

1,000-unit West Oakland project gets green light

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When it came time to discuss a 1,032-unit project in West Oakland last night, a routine meeting took a musical turn: Longtime Bay Area blues artist Ronnie Stewart stood up with a five-piece band.

“These things tend to be deadly serious,” said Panoramic CEO Patrick Kennedy, who watched on from the audience. “But they played for five or 10 minutes, with the simple message being, ‘We’re bringing the blues back to 7th Street.’”

Kennedy's interest went beyond the music. His project at 500 Kirkham St. — three years in the making — went on to be unanimously approved by the Planning Commission, making it the city's second-largest housing development after the Brooklyn Basin megaproject.

It's one of several multifamily projects aiming to bring new housing and businesses to a neighborhood that has a history as a cultural and economic hub. For years, jazz clubs, bars, restaurants thrived alongside a strong black middle class in West Oakland. The Black Panther Party once called 14th and Peralta Streets home. But freeway construction starting in the mid-20th century cut up the neighborhood, leading to decline and disinvestment.

The three-acre lot at 500 Kirkham is vacant. Panoramic plans to build a 33-story tower, plus an eight-story building and a nine-story one. Most of the units are two-bedroom apartments, which will start at about \$3,350 at market rate; 85 units will be pegged at very low income levels.

The site will also include about 35,000 square feet of retail. Oakland-based event space and restaurant 7th West will expand from 7th and Union Streets as the first tenant.

“We’re going to focus on the ‘only-in-Oakland’ experience — we don’t have any spaces for large chain retailers, so we’ll be focusing on local, small businesses, pop-up stores, barber shops,” Kennedy said.

Ronnie Stewart, executive director of the West Coast Blues Society, said that Panoramic “bent over backwards” over the last three years to hear from the local black community. The project will include a gallery showcasing historical photos from 7th Street's jazz era, and Panoramic also funded a Black History Month with a panel and walk through the neighborhood, Stewart said.



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Panoramic Interests' project at 500 Kirkham St. now includes a second park and a slimmer tower design.

"They have shown that they're not gentrifying in terms of coming in and making everything white, and forgetting the black history that was on 7th Street. So that's our take, and that's why we were there," Stewart said.

The quick approvals were also helped by Oakland's lack of "regulatory scar tissue" that would have made building the project in San Francisco much more difficult, Kennedy said.

Still, Panoramic hit a few hiccups during the process: The developer originally wanted just eight parking spaces for the building, but eventually compromised at 59. And in a final redesign, Panoramic added a second park for a total of 40,000 square feet of green space, and slimmed down the tower's look.

Aside from Panoramic's site, China Harbour Engineering Co. and Strategic Urban Development Alliance (SUDA) are planning 800 apartments and office space at 1451 7th St. Holliday Development, meanwhile, is close to finishing a 110-unit project at 532 Union St. about three blocks away.

With approvals in hand, Panoramic plans to break ground in the first quarter of 2020.

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