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Gregory Minder, the president of Intown Group, talks about SkyPoint while in a condo unit. He says the high-rise is sold out and he isn't worried about a slowing market. "We know there are a lot of people in Tampa who want this type of housing."

Tampa high-rise pioneers to plant seeds of urban chic

Downtown condo developers have high hopes the lifestyle spreads like a contagion.

BY MICHAEL VAN SICKLER
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TAMPA — The view from Bobby Neale's home in Land O'Lakes is a field of cows.

From his Brandon townhouse, Ian Markowitz scans a retention pond.

Rock Scaglione looks out his window in Seminole Heights and sees a street of bungalows.

In the coming weeks, they will swap these standard Tampa Bay neighborhood backdrops for something entirely new: high-rise urban chic.

By late April, Neale, Markowitz, Scaglione and a few hundred soon-to-be neighbors will be part of a historic migration to downtown's first major offering of urban living: 777 Ashley Drive.

SkyPoint, the \$80-million 32-story tower with 381 condos, is the biggest residential high-rise in downtown's history. Its future residents will pioneer a way of life in a downtown known for its office towers, parking lots and deserted after-hours streets.

"Downtown is very transitional," Neale said. "Sometimes it's pretty vacant. But with all the things that are projected to come, I just see it getting better and better."

Will this experiment work? SkyPoint's developers are betting it will.

Novare Group, an Atlanta development company, and Intown Group, a local firm, are doubling down on an acre lot across from SkyPoint. There, they recently started building Element, a 34-story condo tower along Franklin Street.

On Thursday, they will seek zoning approval for another tower on Ashley Drive. This one would be called Twelve, part-boutique hotel, part-condo. As proposed, it would be the tallest condo high-rise yet at 47 stories.

When it comes to downtown's so-called condo boom, forget about Trump Tower Tampa, the



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The unfinished SkyPoint at 777 Ashley Drive rises 32 stories into the Tampa skyline.

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Michael Chen, director of Tampa's urban development department

project that became the media darling but has yet to find the financing to start construction.

The developers transforming downtown are Novare and Intown. SkyPoint, Element and Twelve would add 1,185 condos and 135 hotel rooms to a downtown that so far can claim fewer than 100 completed condos. With a fourth project pending next to SkyPoint, no other developer comes close to keeping up.

Gregory Minder, Intown's president, said with SkyPoint sold out and Element selling briskly, he doesn't buy the doom-and-gloom talk about a slowing condo market.

"We're not worried," he said. "We know there are a lot of peo-

ple in Tampa who want this type of housing."

City officials have calculated that the tax windfall from SkyPoint, Element and other condo projects will finance a \$40-million overhaul of downtown for the next 12 years.

A new waterfront park, better public transportation, and a revamped Ashley Drive are some of the projects that might be financed from the taxes paid by downtown's newest denizens.

"This evolutionary stage for downtown will take place in the next two years," said Michael Chen, director of Tampa's urban development department. "Downtown will become not just viable, but a desirable

place to live."

With its floor-to-ceiling glass windows wrapped in Smurf-blue protective tape, SkyPoint hardly looks ready for occupation.

Inside, it looks even more uninhabitable. On the 32nd floor, construction debris covers the floors of the penthouse suites. Dust swirls in the air. Wires dangle from the ceiling.

But Minder said a late April opening for the lower floors is going to happen. Several hundred construction workers work around the clock to keep the project on schedule.

By late August, all 32 floors will be ready, said Minder, who plans to move into his condo on the 26th floor by late July.

So who exactly are the people moving into these condos, which fetch from the \$170,000s (for the 650-square-foot units) to more than \$500,000? Downtown will soon find out. The target market for Novare's and Intown's projects are those between the ages of 25 and 40.