



SHOOTING FOR SENIORS; BOWIE WORKS TO ATTRACT HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS FOR OLDER NEWCOMERS

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Thomas and Barbara Green retired from their jobs at Bell Atlantic Corp. three years ago because they wanted to help raise their growing brood of grandchildren and enjoy an active retirement.

Soon they were in the market for a new home to suit their simpler life.

Last June, the Greens (Thomas Green is now 55 years old and Barbara Green 52) decided to trade in their six-bedroom house in Mitchellville for a two-bedroom condominium under construction in the Cameron Grove retirement community in Bowie.

"We loved the idea of a community where it was a total lifestyle change," Barbara Green said of the three-mile walking path, indoor and outdoor pools, resort-quality tennis courts and manicured rose gardens that are part of the amenities near her future home. They also liked "the whole concept of being there among people of like interests and age," which other condominium complexes in the area didn't offer, she said.

Even more appealing, she said, is the location. The Greens' new home will keep them between their two adult daughters and their six grandchildren, who are in Mitchellville and Upper Marlboro. They looked into similar communities in Montgomery County but "didn't really want to move out of the area . . . because we have our grandchildren, so it was convenient for all of us," she said.

The Greens epitomize a demographic shift that is driving the demand for senior and retirement housing throughout the region, but especially in and around Bowie. Thousands of seniors, many of them longtime Prince George's County residents like the Greens, are looking for a safe, secure and easy-to-maintain home that allows them to stay close to their families. For developers, this is an appealing and relatively affluent market that they are eager to tap.

Retirement developments for upscale seniors are a hot sector in the housing industry, especially in areas like Bowie, an established community where infrastructure exists but where there remain large plots of undeveloped land, and where some of the senior housing is unavailable because residents

must have low incomes.

Bowie's location at the booming intersection of Routes 301 and 50 helps draw people from across the region.

In the last five years, four senior housing developments--from assisted living facilities to independent living units--have been constructed or started construction in Bowie. A fifth is proposed, at the Larkin Chase Rehabilitation and Nursing Center, a nursing home that opened five years ago and has since expanded.

Senior housing developments are popping up in other parts of the county as well--in Greenbelt, Largo and southern Prince George's--but Bowie appears to be the fastest developing.

"That whole corridor from Central Avenue to U.S. 301 outside the Beltway has had a lot of growth in that area" for a long time, said Philip Taylor, a senior planner and demographer with the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. "In the new type of senior housing being built, [there are more] self-contained units with buses that transport to shopping," so traditionally suburban places such as Bowie are increasingly attractive to seniors, he said.

Bill MacQuillam, president of the MacQuillam Organization Inc., a Crofton-based developer in neighboring Anne Arundel County, plans to open a four-story, 110-unit independent living facility in Bowie in mid-April. The Evergreen Senior Apartments, MacQuillam's project, is across from the Bowie New Town Center.

"Most people bought their homes 30 years ago, and there is nothing geared for them," he said.

At another development in Bowie, Pin Oak Village, which has 220 units of subsidized housing, there are caps on income. Many seniors 62 or older exceed the annual income limits of \$35,000 for Pin Oak Village.

The rental apartments for Evergreen, which start at \$850 a month, have not been advertised yet, but MacQuillam already has received more than 100 requests for information--mostly from Bowie residents, he said.

The growth in elderly housing--especially for seniors with higher incomes--is something that Bowie's political leaders sought.

Mayor Fred Robinson said the city encourages developers specializing in building senior care and independent living facilities because they contribute to the stability of the community.

James M. Cronk, Bowie's director of planning and development, said his office conducted a survey of housing for seniors and retirees in the area about four years ago. "We didn't have any senior housing; it was totally missing," he said.

So the city lobbied the County Council to pass some amendments to the county zoning ordinances to encourage that kind of development. "I think Prince George's County should be focusing more on

senior housing" because seniors are a stable, affluent group that costs the government little, Cronk said.

N. Stephen Stavrou was one of the first in the Bowie area to answer that call. Stavrou has developed or co-developed two retirement communities--Pin Oak Village and Cameron Grove, both in Bowie.

Stavrou, president of Stavrou Senior Communities LLC in Lanham, said fewer retirees are flocking to traditional, large retirement havens in Florida, North Carolina and Arizona because they want to stay closer to their children and their children's families. As the tide of baby boomers reaches 55, more and more are looking for smaller neighborhoods of 800 to 1,000 units, he said.

