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SPEAKERS

Steve Hastings, Savannah McDonald, Christopher Conover, Nicole Cox, Greg Fahr, CJ Boyd, Kris Olson-Garewal, Corey Thompson, Greg Sasse



Christopher Conover 00:03

Welcome to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover. This week efforts to house the unhoused in southern Arizona. We start the second week of our series on housing issues in our area with a trip to what is now two vacant plots of land in midtown Tucson's Keeling neighborhood. We're with a group of people who are working to put a temporary homeless shelter here, able to house 10 people at a time for at least a couple of years. The project is the idea of Kris Olson-Garewal, co-founder of The Homing Project.



Kris Olson-Garewal 00:41

We have this site because we were called by a neighbor, Jane Evans, and told that there was a site that another nonprofit, the Southern Arizona Land Trust, had been trying to develop into an apartment complex and had so far been unable to do that. And then maybe we could borrow the land for a couple of years until they got a bid they could live with. Because we don't want to buy the land, we want to be in central Tucson on the bus lines, so that people are independent, they can go to their therapies, they can go to a job, and they can take a bus. And the very first time we did that, it didn't work out in that ward. So when we got a call from Jane that about this land, I called Greg Sasse, who's the executive director of the Southern Arizona Land Trust. And he said, That's not what we do. But he did look at our project. And he said, it's not what we do, but it's consistent with what we do. So he took it to his board, and they agreed to what for us is a long term lease.



Christopher Conover 01:50

Greg Sasse, is the executive director of the Southern Arizona Land Trust, the group who owns this land but decided to lease it, instead of build a small multifamily home complex,



G Greg Sasse 02:02

We essentially provide single family homes for affordable housing, most of our properties, rent for \$500 under market value, our average rents about \$1,250. We service families that most of our people are families of four, and they're all single family homes. And we do own land that we do develop. This particular land was donated to us by David and Gypsy Lyle, who does a lot of good work in Tucson, and they wanted us to build an apartment complex here. And then we went through the bidding process. And we found that it was just too expensive for us to develop this property into a 12-unit apartment complex, based on the construction costs and the rate of return

C Christopher Conover 02:55

that could be afforded

G Greg Sasse 02:56

that could be afford, we keep everything affordable. So when I met Kris, probably first quarter of 2023, she came up with this, the Homing Project, and we were intrigued. And we I got board support, I got the donor support, which was very important to us. And we got the neighborhood to support it as well. So it all fit together.

C Christopher Conover 03:16

Greg Fahr is the project's architect and the owner of Fahr Associates.

G Greg Fahr 03:21

Most of them are going to be brought in. And they will of course be temporary. And they are modularized. And they can be removed at the end of the lease and taken to another site and use for other purposes. The only design probably that I will have to be involved in of a building will be maybe the laundry facility because it'll just be a sheltered area for the washing machines. And we'll have a clothesline and the other part of the design is simply site planning. Where did these units go. How, what's the clearances between them and the perimeter fencing.

C Christopher Conover 04:04

And I would guess because this is in a residential neighborhood, a little bit easier to deal with. And I'm not sure which one of you wants answer this but things like Plumbing and sewage and electricity. It's all already here at this point. Yeah,

C Corey Thompson 04:21

at this point in time, Kris has hired Rick Engineering to do the civil site development plan.

C Christopher Conover 04:29
That's Cory Thompson of Rick Engineering.

C Corey Thompson 04:31
And when this started, we met with Greg and found out what his plan is, which is an apartment project with parking and those amenities which also showed extension of the sewer and the water and electric. And so we had a basic site plan to work with. And basically we've overlaid this Homing project layout over Greg's site plan I fit it in. And we're in the process of designing it all now. Part of the city process, we have to put together a development package. When we first started here, the key was the zoning, here's an R-2. And we needed to fit this type of use into the zoning category. And that was a little bit of a challenge, because the type of use is defined as a residential care, shelter care use. And that's going to require some special zoning examiner process. It's more of a political process to get it to work. And so that's when, CJ, your council member,

C Christopher Conover 05:46
When he says CJ, he's referring to CJ Boyd, a council aide for Tucson Vice Mayor Kevin Dahl.

C Corey Thompson 05:53
And so we met with CJ and the city staff and really put our heads together to try to find out how best to get this use to fit

C Christopher Conover 06:06
CJ from a city standpoint, obviously a project like this always seems like it needs help, you know, and having a member of the Council always is a good thing. But why did you all, why did Councilman Dahl look at this project and go, that's the one we're gonna get behind?

