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### La France Apartments in Delray opens, offers affordable housing

By Jennifer Shapiro

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When La France Apartments open with a ribbon-cutting at 10 a.m. Nov. 15, 14 apartments for low-income seniors will replace what once was the historic La France Hotel, a resting place for people of color in the days of racial segregation.

The apartments were remodeled from the 16 rooms in the two-story building at 140 NW Fourth Ave. in the historically black neighborhood called the West Settlers Historic District. There are eight studio apartments and six, one-bedroom apartments, said Diane Colonna, executive director of the Delray Beach Community Redevelopment Agency.

The apartments were built for low-income residents age 55 and older, and applicants must meet financial criteria, said Jennifer Costello, marketing manager of the Delray Beach Land Trust. The trust provides affordable housing in the city and is in charge of qualifying tenants. So far, the trust has received at least eight applications, Costello said.

An applicant can't make more than \$55,120 annually, and two people can't exceed an annual income of \$61,800, Costello said.

The reconstruction for the apartments cost just less than \$2.2 million, Colonna said, and each are approximately 750 square feet, said Bob Currie, of Currie, Sowards, Aguila Architects, the Delray Beach-based architects. The apartments are handicapped accessible and connect in the backyard with a courtyard, Currie said.

"I think architecturally, it's still representative of the historical building; we just fixed it," Currie said.

The Community Redevelopment Agency bought the hotel for \$450,000 in 2004 and approached the city's Historic Preservation Board to make sure the apartments were consistent with the preservation guidelines, Colonna said.

The apartments will preserve the former hotel's historic importance, said Dorothy Patterson, archivist for the Delray Beach Historical Society.

"It was deteriorating as it was, so to have it go on and be useful in its same location is better than having it disappear completely," Patterson said.

La France Hotel was built in 1949, and some famous black musicians and entertainers stayed at the hotel, which primarily was built for the traveling waiters and chauffeurs who worked during season, she said.

"They made a good living for the time. But because there wasn't a hotel for people of color in the days

of segregation between West Palm Beach and Fort Lauderdale, there was little choice to stay," said Patterson, who helped interview about 12 people on the history of the hotel for a book. "It filled a void and was very successful."

The renovation is part of the city's \$40 million plan to spruce up and restore the neighborhood, which is also attracting white residents because of new housing, such as Atlantic Grove, down the street from La France.

Colonna called the apartment house a great asset. "We are committed to keeping housing affordable in that neighborhood," she said.

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