

## Tenants Push Against the Tide

In the Face of Eviction, Gaithersburg Renters Fight for Assistance

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John Small, 81, and his wife, Betty Jean, raised their family at the Broadstone apartments, below, in Gaithersburg. With their children grown and Betty Jean in a nearby nursing home, Small fears being displaced if a proposal to raze the aging garden apartments is approved. (Photos By Michael Williamson -- The Washington Post)

### Affordable Apartments Vanishing

*Apartments with affordable rents are disappearing quickly as older complexes are torn down or converted into condominiums.*

<i>Units with gross rents of \$999 per month or less</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>Loss</i>
The District	100,158	91,512	8,646
Prince George's County	73,191	55,166	18,025
Fairfax County	29,165	21,361	7,804
Montgomery County	39,467	27,876	11,591

*SOURCE: National Housing Trust*

The pear trees in the parking lot cast their pale flowers up into the darkening sky. "They'll be firewood," predicted John Small, 81, wistfully.

Small, a retired water quality expert, and many of his neighbors -- government and health-care workers, a young Iraq war veteran, a youth basketball coach -- worry about a proposal to raze their aging garden apartments in Gaithersburg and replace them with upscale townhouses, condominiums and apartments.

That could mean eviction from the Broadstone, one of the few havens of affordability in increasingly costly Montgomery County. But rather than simply wringing their hands, the tenants are meeting with city officials to speak up for their rights and developing a package of relocation services that would go into place if they must move.

The tenants hope that market forces, shifting government policy and their own advocacy can help reverse a trend that has pushed many moderate-income workers out of the county.

"They are scared about where they will go, what they will do in the future, but there is also a sense of strength," said Alisa Glassman of **Action in Montgomery**, a faith-based organization working with the tenants. "They are part of something new."

The redevelopment of the Broadstone, where two-bedroom units rent for \$945 -- nearly \$300 below the countywide average -- comes as Gaithersburg is trying to revitalize its aging housing stock and provide more places for sale. It also comes as thousands of older garden apartments are disappearing from the Washington region.

According to an analysis of census data, Montgomery might have lost as many as 12,000 -- or more than a quarter -- of its apartments renting for \$999 or less between 2003 and 2005. By the same calculation, Prince George's and Fairfax counties lost about a quarter of their affordable units, and the District lost about 9 percent.

The developer who owns the Broadstone has agreed to offer 70 units at affordable rents, but that won't replace the 350 there now.

"We are not building anything new that approximates it," said Michael Bodaken, president of the National Housing Trust, which produced the analysis of census data. "We see it as a unique housing resource that needs to be preserved."

Some county governments have stepped in: Fairfax paid \$84 million last year to buy two complexes to save "workforce" housing for those who work in the county but can't afford to live there. And last month, the Arlington County Board spent more than \$32 million to preserve part of the Buckingham Village Apartment complex as affordable housing.

On Tuesday, Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) introduced legislation that would greatly expand the county's ability to buy apartment complexes before they go on the open market.

And Montgomery's Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit Program, considered a national model when it was created in the 1970s, requires developers of large projects to offer 12.5 percent of the units at prices below market rate.

But the program is not replacing units as fast as they are being lost, said County Council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville.) "We're losing ground. We're losing ground fast."

Leggett agreed. "The county has some good programs," he said in an interview, "but we need to look at things that are much more immediate." In addition to his legislation, he has earmarked \$10 million for an affordable housing fund and is awaiting recommendations from a task force. "We need some new tools in our toolbox," Leggett said.

But the county ultimately has little control over what happens in Gaithersburg, which has its own city government. To move forward, the Broadstone project needs a favorable recommendation from the city Planning Commission and approval from the mayor and City Council. A vote could come as early as next month.

Gaithersburg requires developers to set aside units in new projects for families of low and moderate incomes. At the same time, a recent city policy encourages redevelopment of aging apartments into condominium units.

"The challenge is that we have around 4,000 aging units. We need to get some of them converted into condominiums that people can afford to buy," said Assistant City Manager Fred Felton. "There is no easy answer. There is a housing crisis."

Help could come in the form of the slumping real estate market.

Next door to the Broadstone, the West Deer Park apartments stand vacant and boarded up after about 200 families were forced to leave last year. Yet a condominium conversion project there has languished. The city Board of Appeals is considering the developer's request to reopen the complex for rental use.

The slow market is also affecting the \$352 million Rockville Town Square, where a developer is marketing many condominium units as rentals, some at affordable prices.

Felton, the assistant city manager who has been meeting with tenants and organizers, told a crowd of tenants that if the Broadstone is torn down, the developer would be required to give each displaced tenant enough money for 3 1/2 months' rent. He said he and other city officials would help them all find new homes.

"I believe we can absorb these families into existing housing in Gaithersburg," Felton said.

Glassman, of **Action in Montgomery**, said that when the West Deer Park tenants were displaced last year, many moved out without taking advantage of benefits that the developer and the city negotiated for them. The Broadstone tenants, by contrast, have gotten involved in speaking out for the help.

"You have an organized group of tenants holding the city accountable and working with their neighbors to be sure they get what they should," she said.

Still many tenants are worried.

"They'll get rid of the little people like us," said Jennifer Jones, a doctoral student studying speech and language pathology and supporting herself and her 10-year-old son on a research associate's salary of about \$2,100 a month. Her son has a learning disability, and Jones said she worries about his changing schools, let alone finding another apartment.

John Small's ties to this place are deep and sentimental. He was one of the returning vets this housing was built for, 42 years ago when he and his young family moved in. Gaithersburg had a tenth of its current 52,000 population, and the Broadstone was brand new and charging \$90 a month for rent.

His children grew up here, and he and his wife, Betty Jean, grew old here. She now lives in a nearby nursing home. Small remains the senior resident, watching the seasons change from his third-floor window, which has a commanding view of a city park. The place was a farm when Small moved here in 1965. The old irrigation pond teems with life.

"Soon the ducks will have their broods," he said. "They will come out with a little string of ducklings. The turtles will eat half of them, and the other half will fly away."

He hates the thought of losing his place in this world.