C CJ Boyd 06:26
Chris had reached out to me prior to having this this spot, and I had already made very clear, we are very supportive of more affordable housing at every level, you know, the city is in a long process of changing some of the codes that we have that make it harder to build sort of different kinds of housing that're outside of the normal single family home. Some of that takes time. It means public input. And we don't want to rush that. But in the meantime, we also are excited when folks are bringing new ideas and say, Well, okay, can we make this work, you know, as a temporary thing. And so Kris had already reached out to me and I told her that if you find anything in Ward Three, though, Vice Mayor Kevin Dahl has been extremely supportive in having me on the staff as a housing advocate, and said, you know, we want we want the housing, we recognize we're in a housing crisis, we're in a crisis around homelessness, as well

as affordability of housing. And so you know, when, when Kris found this, I was excited. First of all, I live in the neighborhood, I live about four blocks from here. So I said, Oh, I know that neighborhood. And I know it very well. And that sounds like a perfect place. And I just want to sort of give a shout out the the neighborhood association here in Keeling has been extremely supportive and and really excited that something is going to be done to help with the homelessness issue that we have here in this neighborhood. And so it was sort of a it was very easy in a way.

C Christopher Conover 07:47

I would think a lot of people are going to be surprised to hear that because we hear so often. Yes, there's a problem. But not in my backyard.

C CJ Boyd 07:55

No, that is absolutely not

C Christopher Conover 07:57

it's not the answer we seem to be getting here.

C CJ Boyd 08:00

No, you couldn't be more, right. And I'll say I work with neighborhood associations all over the ward. I live in this, this neighborhood, but I work with other neighborhoods, when I show up to the neighborhood meetings here. It's just as a neighbor, and it's very different. And that's why I want to give so much love and thanks to Keeling because folks understand that this isn't just a problem somewhere else. It's a problem right here. And the whole idea of providing services in the place where people need the services is that you are helping. That you actually increase, you're improving the neighborhood. And there's a sort of this myth that if you build some services, or if you provide some services, that everyone's going to come from all over town, they're gonna be busting them out from California or something like, that's just not the reality. The reality is, I mean, I live, like I said, four blocks from here, I see folks walking by every day who are having a rough time that are, you know, being beat up by the sun, maybe pushing a shopping cart who are having a rough time. And so having services here in the neighborhood where folks already are is crucial.

C Christopher Conover 08:58

Kris, can you give a little bit of a description. We've been lucky enough. And we'll put the pictures up on our website to see the the drawings, the architectural drawings, the artist's renderings and the plan. But for those who are just listening, and don't look at those pictures, describe what this is going to look like, because right now it's a open lot with some trees around the edge of it. And obviously that is not the long term plan here.

K

Kris Olson-Garewal 09:23

None at all. The core thing is that there will be these houses that are essentially freestanding bedrooms. They're only 64 square feet, but they have air conditioning, heating, and one thing that intrigues everyone who looks at them who's unhoused a lock on the door and a place to store their things. They will be segregated by gender, people who are transgender will let them choose. And the reason for that is that there are a good number of people who have had domestic violence experience, and they usually are sort of opposite gender averse. There are freestanding separate, individual bathrooms that people will share. And in addition, there's going to be a commercial kitchen, that the residents themselves will make the meals we'll get them for as long as they need it, some help to learn how to cook, because most of these people have not been doing much in the way of cooking. It'll be oversized, it'll be large enough to serve 100 people. Because eventually, when the lease is up here, we'll be moving to another site, that's about 4.3 acres. And when we go to that site, it'll we'll be gradually putting in 100. The kitchen opens up with a garage door roll up. And the dining room is not a building. It is a canopied large plaza. And it's also a place that people can gather 24/7, we'll also have a chicken coop, the hens will be for egg laying. And we'll also have gardens in the back that are for our residents. And in the front, there's also going to be a community garden for the Keeling neighborhood. They asked if we could find room, could they please have some of this property. And so they get in the front, they will have their own space.

C

Christopher Conover 11:17

Sounds like garden omelets for everybody eventually, is the plan

G

Greg Fahr 11:20

addition to the community garden space, will have raised planters, an herb garden and other things they want to grow. So that'll be kind of part of the project that will you know, it'll be a community effort instead of just housing people.

K

Kris Olson-Garewal 11:39

Oh, there's one thing I forgot to mention. The fence will be a double layer fence. Even though we are presuming that people who come in, they want to part ways with drugs. It's hard at first. And so to make it not any easier that people can pass drugs in, we'll have a double layer fence.

C

Christopher Conover 11:58

What, and I'm not even sure who to ask this of could be engineering could be architecture could be you, Kris could be you, CJ. What's the timeframe? On this?

