

Affordable Units Ready at Right Time

Affordable, accessible apartments to open soon

*By Amy Flowers Umble
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Area rents keep rising quickly.

Disability payments do not.

More than five people call the disAbility Resource Center every day, desperately seeking affordable--and accessible--places to live in the Fredericksburg area.

"They're very hard to find," said Shawn Lawrence, the agency's housing coordinator.

Many people with disabilities end up in the homeless shelter or on the streets, he said.

So Lawrence looks forward to Thursday, when five new accessible, affordable apartments will open in the city.

The Central Virginia Housing Coalition bought the Colonial Heights Apartments in Fredericksburg 10 years ago. The agency first rented the apartments on the corner of Charles and Dixon streets.

In 2004, the CVHC applied for federal tax credits to renovate the apartments. Agency staff started developing site plans and hoped to have fresh, cheap apartments quickly.

Early on, the project hit some snags, said Gary Parker, the coalition's executive director. Part of the apartment complex at 200 Charles Street dated to the 1800s and had to be restored to historic standards.

Lead-based paints and asbestos posed more problems, as did an issue involving the 100-year flood plain.

"The architect really had to work some magic to get everything to fit together," Parker said.

But now, contractors are finishing up the final details on the 14 apartments. They include one-, two- and three-bedroom units. Rents start at \$650. Renters need to make about 80 percent or less of the area median income to qualify.

Five of the units are handicapped-accessible. They have smoother carpet, benches in the showers, handheld shower sprays, lower kitchen counters and knobs on the fronts of the stoves.

Such details mean the world to a person in a wheelchair, Lawrence said. But they usually come with a hefty price tag.



The Colonial Heights Apartments at Charles and Dixon streets in Fredericksburg are a blend of old and new.
DAVE ELLIS/THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Projects such as Colonial Heights and Project FAITH--a **King George County** apartment complex that offers accessibility at income-based rents--are rare but necessary.

"They're the exception rather than the rule," Lawrence said. "But they're more needed than people are willing to admit."

Tomorrow, Colonial Heights will hold a ribbon cutting. And Oct. 1, renters can start moving in. More than half of the apartments have already been leased, Parker said.

Lawrence expects the complex to fill up quickly--if the constant ringing of his phone is any sign. Many of the callers are facing evictions and foreclosures during the recession.

"People with disabilities are losing everything just like everyone else," Lawrence said. "It's just doubly hard because they have a disability to go along with it."