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Former Duluth jail to welcome first tenants as new apartment building

Many funding sources were needed to bring the project forward, including a state historic tax credit that has since been allowed to lapse.



The exterior of the Leijona apartment complex under construction in the historic St. Louis County Jail building on Oct. 13 in Duluth.

Clint Austin / 2022 File / Duluth News Tribune

By [Peter Passi](#)

January 20, 2023 07:10 PM

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DULUTH — Developer Meghan Elliott used the moment of a ribbon-cutting at the former St. Louis County Jail Friday afternoon to advocate for the reinstatement of Minnesota’s historic tax credit, which lapsed in July 2022.

She said that if not for federal and state credits the project had already received, the building could not have been transformed into a 33-unit apartment building.

“It was such a blow to Minnesota when our state historic tax credit expired last year, and literally all new historical redevelopment in Minnesota stopped,” Elliott said.

But she took heart in Gov. Tim Walz’s announcement Thursday that he supports a plan to provide \$20.9 million in funding to resurrect the credit program.



Developer and co-owner Meghan Elliott shows a couple of cell doors that will remain in the units during a tour of the Leijona apartment complex under construction in the historic St. Louis County Jail building on Oct. 13 in Duluth.

Clint Austin / 2022 File / Duluth News Tribune

A number of apartments in the building, renamed Leijona, will be reserved for income-qualified tenants earning no more than 60-70% of the area median income.

Jon Commers, one of Elliott's development partners, said, "It's an urgent moment right now to add to the housing stock in Duluth as a community and statewide. This has been a huge issue, and I'm really proud we can be part of a response to that."

"It's also an urgent moment to reuse existing materials, investments the public has already made in buildings, infrastructure and access," he said.

Commers said more than 170 tons of steel was removed from the neglected and pigeon-infested building, which was transformed with an average of 40 tradespeople working daily for the past several months.



Leijona developer Jon Commers describes an area of the fourth-floor jail block in 2021, at the former St. Louis County Jail in Duluth.
Clint Austin / 2021 File / Duluth News Tribune

Sen. Tina Smith, D-Minnesota, said, "It's incredible to think of this historic structure that is so much a part of what gives Duluth its texture and its realness, that this is a place where people used to be incarcerated, and now it is a place where people can live and have the freedom and the opportunity to build the lives they want, because they have a safe place to call home."

She said multiple funding sources were needed to make Leijona a reality.

“It is really damn hard to figure out how to finance projects like this. It takes a village. It takes a globe to figure out how to do this. It’s complicated. It’s important to do, but it’s not easy,” Smith said.

Smith said she and Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minnesota, worked to bring federal support for the project to the table in the form of \$1.6 million in historic tax credits, \$380,000 in American Rescue Plan Act funding and more than \$380,000 in cleanup support from the Environmental Protection Agency.

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The city could join others around the nation that have ditched parking minimums, as it also considers how to better accommodate electric vehicles and bikes.

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“Everybody in this community and in our state deserves a safe place to call home, because housing comes first. If you have a home that is safe and secure and comfortable, then your family can work, your job can work, your education can work, you can be healthy. And without that, nothing else works,” Smith said.

Mayor Emily Larson noted that many people played a role in saving the building and breathing new life into it. She recalled how close the building had come to ruin in 2010, surviving only after a 5-4 vote of the Duluth City Council against allowing it to be demolished.

Larson praised the development team for saving the building and rethinking it to meet Duluth's need for more affordable housing

"We've been talking about how do we help this community see that housing is for everybody, and we're all stronger when we have a safe, affordable place to be. This is a project that does all of it, and it does it with class and elegance. And it does it with the values of this community. We're just deeply, deeply grateful to you for your vision. And we're here for the next project and the next project and all the projects after that," she said.

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By **Peter Passi**

Peter Passi covers city government for the Duluth News Tribune. He joined the paper in April 2000, initially as a business reporter but has worked a number of beats through the years.