

People are Lining up to Move into Abingdon's New Subdivision

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Where Kyle Breeding used to live, he suffered from breathing problems, and the medical bills would pile up when his wife needed hospital treatment for severe asthma attacks.

But Breeding no longer worries about the black mold growing in the double-wide trailer he shared with his wife and daughter. In September, the family moved into a good home – and haven't made a trip to the hospital since.

The Breedings are among the new residents of Sweetbriar, a subdivision near Abingdon Elementary School built by a local nonprofit to meet the need for affordable housing.

People Incorporated, which built the complex with help from a host of federal programs, officially cut the ribbon on the project Thursday. Families already fill all 20 of the duplex-style units, with rent assessed based on the ability to pay.

"We had people waiting in line to move in," said Rob Goldsmith, president of People Inc., who said the recession has increased the demand for nice rentals at low cost.

Goldsmith also said that 150 families are still on a waiting list.

Construction costs make it nearly impossible for a for-profit developer to build affordable rental housing and meet expenses, Goldsmith said, which means only nonprofits with access to federal dollars can do it.

He said Sweetbriar and similar projects can help erase the stigma that low-income people sometimes face – and help them avoid standing out in unintended ways.

"People that live here will have a functioning bathroom and they can get a good night's sleep," he said, "and those things matter."

Ann Murray, who is disabled and lives alone, said she values the ability to get a good night's sleep in her new home – away from the threat of drugs and crime that plagues some low-income housing areas.

"If you have to be scared all the time, that ain't no way to live, is it? And these days it's worse than ever," she said.

Murray, who suffers from arthritis, said she also likes having a garage because it's much easier for her to carry her groceries inside.

The homes are built to green building standards and with no shortcuts, said Danny Wilson, construction superintendent for the project. Wilson said \$2.8 million was spent to build all of the homes.

He said another phase of the project is planned for 2011, when 22 more units will be built on the site.

“When we started to rent them up and had kids riding bikes in the neighborhood and saw kids playing basketball in the driveway, it hit home,” Wilson said. “We’ve actually created a neighborhood here where kids can live in a nice house and a safe environment.”

Breeding said his family is breathing easier since moving in; they’ve had no more costly hospital visits and have seen a reduction in their monthly housing costs, from more than \$700 for the trailer to just \$435 a month. Plus, the utilities are less expensive.

“We’ll have extra money to send my [18-year-old] daughter to college,” Breeding said. “I’m hoping to get back to college myself.”

Goldsmith said the project is one of five wrapping up around the region – with more than 150 units in Abingdon, Norton, Dante and Pulaski.

More are planned.

“I believe this area could absorb thousands of units here like this that would rent for the level of rent that we are able to charge,” Goldsmith said. “We’ll just keep working at it.”