C

Corey Thompson 12:09

that we're just ready to start submitting the plans to the city. And typically, it'll probably take

and we're just ready to start submitting the plans to the city. And typically, it probably take about four months worth of reviews. So I hope to have grading plan ready for Kris here in about four months. And then the utilities start and then there's we're standing in the parking lot area and some drainage along the sides and stuff so construction probably will take another four to six months

K Kris Olson-Garewal 12:37
Four

C Corey Thompson 12:38
Four? oh, you're gonna have to talk to your contractor about that. But maybe Yeah, yeah, we'll see

C Christopher Conover 12:46
Could be Christmas at a at a new house.

K Kris Olson-Garewal 12:48
Yes, we hope so.

C Christopher Conover 12:51
Thanks to the Homing Project's Kris Olson-Garewal, CJ Boyd from Councilman Kevin Dahl's office, Cory Thompson of Rick Engineering, Greg Fahr of Fahr Associates, and Greg Sasse of the Southern Arizona Land Trust. We're looking at efforts to put a roof over the head of people who are unhoused or are at risk of losing their home. The Marist College building in Tucson dates to roughly the time Arizona became a state. And it's old enough that at one point it sat inside the Presidio that marked the start of Tucson. The three-story adobe building operated as a Catholic school until the 1960s and spent almost 50 years after that falling into disrepair. Not long after the building turned 100 years old, it and another building to its north were bought by Phoenix-area nonprofit Foundation for Senior Living. They knocked down the building to the north and renovated the Marist College into more than 80 apartments for disabled and senior housing. To learn more about the project, we spoke with Steve Hastings FSL's, Chief of Real Estate Services.

S Steve Hastings 14:06
Marist College itself is right on the cusp of the Tucson Convention Center. So in terms of promoting downtown, it kind of is a nexus if you were to go down Church Street and go buy a dilapidated building, you know, it doesn't show very well. And so folks were very interested and TEP got involved the Catholic church got involved. Rio Nuevo, I mean, it's a long list of players, the county, everybody got involved, to help us remodel that building. So that you could walk

from the convention center over to Jackson Street and go up Jackson, into the downtown area and into the restaurants and movie theaters and all the great stuff that has been happening in downtown Tucson.

C Christopher Conover 14:44

We had an opportunity to go into the building, and we were down in the community center and just those big beams and supports going up. That's, you don't find that kind of architecture anymore.

S Steve Hastings 14:57

No and they were 450 years old when we got them. I had to go back to the library and what is the thing fish, fiche. You know and look up old articles, but it was there

C Christopher Conover 15:07

when it comes to increasing affordable Senior Living, which is what the Marist is, what are the priorities on that? Is it just having something there? Are there special concerns that have to be taken into consideration for senior living?

S Steve Hastings 15:23

Well, yes and no. Everything FSL builds is accessible to somebody in a wheelchair or a walker or a mom pushing a baby in the stroller: grab bars, low thresholds, lots of lighting, those kinds of things, help seniors age more successfully in place. Now, I don't know if you know, but when we did, the eight units now are Marist College, we also think I think we did 78 down the street on the corner, we could not have done just the eight alone. The economics wouldn't have allowed us to do that. And so one of the things, I mean, FSL, and most nonprofits are good at this, when you come into a community as a guest, and we do a lot of things in Tucson, but we still consider ourselves a guest. If we look around to see what else we can do. And there was a great group, there is a great group, helping them folks who are deaf, hard of hearing, and blind. And we teamed up with them, and on the sixth floor of that second building at the corner of Church and Broadway, is specially designed for folks with those kinds of needs. And it's a very unique setting. And people can come out and walk out in the morning and see folks that they can sign with and have a greeting and they have a place to meet. And then we have ways to replicate that throughout the building, not just that sixth floor.

C Christopher Conover 16:41

We're seeing a real crisis not only in housing, but especially affordable housing for seniors. You work in Tucson and Phoenix and all over the place. Is this about rising rents increase in other expenses drops in retirement savings? What's making it so hard on senior specifically?