That led him to develop Pin Oak, a 220-unit rental apartment complex at Excalibur and Mitchellville roads, and now Cameron Grove, an 800-unit subdivision of town houses, condos and single-family units for sale at Church Road and Central Avenue.

"The market for both places is very deep," said Stavrou, whose company focuses on the special needs of aging communities. When Pin Oak opened its first 110 units in 1996, Stavrou received 846 applications from prospective tenants, he said.

Likewise with Cameron Grove: Of the first 150 units, still under construction, 50 already are sold. "It's actually a problem because we're overrun with people" seeking to buy the \$116,000 to \$200,000 homes, he said.

The Cameron Grove development stands to get a \$1.5 million break in water and sewer installation fees if a bill approved by the Prince George's County delegation wins approval in the General Assembly in Annapolis. Although the proposal has come under fire for being a special bill to benefit one development, Stavrou said that kind of political support indicates the county's desire to encourage these kinds of developments.

Officials at the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission oppose the bill proposed by Sen. Ulysses Currie (D-Forestville), saying the benefit to the developers will mean higher utility bills for the rest of the ratepayers.

But Stavrou said public coffers will benefit: Cameron Grove alone will generate \$51 million in taxes for the county over 20 years, according to consultant Robert Charles Lesser & Co., of Chevy Chase, which studied the development under a contract with Stavrou.

Meanwhile, Bowie, with its population growing about 4 percent a year, especially in the under-20 and over-60 age brackets, is looking for ways to attract seniors.

"We're trying to make things attractive to the whole community," Robinson said. The city is trying to build places where seniors and children will be able to socialize together, he said.

For example, the city cut the ribbon Sunday on the not-quite-finished Bowie Senior Center--a free, public recreation center for seniors at 14900 Health Center Dr.--to accommodate the increasing numbers of participants in the city's senior programs.

The center is to include not only an area for seniors but also a public gymnasium now under construction for children and the entire community on the same parcel of land.

The \$4 million, 29,000-square-foot senior center is a vast improvement over the 4,000-square-foot space in Bowie's city hall where 100 seniors have passed through on the average day to take classes and get hot lunches, said Marilyn Milio, senior services project manager for Bowie.

Julian A. Domingo, 73, said pool at the senior center is "my impetus to get up and out every morning." The retired post office worker and longtime Bowie resident meets 11 or 12 of his retired buddies there to play five days a week.

"I moved here in 1974 from New York, and I was looking for a small town, and I've seen it grow into a large town," Domingo said regretfully. But he no longer works and therefore doesn't have to drive in heavy traffic, so life here is bearable, he said. Besides, the city has been treating him well. "As a matter of fact, they may be doing too much," spending a lot of tax money on serving seniors, he said.

For Lorraine Warner, 64, Bowie has evolved from a suburban community into a nice place to spend her retirement years. Warner moved to Bowie in 1973 with her husband and six children.

When the family moved to Bowie, "there were so many kids" living on their block in the Somerset section of Bowie, but in the last five or six years, empty nests and aging parents have left the block virtually devoid of children, Warner said. Warner, who lives with her husband, James, keeps herself busy by taking art and Tai Chi classes at Bowie's city hall. She's staying in the area not only because five of her six children have settled in Maryland but also because "I really like the city of Bowie."

Barbara Green, who looks forward to chaperoning her grandchildren to and from school, stamped a seal of approval on her future neighborhood as something that bridges the new with the familiar. "I like Bowie. It's convenient to me, and I can still get to all of the things I normally would have done," she said.

The Graying of the City

Bowie has been aging from a median age of 19.5 years in 1970, to 28.8 years in 1980, to 32.9 in 1990. The trend continues upward, according to the city's 1996 demographic study.

The city, which experienced explosive population growth among baby boomers in the 1980s, is showing its age in the growth of its retirement-age population.

Prince George's County as a whole is home to 178,245 people 50 years old or older, and the median age is 34, according to 1999 estimates from Claritas Inc.

Nationally, there were about 60.1 million Americans older than 55 last year, according to Claritas, a data service that tracks demographic information. By 2004, that segment of the population is expected to grow by 11.86 percent, to more than 67.1 million, while the general U.S. population is expected to grow by 4.19 percent.