

## **Wilrik Apartments undergoing renovations**

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Renovations are finally underway at the Wilrik Hotel Apartments, a historic building that has been embroiled in legal controversy for almost a decade.

The Wilrik Apartments was originally set to be renovated in 2013, after it was supposedly purchased from Duke Energy Corporation by the Sanford Housing Authority. City officials planned to turn the 41-unit apartment building into affordable housing, making it the newest living space for low-income families in Sanford.

Three years later, however, it became clear that the housing authority, a federally-funded agency, did not actually own the building. In fact, it was owned by Sanford Affordable Housing Development Corporation, a nonprofit unaffiliated with the city and with no obligation to make the promised upgrades.

Even worse news came a year later, when former SAHDC board member Robert Woods was charged with embezzling \$100,000 from the organization. The case is ongoing.

The light at the end of the tunnel appeared last year, when the city won a lawsuit for ownership of the Wilrik Hotel Apartments.

In August, Superior Court Judge Winston Gilchrist granted control of the building to the city under the oversight of a board composed of Mayor Chet Mann, city councilwoman Rebecca Wyhof Salmon and city Historic Preservation Commission chairman Brian Mitchell.

Next year, the group is charged with examining its progress and deciding if there should be a new board or if city officials should continue their service.

### **Renovation underway**

With the city back in charge, progress was swift. In February, the city council appropriated \$80,717 for improvements to the Wilrik Hotel Apartments, \$50,000 of which was grant money.

Renovation work started earlier this year with repairs to the roof, elevator and air conditioning system, said Mayor Chet Mann.

“There has been no maintenance done in many years. It has been really let go, unfortunately,” Mann said. “There’s been a lot of vacant rooms there for years. Our goal is to get it fully occupied, but first and foremost, to get the building in good, safe and healthy condition.”

The city is first tackling infrastructure issues like the roof and aging AC units, Mann said. There are also plans to upgrade the building’s electrical, fire protection and heating systems, according to public records.

After that, plans are to renovate apartments as cash flow allows, Mann said. Four vacant apartments have already been remodeled and were recently listed by Adcock Property Management.

There are many left that need new flooring and paint at a minimum, Mann said. Renovation is expected to cost \$10-15,000 per unit, he said.

“I think people are gonna be very proud of that building again,” Mann said. “It’s a beautiful building from the outside and it’s got such potential on the inside.”

The future of the Wilrik building

Wilrik Hotel Apartments will remain affordable housing until at least 2027, per the restrictions of federal tax credits associated with the property. After that, plans are to open the building for private investment, Mann said.

“We would love to see something more market-rate downtown,” he said. “Maybe with younger, first-time home buyers. Just open it up to a different crowd that would flourish downtown.”

Current residents, some of whom have lived there for 10 or 15 years, would be moved to a different affordable housing complex, Mann said.

Although the city’s existing affordable housing properties are full, Mann expects supply to increase in the next five years, he said. One nonprofit, the Brick Capital Development Corporation, is currently building 71 new affordable housing units. There will be a place for Wilrik residents to go, Mann said.

For now, city and nonprofit staff are checking in on current residents, he said.

“We’ve had a lot of people who simply haven’t paid the rent during COVID,” Mann said. “We don’t want to evict, but if you’re unwilling to pay your rent and have the ability to, we’re not gonna allow that to continue now that the eviction moratorium expires in July.

“There are some great residents in that building and there are some that probably need to leave that building. We’re working as humanely and as fairly as we can with everyone there ... to weed out those who need to leave and protect those who need to stay.”