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By LAURA KINSLER, The Tampa Tribune

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**NORTH TAMPA** - As Busch Boulevard prepares for a \$12 million makeover, the area is attracting much more than that in private investment.

The Liberty Group, hotel developers based in St. Petersburg, broke ground this month on a \$13 million Holiday Inn Express & Suites on the site of the former Faze 2 Lounge just west of 30th Street.

Liberty President Punit Shah took inspiration from Busch Gardens to come up with a jungle safari theme that includes animal print designs in the fabrics, wallpapers with bamboo and tropical foliage prints.

"I like to make the hotel look like it belongs in the area - not like a cookie cutter," Shah said. "The pool is going to be outstanding. We're really going all out because we're expecting a lot of families at this property. It's going to have fountains and jets, and it will be surrounded by lots of palm trees and beautiful landscaping." The 123-room hotel is scheduled to open by September.

"I'm so excited the area is redeveloping," Shah said.

The McDonald's at 3411 E. Busch Blvd. just finished a \$200,000 renovation using dark wood veneers, pendent lights and safari prints. A vacant restaurant at Busch and 30th reopened last week as Morrison's Buffet and Grill.

But the biggest project, by far, is the new Lodge at LakeCrest, a 464-unit luxury apartment complex just north of Busch Gardens.

The Hanover Co., based in Houston, has transformed the 28-acre site that housed a canning plant for 35 years. Now it features a 4.5-acre lake surrounded by 26 three-story buildings and a clubhouse that rivals those in the most exclusive gated communities.

It includes a sports lounge with billiards and three high-definition TVs, a movie screening room with stadium seating, an executive business lounge and a resort-style pool with a large lanai, outdoor kitchen, volleyball court and fire pit. "We're going to have a social director and personal trainer on site," assistant property manager Nicole Pavlovich said. All apartments will feature open floor plans with Berber carpet and slate floors in the entry, kitchen and bathrooms. All units have built-in features, such as wine cabinets and arched computer niches, desks and shelves.

The 80 town house units have upgrades such as stainless side-by-side refrigerators, double ovens, custom cabinets and granite counters. They also feature 9-foot ceilings, private garages, terraces on multiple levels and master bathrooms with separate showers and garden tubs.

The first units will be ready for occupancy Dec. 20. Rents start at \$899 per month for a one-bedroom, one-bath unit. The largest town house unit rents for \$2,699 per month.

Reporter Laura Kinsler can be reached at (813) 865-4844 or [lkinsler@tampatrib.com](mailto:lkinsler@tampatrib.com).

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