

West Village complex has yet to fulfill UC Davis' vision

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Before construction began, UC Davis laid out a vision for West Village, its new on-campus community, as a showcase of energy efficiency that would provide affordable housing for faculty and students.

Nearly two years after the \$300 million development opened, it has not yet fulfilled those expectations.

Its student apartments have experienced high turnover. Single-family homes for faculty and staff have not materialized. And the developer can't quantify whether the project is meeting its goal of using no more energy than it produces from solar panels.

As for being affordable, West Village apartments have some of the highest rents in town.

"The reality is the rental rates at that property are extremely high," said Karen Mattis, coordinator of the Davis Residential Managers Association, a citywide group of property managers. "Students are looking for something more affordable."

West Village isn't actually run by UC Davis. The school contracted with private developer Carmel Partners to build and manage the community.

So far, Carmel has built two apartment complexes with 507 units that house 1,500 residents, mostly students. As of this week, the complex was charging \$2,000 for a two-bedroom unit, while the Davis average is \$1,307, according to a 2012 report by UC Davis Student Housing.

For that price, student tenants get an amenity-rich complex, including a resort-style pool and a stunning clubhouse.

Despite those luxuries, West Village has had a hard time keeping tenants, with about 50 percent of them declining to renew their leases in 2012, not including those who graduated.

Citywide, the average renewal rate is closer to 70 percent, according to Mattis.

The complex has an elaborate marketing campaign to attract students, distributing thousands of branded T-shirts, water bottles and sunglasses.

Through Facebook, DavisWiki and interviews, students have complained that management has promised more than it has delivered.

"The apartments are really beautiful from outside, but then when you move in, you realize there are issues with the apartments," said Trudy Lei, who has lived there since September 2011.

"Management is awful. They talk down to us because we're college kids," said resident Chelsea Hayman, who offered a laundry list of complaints ranging from persistent Internet outages to inoperable toilets.

Carmel Partners acknowledged the existence of "several front office issues" and operational problems, but asset manager Stephanie Martling said "hiccups are to be expected" from a new complex. The San Francisco company has responded by bringing in a new manager.

"It's just so big. We all wear different hats every day," said J.D. McLeod, the new manager, who arrived in November.

Mattis, of the Davis residential managers group, attributed West Village's woes to "high prices, bad reviews on DavisWiki and its remote location."

"You can do all the incentives you want, but unless the apartment works for the student, they're not going to stay there," Mattis said. "Students are savvy. They know what they're looking for."

University officials expect West Village to one day house 3,000 students, faculty and staff, a buildout that will take at least several years. A third apartment complex with 500 beds is expected to open this fall.

About 300 single-family homes were supposed to arrive last year but did not, partly because of the dismal real estate market.

Built on university land, the 130-acre project was touted as the "largest planned zero-net energy community in the nation."

Researchers projected that the apartments – built with energy-saving features such as extra insulation, solar panels and efficient appliances – would use half as much electricity as conventional buildings.

The project received \$22 million in public funding, including \$14.5 million from UC Davis to pay for streets, utilities and other infrastructure, and \$2.5 million from the California Energy Commission to explore renewable energy.

Martling said last week that the project is "on track" to meet its energy goals, but did not offer data about energy savings to support that assertion.

"Our data has been changing," she said. "It's not fully built and stabilized."

So far, in addition to the student apartments, the village includes office space occupied by a few of the school's research arms. More research experiments investigating energy usage are on the

horizon, including one that aims to use solar panels to charge electric cars. A "biodigester" that would convert waste into energy is slated to go online this fall.

UC Davis still has high expectations for West Village. "We can use this as a living laboratory," said Sid England, the university's assistant vice chancellor for sustainability.

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