

The Oregonian

The Pearl's intent on finding its families

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By Su-jin Yim
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So, if you throw a fancy party and nobody comes, do you assume it's because your invite list wasn't long enough? Or because folks just weren't in the mood for foie gras and pate?

In a way, that's what developers in the Pearl District wonder when they look around and don't see more families in the booming Pearl District. So, the Portland Development Commission contracted a study and helped community groups organize a forum to gather more public input this Saturday to find out why.

The study tested a basic economic thesis: "We figured, 'Let's see if this is really a demand problem or a supply problem,' " says Heather Hansen, PDC housing policy and planning coordinator. The study, released in February, showed plenty of families would be interested, if the housing's right: 1,200- to 1,500-square-foot condos with three bedrooms and one or two bathrooms, she says. Today, most three-bedroom units tend to be pricey penthouses.

The PDC hopes that developers will see the pent-up demand and come forward with supply, Hansen says.

Neighborhood activist Patricia Gardner knows people who reluctantly left the Pearl once their families grew.

"They need a little more space, and they can't find it," she says.

The urban renewal agency also is working on a program to ensure affordable housing will stay affordable over the years. The details aren't nailed but could include deed restrictions to limit resale price, Hansen says, as they do in California and Massachusetts.

Of course, a lack of housing isn't the only thing keeping families out of the Pearl, a haven for singles, young couples and empty-nesters. Forum organizers hope families will tell them what's needed to lure them into the neighborhood, such as schools, child care, transportation and family-friendly businesses, says Zimmerman Community Center executive director Pat Rumer. Zimmerman plans to continue the conversation at two smaller events in May, Rumer says.

A low-income family housing development may emerge before a market-rate project. Architect Ben Gates is looking at properties in the Pearl as part of his three-year fellowship with Central City Concern.

No matter which comes first, Gardner says, patience is required.

"We can't just add water and be done demographically," she says. "It'd be nice to socially engineer it so we have the right mix but some of that's going to take time."

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FAMILIES AND THE PEARL

What: "Building a Pearl/River District for Families," a community forum to explore how to make the Pearl District more welcoming to families.

When: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday

Where: Pacific Northwest College of Art's Swigert Commons, 1241 N.W. Johnson St.

Cost: free