S

Steve Hastings 17:03

There's a lot of answers to that some of them go back all the way to the 80s, where HUD made some decision to shut down some programs. Had we stayed on track with the kind of production schedules we had in the 80s, prior to the Reagan administration, we'd have enough housing today. But we we basically cut from 278,000, I think it's a number of new units per year down to less than 3,000. And we maintain that for too long. So that's the genesis of the problem. And this is all my opinion. COVID came along. And we had couples that were kind of on the edge mom and grandma and granddad were both working. Dad dies of COVID, and mom is out on the street. And that created a huge influx of folks. And what we're seeing with those folks is when we're lucky enough to get somebody in off the street, about a year or two years, they stabilized with us, and then they go back home wherever they came from. They were too embarrassed. But now, you know, they stabilized with somebody like us, a nonprofit who has an interest in seeing them succeed. And then they move back home and that space opens up for for somebody else. The other thing in this, I'm getting way out over my skis here, but Attorney General in Arizona has filed a lawsuit against a group called RealPage. And it seems like there was some price setting there. And that affects everybody. And I hope we get to the bottom of that rents go back down. But it was really, I saw that drive up real time based on this artificial intelligence or this. I'm not sure what to call it. I don't want to say collusion, but there are people working against the everyday tenant.

C


Christopher Conover 18:34

Our listeners are very familiar with that. That was the topic of last week's episode. Is it easier from the FSL standpoint to do a project like the Marist using an existing building? Or is it easier to start from flat ground or relatively flat ground that can be made flat and build up from there?

S

Steve Hastings 18:56


Well, you have to look at all opportunities. When you look at the Marist, it was a vacant school building. It had been an office building, most recently, I think, since like 1965. So we didn't have to relocate any tenants. We could go and do mods. And it's fairly, I won't say easy, because it was a heavy lift. And maybe maybe I'd give a quick, pat on the back to Tofel Dent, which is a local contractor. We probably wouldn't have taken on the marathon unless we saw how they manage the Bowman Hotel down in Nogales. It wasn't our project. I was just familiar with it. And I looked at it a few years before and I kind of knew the challenges. It was actually sitting over a lake or stream. They did a good job. So we felt they had the the ability and we were gratefully very right so Tofel Dent made a big difference. Corky Poster made a difference with his team. I mean there are a lot of good folks in Tucson that made this project happen. Without any one of them, it wouldn't work. So back to your question. It was a vacant building. We did tear down the building at the corner of Church and Broadway. It was diocesan offices before they moved over to the new campus. But previous to that it was just an attorney's office, it was functionally obsolescent. We couldn't convert it into anything valuable. So we did tear it down. If we go in to any market and look for an acquisition rehab, if it's full of tenants, really, there's no place to put them right now. So we're almost prevented, you know, unless we want to put them in a hotel for a year and a half. So all of all the stuff we're looking at now, everything in our pipeline is vacant land.

 Christopher Conover 20:32


That was FSL's Steve Hastings. You heard mention of the local construction firms that made the Marist College renovation possible. The architect on that project was Savannah McDonald, a principal at Poster Mirto McDonald, we sat down with her in the community room that makes up the bottom floor of the Marist College.

 Savannah McDonald 20:55


In terms of construction. I mean, it was in bad shape, we had to rebuild adobe, we had to put in this interior steel structure, because the adobe was overstressed. So we actually built a new structure on the inside, we call it an endoskeleton, dropped in these columns and beams, you see, and basically held the building up with the new structure and then just tied in the adobe. And then we just, you know, reconfigure the interior to fit out a community space here, down here in the basement, and then eight units and the two levels above.

 Christopher Conover 21:29

When we talk about those eight units. We've all been in high schools, we all know about classrooms, but how do you go from classrooms to somewhere somebody would want to live? I know some of us felt like we lived in our high school classrooms. But but the reality How do you make that type of switch?

 Savannah McDonald 21:48

Difficult, and it was a very small school classroom to begin with, I actually don't know how it was really originally configured, you can see that there was a kind of a spine down the center east to west, a corridor with classrooms on each side. So we tried to maintain that general configuration. It was really hard to fit in even just the four one-bedroom units on each level. There was a center stair, that we actually removed, it was in really terrible shape. So we use that space to just add more square footage to the four units and built a new stair and elevator to the east to serve as you know, sort of egress and access to the upper levels.


 Christopher Conover 22:28

Because this was housing, designed to be housing for seniors. Does that cause more of a challenge than housing for younger people? Or what were those challenges so minor if they're even challenges?

 22:48

I would say yes, there are challenges, but they're definitely we're the ones, right? Like, we want to make everything as accessible as possible, maybe not what we call Type A, which is wheelchair accessible for every unit, but certainly lower counters and larger bathrooms, just because the idea is, is that the seniors can age in place, and if they lose the ability to access


their unit that would be devastating for them to have to leave. So we try to make it as accommodating and as accessible as possible from the start. So just keep that in mind. And that's that's true for all of the units of the project.

 Christopher Conover 23:23

You mentioned some of the problems or issues dealing with this as an older building. When you restore an aging building, is that typical? Or was this one particularly difficult?

