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Affordable Housing Project Opens Doors in Lafayette

By Cathy Tyson



Some of the residents of Belle Terre gather in the lobby area, from left: Property manager Leslie Bown, Evora James, Larisa Lantsova, Yuet Yuen, Nirmalui Bains and Mac Parker. Photo Andy Scheck

median income was \$65,500, so a low income resident could only qualify for one of these apartments if they made a maximum of \$32,750 per year.

All sources of income are counted, including Social Security benefits, 401K, disability and interest from bank accounts. Tenants pay rent that is calculated at one-third of their income, with the balance paid through operating subsidies which are ultimately paid by HUD vouchers, via the Contra Costa County Housing Authority.

"With budget cuts and sequestration-there are a limited number of vouchers available," said Karp. Federally funded HUD's mission is to create strong, sustainable, inclusive communities and quality affordable homes for all.

Eleven of the 45 units were allocated by the Housing Authority from their existing waitlist; the balance of units, 34, had a separate process through Eden Housing. There was a very simple pre-application form with basic information provided to all 600 interested parties-that group was randomly assigned lottery numbers. Lucky seniors who received numbers 1-300, and are at least 62 years old, were invited to fill out more detailed applications that documented their finances, including tax returns and evidence of income and assets, and then a criminal background check was completed along with contacting their prior landlord. Those who met all of the requirements and had a qualifying lottery number were approved.

Fair housing law prevents apartments to be selectively allocated to tenants whose population is not representative of greater Contra Costa County. While it's true that the vast majority of Lamorinda residents are Caucasian, that representation is not true of the entire county.

It was challenging to win one of these apartments and it was equally challenging to get the structure built. The project took nine years from the initial efforts of the Senior Housing Task Force which was created to help the City Council meet its goal of providing senior housing in Lafayette.

In 2008, the project was approved for very low income seniors, but securing financing wasn't easy. "After a few unsuccessful attempts to obtain state and federal funding, the project broke ground in September, 2012 and was completed in late 2013. Funding for the project comes from a number of sources, including the county and the state. The city's redevelopment agency contributed \$3.8M towards the project," said Niroop Srivatsa, Lafayette's planning and building director.

"It's like heaven - really nice," said Connie Yoo who moved in to her third floor unit with husband Hanseop Yoo on Feb. 1. The couple attended an information meeting last fall and were struck by the many interested people vying for apartments-"I'm lucky," she said. They filled out all of the required paperwork and were approved and with help from family they moved the few blocks from their previous Lafayette apartment to their brand new, light filled space. "It's like a family already," she says of her neighbors. "We appreciate the government, they helped us."

New tenant Evora James couldn't be happier. She enjoys the brand new apartment and its convenience to downtown. Although she doesn't own a car, she is able to walk to the grocery store and even BART. When the project was in the planning stages, there was some concern about adequate parking, but many of the residents don't own cars, so the underground parking area is roughly half full, with plenty of available spots for visitors.

There will be an official grand opening party with a ribbon cutting on May 16 to wrap up affordable housing

week; Belle Terre is the showcase project. The mayor is expected to speak along with political luminaries. Another Eden project is under construction in Orinda.

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