

Uprooted tenants bitter about losing apartments 'for nothing'

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Jennifer Jones saw her rent double after she and her son had to leave their Gaithersburg apartment to make way for a developer's dreams of luxury town homes expected to retail for about \$700,000 each.

Now that the housing market has fallen off, the developer gutted his plans for town houses and sought to upgrade and reoccupy the very same units, leaving Jones and 197 other families at 70 W. Deer Park Road wondering whether they lost their homes "for nothing."

"Some people had to change jobs because they couldn't find anything in the area for the same price, some kids lost their friends because they had to change schools," said Jones, who saw her rent increase from \$719 to \$1,499 to stay in the area. "Thanks for nothing, you uprooted us and our kids for nothing."

Gaithersburg's planning commission voted unanimously last week to allow RST Development to re-rent the units provided the company completes renovations including installing new windows and window treatments, significant landscaping work, improving the insulation and outfitting apartments with the latest in energy-efficient technology.

Assistant city manager Fred Felton said the apartments will rent at market rate and are expected to be on the market within the next six months. Felton added that the developer also agreed to keep 10 apartments for lower-income families under a form of rent control for the next 30 years. Affordable housing advocates have conflicted feelings about the outcome.

"This is a classic tragedy that has sort of a mixed ending," said Tom Cowley, co-chair of Action In Montgomery, an interfaith affordable housing advocacy group. "Families were evicted, these apartments sat vacant for about 16 months, but we'll have rental units back on stream. They will have been somewhat improved and some will now be moderately priced housing." Felton said city leaders have learned their lesson.

"The situation is unfortunate, but we've learned from it and we won't let it happen again," Felton said.

A new city policy forbids developers from reverting properties approved for redevelopment to their original uses.

Jones said future occupants of the complex formerly called West Deer Park Apartments should be wary.

"I feel bad for anybody who moves in there now," Jones said. "What if they change their mind again?"
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