 23:40


They range, right? There's a wide variety of buildings that we start out with and renovation and try to adaptively reuse. In a lot of ways, this was a pretty major and significant renovation, kind of on the higher end of that scale of needs. And like I mentioned, there were groups that came in and tried to figure out what to do with it before, but because so much had to be done just structurally with the building, that it was just kind of a cost issue. So this good opportunity here allowed us to spend that money on brand new adobe to fill in where there were holes, right? Like the actual made, you know, complete and historically accurate materials and plaster and things like that, so that we could recreate it and do it right. So I would say it was I mean, there was actually one of the big issues was pigeon infestation,

 Christopher Conover 24:32

There's one you don't often think of.

 24:35

And that's something that was like pervasive, but also like through generations, like even through construction, I think the pigeons would come in and get you know, walk their footprints and the jibcrete and stuff because they could we could just not get free of them in this project. They'd been here for so many, so many years. Another particularly costly issue was that I think in like either the late 80s or early 90s they put this material kind of spray coated the outside of the building with something called tuftex. So we had to abate that we had to remove it. So we actually like basically ballooned the building for the whole removal of just that material on the outside just to get to the building as a as a beginning point.

 Christopher Conover 25:18

The company has been involved in projects like this, not only here, but one in Nogales, restoring a historic property into affordable homes for seniors. But you also do some market rate projects like the Benedictine Monastery, not far from here. And the remodel of the old Bisbee High School into apartments. How do projects like that, which are market based housing, differ from doing affordable housing like this one?



25:55

Good question. And architecturally it's it's a lot of the same challenges. Usually, there's kind of a different mindset when it comes to the goals, kind of the architectural finishes and outcome. With a project like this with that's kind of from affordable housing, finance, amenity space is really important, which is fantastic, because then we can really, like take a lot of design effort and use a lot of space toward, you know, in the case of this project, great community space for seniors, which is really important, especially for units being kind of on the smaller side. For the monastery and things like that, right? Like it's there's all the economics of how much is somebody going to pay in rent, right? And how much does that mean that we can spend on construction finishes there. So that's in your mindset, a little bit, maybe a little bit more than, than on a project like this. But in a lot of ways it's similar. It's like just trying to find really efficient and nicely designed units for people, like really thinking about how people live and how they want to live especially in in Tucson or in Nogales, you know, what's, what's special about the place and really fine tuning the design?



Christopher Conover 27:04

when a client comes to you all and says, I want to do this project, for example, the Marist project or the one in Nogales says, I want to make this affordable housing. And you all start your work. Do you ever have to have a discussion that, no, we can't do this because of the restoration needed or whatever costs, we can do it, but there's no way we can do it to the affordable housing level? Or is that not a discussion?



27:35

That's definitely discussion, it's, you know, the financial component is always part of those those design phases. Thankfully, on this one, and on many of them, we work with a contractor from the beginning who can provide expertise and advice and cost estimating along the way and help us make decisions that are appropriate and realistic in terms of picking materials and how much shades I can get on the windows and things like that, so that it does work right so that we do meet the budget. But yeah, we've we do feasibility studies, we'll we'll kind of investigate, like the building to the north, how many floors we can go and how many units we can fit on, you know floor and what that means for the overall budget and how to really hit the sweet spot in terms of the costs, and but at the same time for affordable housing just want to fit as many units as possible. There's such a desperate need.



Christopher Conover 28:27

One of the things we've seen in bigger cities is office space, because now office space is being used differently, or not at all after the pandemic, being converted into housing. Are we going to see that in Tucson, do you think or is that bigger cities like New York, Los Angeles, places like that?



28:48

I think we're gonna see it. Certainly we're actually with the contractor who did this project when

we met with them on a site that's looking to convert a few office buildings into affordable housing. So the case that I'm thinking of is pretty well suited. The exiting worked pretty well. It was nice, you know, durable construction. So I think so. Certainly.

C Christopher Conover 29:09

That was architect Savannah McDonald with Poster Mirto and McDonald and that's The Buzz for this week. Join us next week for a live recording of our show as we discuss the rising costs of housing and efforts to get people off the streets in southern Arizona. The event takes place Monday at 6pm at Safford K-8 School in Tucson. More information and RSVP details are on our website azpm.org where you can also find our episode archive. Subscribe to our show wherever you get your podcast just search for The Buzz Arizona. We're also on the NPR app. Zac Ziegler is our producer with production help from Deserae Tucker. Our music is by Enter the Haggis, I'm Christopher Cohn over. Thanks for listening.

N Nicole Cox 30:12

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