

New dorms: Florida universities building plusher digs to lure students

By [Anastasia Dawson](#)



Phillip Simmons, a 21-year-old junior at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, relaxes at the Osprey Fountains dorms. THE FLORIDA TIMES-UNION

TAMPA — There are rusty sinks and tiny communal showers. The rooms always seem too hot or too cold. The carpets have mysterious stains, and the tiny windows do little to mitigate the harsh fluorescent lighting.

But for freshmen Anastasia Akimova, 18, and Yu Maeda, 20, along with some 1,000 other students at the University of South Florida, the Andros dorms are home — at least for the semester.

“They’re really old. Not that nice,” Maeda said. The dorms, in fact, have seen only a few superficial renovations since they were built in 1964.

“I’m kind of afraid there are ghosts,” Akimova said with a laugh, but she was only partly kidding.

The students hope the eight outdated Andros dorm halls end up as specters of the past as the university pushes forward with plans for a new mixed-use housing village with shops, private rooms, a gym, restaurant, pool and other amenities yet to be disclosed.

The all-encompassing village will replace the aging Andros dorms, which USF President Judy Genshaft euphemistically refers to as a “more mature housing facility.”

It’s becoming a necessity these days as more universities in the Sun Belt roll out luxury-style dorms that rival any high-dollar metropolitan apartment, said Byron Moger, a student housing trends expert with commercial real estate company Cushman & Wakefield.

Florida’s 12 state universities must charge roughly the same tuition, so they cannot compete for students on price alone. That makes campus amenities such as fancy dorm rooms a key to recruiting and retaining students, he said.



Some of Florida's newest dorms come with granite countertops, game rooms, putting greens and tanning beds at prices that range from \$2,410 to \$5,000 a semester. A lazy river reminiscent of a theme park flows around a private pool at the University of North Florida's Osprey Fountains dorms, where students also enjoy a karaoke stage. Concrete block walls like those at Andros are disappearing.

"Clearly universities are competing for students, and they can't really compete on price, so it's more like the old days before the deregulation of airlines: They can compete based on the quality of the services they offer to students," Moger said.

"It's become a sort of standard of living that a significant percentage of the student population can afford, so the students come in expecting much better accommodations."

USF is still waiting on final approval from the state Board of Governors to begin work on the \$134 million Andros Village in a partnership with Capstone Development Partners and Harrison Street Real Estate Capital. The new dorm would house 2,165 students and boost on-campus capacity above 7,000.

USF housing is at capacity now with 5,600 students, said spokesman Adam Freeman.

Capstone built the Greek village at Florida State University as well as residences at Florida Atlantic University, the University of Florida and the University of West Florida. Through the partnership with USF, Capstone-Harrison Street bears the risk for financing, building, furnishing and operating the project and makes its money off student rents. By leasing the land, USF would make \$317 million over 52 years.

Even though the cost of building on-campus dorms has increased by about 15 percent over the past five years, according to PriceWaterhouseCoopers, bringing in experienced private companies skilled in streamlining operations helps universities keep costs low.



These higher-end dorms run by private developers are becoming a solution for universities of all price points and sizes, said Jeff Jones, principal developer with the Birmingham-based Capstone Development Partners. The company has worked with about 70 universities over the past 19 years, many of which are expanding housing options to accommodate growing enrollments. By 2023, enrollment at USF's main campus in Tampa is projected to reach about 42,000.

"Many institutions are turning to public-private partnerships with experienced private-sector developers for both development expertise and efficiency and for creative ways to finance and in some cases operate these new housing communities," Jones said. "Institutions understand that to a degree, their on-campus housing needs to be competitive with highly amenitized apartment communities that might otherwise draw students off campus."

Details about USF's dorms are still limited because the project isn't finalized, Jones said.

"We're working through this process. It's very complicated, but no matter what, there will be some new housing in USF's future," Genshaft said at a recent Board of Trustees meeting.

Ask around campus and you'll still find staunch supporters of Andros' barrackslike lodgings, though they are mainly upperclassmen or alumni who no longer live there.

With two students to a room and eight sharing a single bathroom, students have little choice but to get to know their neighbors, said senior Katie Owens, 21, who now lives off campus. On a campus of more than 40,000 students, it helped to come home to familiar faces her freshman year, Owens said.

“They’re not the nicest, but they were fun,” Owens said.

Senior Ali Gomez, 22, met her boyfriend while they were both living in the Andros dorms, she said. She now lives at The Point apartments just off campus but still hangs out around the outdoor pool and picnic tables of her old dorm with the people she met there.

“They’re the best; I’ll be sad to see them go,” Gomez said. “When I lived there I felt like I knew everybody.”



In 2006, then-student President Garin Flowers and his friends even wrote a love song about Andros — a passionate ode to the dorms’ dining hall that, at the time, stayed open until 2 a.m.

“Let me take you out to Andros, I just want to chill with you. Girl I really want some Andros, I’m just being real with you,” they sing in their best Boys II Men impression. On YouTube, “The Andros Song” has about 25,000 views.

At \$2,200 a semester, the old Andros dorms are also the cheapest living option on USF’s campus. Rooms in Juniper-Poplar Hall, built in 2009 with shops and other amenities, cost \$2,826 to \$3,300 a semester, and the two bedroom apartment-style Holly dorms cost \$3,620 a semester.

Rooms in the new Andros Village would cost \$3,395 to \$4,595 a semester.

Still, the dorms are comparable and, in some cases, cheaper than the apartment options near campus, where students also have to factor in utility bills. Students can also use loan money to pay for on-campus housing, or get free rent for working on campus in positions such as resident assistant.

A 2014 study by the program management firm Brailsford & Dunlavy found that the 23 apartment complexes within 2 to 4 miles of the USF campus charge an average of \$650 to \$878 a month, or roughly \$2,600 to \$3,512 a semester. Those closest to campus charge significantly higher rates than those several miles away, an average of \$964 a month for a one bedroom and \$708 a month for each roommate for a four bedroom unit.

“It makes sense for an apartment model with coffee shops or juice bars to extend into the academic housing environment because it’s the same constituency, and it’s a proven model off campus,” said Moger, of Cushman & Wakefield.

“For a long time, schools would let the private sector build those accommodations off campus, but at a certain point they had to become more competitive.”



The new Florida Polytechnic University in Lakeland has adopted a public-private partnership model similar to the one proposed for USF. Vestcor Communities owns and operates the only residence hall on campus and is in the process of building a second, set to open in July.

Students have access to game rooms, an in-unit washer and drier, gyms, private bathrooms and modern kitchens for \$2,835 to \$3,870 a semester. Polytechnic freshman Brianna Mann, 18, said her friends' rooms in the Kosove apartment-style dorms at USF were awful compared with her new home.

“At USF they didn't have anything except a cheap couch, and we have everything, full kitchen, big TVs,” Mann said. “Our dorms make you feel really at home. I don't want to move off campus.”

If approved, demolition of the Andros' Delta, Epsilon, Eta and Zeta dorms will begin in May, and students would move into the new rooms in fall 2017. In 2018, the Iota, Kappa, Lambda, Mu and Theta dorms would be demolished, with the new rooms completed for the fall semester of 2019.

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