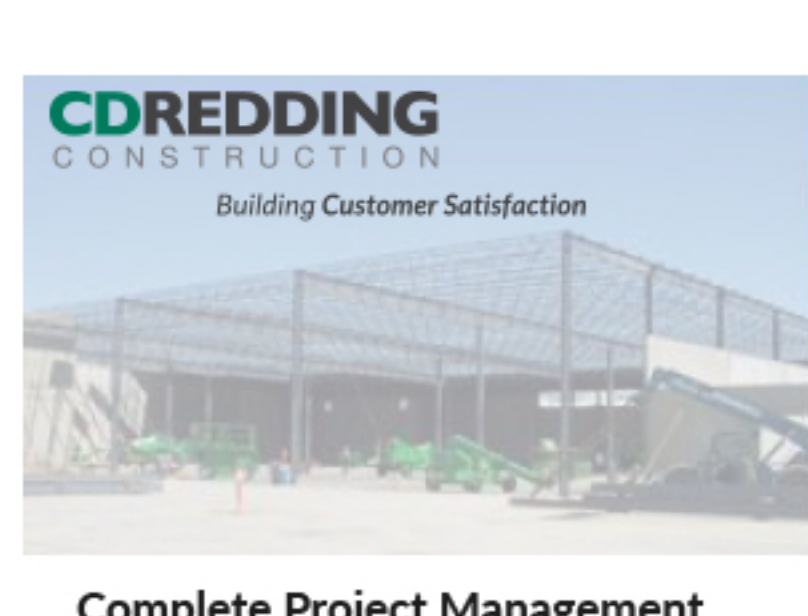
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