

Berwyn Apts. may get major makeover

Mar 17, 2004

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Residents would be forced out temporarily

*By Matt Santoni
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Residents of the mostly student-occupied Berwyn House Apartments may be displaced by next year as the building's new owners move to renovate and expand the 40-year-old building, city officials said.

Washington-based developer Rock Creek Properties LLC has a contract to renovate the 132 existing apartments and add another 72 units and a parking garage to the complex on Berwyn House Road just off Route 1. The project would potentially displace most or all of the building's renters during construction, Economic Development Coordinator Claire Sale said.

RCP representative Jon Wallenstrom said the renovations will create more "Class-A" apartments comparable to existing complexes like South Campus Commons or University Courtyards. However, the amenities will not be decided upon until later in the contracting and design process, Wallenstrom said. Until plans for the scope of the renovations are finalized, RCP could not estimate the cost, Wallenstrom said.

One of the most important additions to the building will be a sprinkler system, bringing it into compliance with the city's proposed regulations requiring fire sprinklers in apartments and dorm-style housing. RCP is also considering ways to improve security, Wallenstrom said, given that building resident Richard Charette witnessed the February shooting of Lamont Whitted in the park down the street.

Residents of the apartments have voiced concerns that the building has frequent problems with plumbing and electricity, requiring frequent shut-offs for maintenance work.

While there were some problems with security - lighting in the parking lot is sometimes poor, and the front door could be unlocked with a strong yank for months, he said - the apartments are reasonably large, well-maintained and well-soundproofed against student parties that occasionally spill into hallways.

In order to minimize the number of renters shut out by the renovations, work will likely begin during the summer, Wallenstrom said. It may take the company more than a year to prepare its plans for the renovation and get approval from the city and county for the expansion.

Once leases expire at the end of a year, RCP may cut the number of new leases it signs by half or more in order to open up apartments for reconstruction. RCP is considering another option that would close the building entirely to complete construction as quickly as possible.

The building's new Resident Manager, Michelle Palmer, was unavailable for comment. Palmer took over after the building's previous manager, Pat Crawford, recently retired.

RCP was contracted to renovate the building by the new owner, Texas-based real estate firm First Worthing. First Worthing operates student housing projects in Florida, Texas, Arizona and North Carolina.

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