

First look at special needs complex in Allendale

Units to open new horizons for 24

By ALLISON PRIES
STAFF WRITER

ALLENDALE — Two dozen adults with special needs were welcomed to the neighborhood Monday at a ribbon-cutting ceremony for Crescent Commons, a housing development on West Crescent Avenue.

The first phase of the project is nearly complete — except for some electrical work — and residents selected from a pool of more than 100 applicants will move in Jan. 1.

Construction continues on a second phase at the site, consisting of six town homes that will be sold as affordable housing to low-income families.

The development is located on a 1.5-acre site across from the borough's recycling center that was once home to a construction company.

For many on Monday it was a first look at the place they'll soon call home. And like any other new tenants touring their well-appointed apartments, they peeked inside kitchen cabinets and marveled at dishwashers and front-loading laundry machines.

"The payoff is to see their faces," said Tom Toronto, president of the Bergen County United Way, which partnered on the project with Allendale Housing Inc. and the Madeline Corp.

Dozens of state and local officials, future residents of the complex and the many professionals who helped bring the project to fruition gathered in a tent in the parking lot of Crescent Commons to celebrate the near-completion of the project, which consists of seven two-bedroom and 10 one-bedroom apartments.

Of the 24 residents, four have multiple sclerosis and the rest have Down syndrome or Asperger's.

They range in age from 20 to 60-plus. Most hail from Bergen County towns such as Wyckoff,

Fort Lee, Garfield, Ridgewood, Waldwick, Washington Township and Old Tappan. At least one person comes from Wayne.

"It doesn't have to be this nice," said Liana Kraenzlin, 34, of Budd Lake, glancing at the high ceilings, decorative molding and meticulously landscaped grounds of what will be her new home.

Kraenzlin was diagnosed with MS at the age of 19. She worked until a year ago as a registered nurse and has been living with her mother and stepfather.

"I just needed a place to hang my hat that has wider doorways," she said. Her new one-bedroom apartment will allow her to get around more easily in her wheelchair because of its roll-in shower and waist-level cabinets and closets.

The built-in community that will come with moving into Crescent Commons has the bubbly young woman excited about making new friends. "I can get back to being an extravert, rather than an introvert," she said, adding, "I'm not meant for sitting on the sidelines."

Zack Hamrick of Mahwah will leave his parents' home in the Fardale section of the township for a life of independence.

"This is like dying and going to heaven," said his mom. Zack, who has autism, will only be about 10 minutes away from his parents but yet have the freedom of living on his own with a roommate.

"It's a tremendous step forward for him and a little bit of a relief for us — to know he will be OK if something happens to us. That's something every parent here feels," she said.

8,000 in line

The residents of Crescent Commons are among the lucky few. More than 8,000 people in New Jersey are in line for special needs housing.

"I wish every town would do

this because it has such a profound impact on such a large group of people," Allendale Mayor Vince Barra said, referring to the special needs residents' families and the entire borough.

The borough's Woman's Club has set up game nights and movie nights, walking tours and shopping trips for the residents of Orchard Commons, Allendale's first developmentally disabled housing project.

When Crescent Commons is occupied, the borough will house a total of 37 people through three special needs projects.

"If one-third of the towns in New Jersey did this," Barra said, "it would wipe out the waiting list."

The \$5.8 million project was largely paid for with \$3.3 million in grants from the state's home mortgage finance agency and the special needs housing trust fund and \$1.25 million from the borough's housing trust, which is funded by fees developers pay.

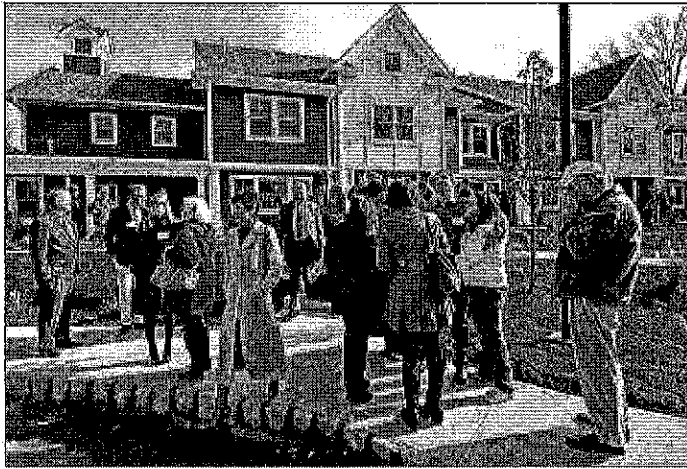
Other towns are beginning to take notice of Allendale's efforts and develop their own special needs housing.

Construction is under way in Ramsey for Airmont Woods, the first housing project in the state specifically for adults with autism.

"We used Allendale as a model for our project," said Ramsey Mayor Chris Boita. "Mayor Barra has been very supportive."

Barra, who began working on building affordable housing for the developmentally disabled in 2007, said he was inspired by a niece with special needs. "They've done far more for us as a community than we've done for them," he said.





CHRIS MONROE/SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

The first phase of development at Crescent Commons in Allendale will provide 17 apartments for adults with special needs. Other towns are beginning to take notice of Allendale's efforts.