

Downtown affordable condos called into question

Dozens have passed up chance to own Pearl at Jackson units.

By Cara Rank

In her 10 years in Jackson Hole, Meg Petersen thinks she has applied for five – maybe more – affordable homes.

Finally, this summer, her name was selected during a lottery. Petersen had a chance to buy one of five affordable units in the new Pearl at Jackson building. For \$212,000, she could purchase a one-bedroom condo with stainless steel appliances and fine finishes. It sounded like a dream.

Except Petersen applied for the unit sight unseen. And when she did see it, what she found was something she called similar to “a cave.”

The bedroom had no windows looking outside,

and the finishes were made of dark wood. The condo entrance was off a back alley and separate from the market units.

It didn't come with a parking space, either.

“While it pains me to turn this down, I fear it would have haunted me more had I taken it,” she wrote in a letter to the Teton County Housing Authority in September. “It feels to me that the county regulations for affordable housing were a mere afterthought for the developers. I can't justify that kind of investment for a home that feels like seasonal employee housing.”

Petersen is not alone. Twenty-five people chosen to buy units at the Pearl at Jackson building have turned down the opportunity, said Christine Walker, execu-



Walker

tive director of the Teton County Housing Authority.

Some declined because they were selected to purchase affordable homes elsewhere in the valley, she said. Some turned down the units because of the price tags, which ranged from \$126,900 to \$299,000, she said.

Some cited lack of parking – only two of the condos were given a parking space in the underground garage – while others had issue with the design, particularly the amount of light the bedrooms receive, she said.

Reaction to the development calls into question whether developers are creating livable affordable and employee housing to offset their market homes and commercial space or whether they're simply fulfilling development obligations the town and county imposed. Currently, a builder must make 25 percent of a development available and affordable for the local

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work force.

David Neville, a real estate agent selling the market units, said he didn't agree with how Petersen characterized the units. As of Tuesday afternoon, four of the five affordable condos had been spoken for but are not under contract.

"People are excited about them," he said.

Neville said he's hearing that people like the affordable condos.

"I don't know where you are getting your stuff," he said in response to questions from a *News&Guide* reporter.

The property is owned by Pearl and Jackson Development LLC, which lists The Neville Revocable Trust, Darin Olson and Athsole Olson as members, according to the Wyoming Secretary of State's Office.

The 26,730-square-foot planned-mixed-use-development building is being completed on about 1.5 lots, smaller than town regulations allow. The development consists of 15 residential and nine commercial condominiums on 0.31 acres at the corner of Pearl Avenue and South Jackson Street. It replaced a small A-frame that previously housed a rental car operation.

In the building, there are three affordable units on the first floor: a studio and two one-bedroom condos. None has a parking space or storage unit.

A separate entrance from the alley off Jackson Street is used to access these three condos.

The studio unit and a bedroom in one of the condos have exterior windows.

The third condo has an exterior window in the great room but no exterior window in the bedroom. The bedroom does have a frosted-glass window to the main living areas.

Upstairs, there is a one-bedroom affordable unit that comes with one parking space but its bedroom has only interior windows. In the three-bedroom unit, only one of the bedrooms has an exterior window. Both upstairs units have extra storage in the garage and a parking space each.

Finding buyers for four of the five affordable units has taken time, Walker said. None of them is under contract yet because the housing authority is working through final items such as the cost of homeowners dues.

"We have gone through more people than is typical," Walker said.

In recent years, people selected to purchase affordable homes have rarely

passed up the opportunity. Lotteries for homes have drawn dozens of people, and the first person drawn usually buys.

One reason that 25 people have turned down Pearl at Jackson offerings, Walker said, is that an open house to show the units was canceled, forcing some applicants to apply for a product they had not seen.

The lottery for the properties began Aug. 19.

Walker stood behind the condos.

"They're really nice units," she said. "They are a different product type than is customary in a more rural setting. This is more urban."

Still, she understands the skepticism.

"I was skeptical," she said. "And when I went to view the units, I was pleasantly surprised at how nice they were."



Neville

Walker said the units have many nice features, such as tall ceilings and big windows in the great rooms that let in a lot of light.

Some south-facing units receive more light than some of the market units, she said.

Some bedrooms only have internal windows, but they still get natural light, Walker said. Developers put in "air exchangers" that bring fresh air into the units.

"It's nice to have a lot of different product type, which caters to a different worker in our community," she said. "I think we need to have a mix."

Still, when the housing authority submitted comments to the Jackson Town Council during the development's review, it recommended some changes to make the spaces more "livable."

For one, staff recommended that developers add exterior windows for sleeping areas as "it would be preferable to have natural light in the bedrooms."

"All of the market-rate units have bedroom windows, and TCHA staff recommends that the applicant provide a consistent product for the affordable units," the comments state.

The developer put exterior bedroom windows in three of the units.

The housing authority also suggested that the developer assign basement storage spaces to each unit for outdoor gear such as bikes and skis. Finally, the comments suggested lengthening the outdoor balconies to be comparable with the size of the outdoor balconies in

the market units.

While the developer incorporated the suggestions for the two upstairs units, those changes were not made for the first-floor condos.

That's because those were originally intended as employee rentals, Walker said.

The Town Council allowed the developer to change those to ownership units so the condos could be sold more easily. Because of the economic climate, finding financing to sell those kinds of units has been challenging, the developer's attorney, Brenda Wylie, said at the time.

When those units were changed, the developer was required to pay a \$25,500 fee to offset the lack of three spaces.

Now, the Town Council may address parking issues with the units, too.

Walker said town officials may consider suspending the current practice of keeping streets clear of cars overnight so they can be plowed by morning rush hour. Instead, the town would allow on-street parking on one side of town street at night during winter months.

And if the town doesn't change parking regulations, Walker said, owners can use the new parking garage, which is one block away. Town regulations allow someone to park there for up to 72 hours at a time, so an owner could park overnight, then move the car during the day.

While there is on-street parking during the summer, there also could be on-street parking in winter, Walker said.

Jeff Noffsinger, a planner with the town, said people will have to find creative ways to park their cars.

"It might be a little inconvenient, but I don't think it's any different from a large city where you have inconvenient parking options in your downtown," he said.

Petersen said she could have dealt with not having a parking space. She's a manager for Frank Lundy's movie theater and could have parked her truck in the lot across the street.

She would have been just steps away from work. For her, the issue came down to buying a unit with a separate entrance and one with little light.

"They feel entirely separate from the living spaces in the rest of the building," she said. "The inside living spaces of the units, while no doubt well built and [apparently] with fine appliances, reflect very little of the character of the rest of the building."

So Petersen will keep on renting.

— Amanda Miller contributed to this report.