

## More apartments coming to Highlands development



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Cortona, a 280-unit apartment complex under construction just south of Forest Park, gets its name from the picturesque Italian town that shared top billing with actress Diane Lane in the 2003 movie "Under the Tuscan Sun."

More pertinent to the St. Louis project, the hilltop town in Tuscany is the favorite Italian city of Steve Brown, a principal at Balke Brown Transwestern, developer of the Cortona apartments. He said site work has been underway for about two weeks.

The project, known fully as Cortona at Forest Park, will occupy the southwest corner of Balke Brown's 26-acre Highlands mixed-use development on the site of the former Blues hockey arena. In 1999, demolition charges flattened the "old barn," as it was known to Blues fans.

Two office buildings, two loft-apartment buildings, a hotel, a restaurant and medical offices now sit on the old site. A fourth office building is planned.

Balke Brown brought in Humphreys & Partners, a prolific design firm based in Dallas, as the Cortona's architect. The five-story building will have an exterior "reminiscent of an Italian villa," with earth-tone panels, the developer said.

When completed in early 2014, the Cortona will have nearly 200 one-bedroom apartments and 80 two-bedroom units. A large courtyard will have a 7,000-square-foot clubhouse, a saltwater swimming pool, an outdoor kitchen and a spa, the company said.

Balke Brown hopes the Cortona will attract Generation Y, the tech-savvy younger professionals who can afford nice apartments.

"Research shows that Gen Yers put a premium on flexibility and mobility," Brown said. "Many don't want to be tied down with the title to a house. They also enjoy settings that create the opportunity for the informal interaction that sets the stage for establishing new social relationships."

Available to residents will be a car-detailing service, a chef who will give cooking demonstrations and a leash-free pet park, Balke Brown said. Monthly rents are projected to range from \$1,000 to \$1,750.

The AFL-CIO Building Investment Trust is financing the \$42 million project. AFL-CIO-sponsored real estate funds have in recent years invested in several St. Louis projects, including the Laurel and Park Pacific developments downtown.

Deanna Haas, Balke Brown's vice president of residential management, said the Cortona will be a "gated community" with vehicular access limited to two places on Parkview Place, which bisects the Highlands development. The Cortona will have surface and garage parking.

"We really want to make Cortona and the Highlands a complete community," she said.

The Cortona will more than double the number of apartments at the Highlands, which is just west of Forest Park Community College and near the Forest Park Hospital site the St. Louis Zoo has targeted for its expansion of office and research space.

The Highlands also is at the northern edge of the Cheltenham neighborhood, which in the 19th century attracted Irish, Italian, German, and Polish immigrants who worked in the area's clay mines and brickyards. Small homes took over most of the neighborhood after the mines closed decades ago.

John Raniero, a retired tile setter who has lived in Cheltenham for more than 50 years, said he approves of the Cortona design that won't increase traffic in his part of the neighborhood. He said the new building will improve the five-acre site.

Raniero, 76, president of the Cheltenham Neighborhood Association, said Balke Brown officials have provided residents with an overview of their Cortona plans.

"We looked at all of this, and nobody has got too much of a thumbs down on it," he said. "If they do all of what they say, it's going to be really pretty."