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MARGARITA PRENTICE
state senator, D-Seattle

Advocates seek money for low-income housing

\$100 million sought in state, and that figure is called too low

By ELIZABETH MURTAUGH
Associated Press writer

SEATTLE — It took three years, reams of paperwork and a lot of begging before hammers started pounding away at Avalon Way Mutual Housing, a low-income apartment building under construction in West Seattle.

Perry Wien, head of the Seattle nonprofit behind the project, got used to rejection.

"You get turned down and you apply again," said Wien, CEO of Transitional Resources and an assistant professor of social work at the University of Washington. "It's not like you get a chunk of money and say, 'OK, let's go for it.' It's an ongoing saga."

There's only so much money to go around, and no matter how much it is, it's never enough.

"Even in good years, it's frustrating knowing how huge the need is and how little we've been able to do," said state Sen. Margarita Prentice, D-Seattle. "The needs are just mind-numbing in their scope and depth, and yet we could use our entire budget and just make a start."

Yet housing advocates like Wien keep calling on the government, businesses, churches and foundations, knocking on doors and holding fund-raisers, because that's what it takes to put roofs over the heads of people who might otherwise wander the streets.

Roughly 94,000 low-income households in Washington are publicly subsidized, according to the Washington Center for Real Estate Research.

State officials could not provide an estimate of how many more people need housing assistance and don't get it, but advocates with the Washington Low-Income

Housing Network cite the half-million people living at or below the poverty level as a telling sign of unmet needs.

About \$2.3 million finally came through for Avalon Way from nearly two dozen public and private funding sources, but engineers still had to cut the project's price tag by \$300,000 to make it cheap enough for the low bidder to build.

There's no way people who will move into Avalon Way's 15 studio apartments this summer could afford the average studio in Seattle, which rents for \$620 a month.

Like tenants at other low-cost homes for the mentally ill, they live on monthly Social Security checks that add up to less than \$7,000 a year — a far cry from the Seattle area's median household earnings of nearly \$66,000.

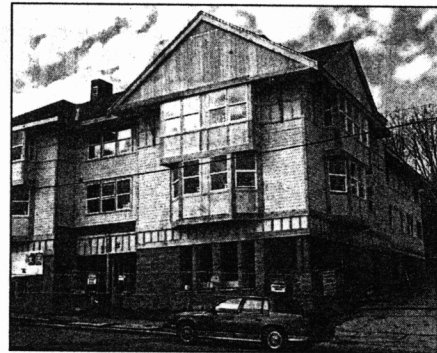
So their rent will be fixed at one-third of their income, or about \$180 a month — a formula most low-income housing providers follow.

They need all the help they can get, as do thousands more who line up outside shelters and soup kitchens or try to make ends meet with paychecks and food stamps.

In a lean budget year like this one, it's hard to tell whether the state's low-income housing kitty will shrink or grow.

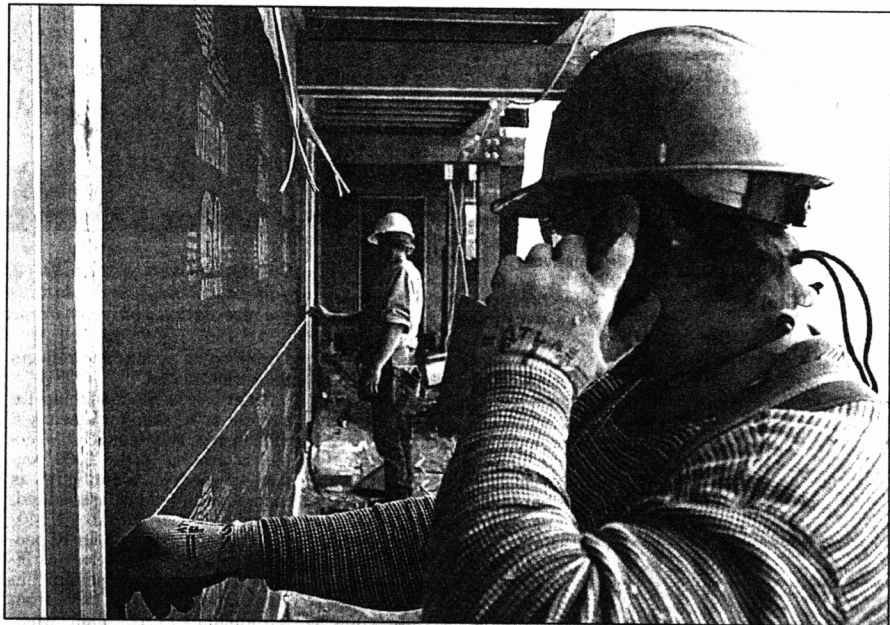
Either way, advocates who have lobbied for \$100 million in low-income housing funds say it won't be enough.

"We have the capacity to do probably double what we're doing now without even batting an eye, but we're not able to do it because of the shortage of money," said Carla Okigwe, executive director of the Housing Development Consortium of Seattle-King County.



Photos by STEVAN MORGAIN/The Associated Press

Future homes:
This new low-income apartment building is shown during construction in March in West Seattle. When finished, the building will house some 30 people with disabilities.



Working: Siding installer Bryan Saxon talks on the phone while his partner, Eric Miller, lays out the wall at the low-income apartment building under construction in West Seattle. Low-income projects like this are becoming rare in Seattle as both land values and the standard of living rise.

Gov. Gary Locke has proposed \$63 million in spending on low-income housing construction for 2001-03 — \$50 million for the housing assistance and repairs to reduce energy costs, \$8 million for farmworker housing and \$5 million to house homeless families with children.

The state Senate's budget blueprint pitches \$83 million for low-income housing, including more money for overall housing assistance, \$3 million for self-help pro-

grams and \$5 million to house disabled people.

The House will unveil its budget wishlist sometime next week, and lawmakers could spend until late May negotiating the details.

Housing advocates cite a litany of statistics pointing to a growing number of people struggling to find homes they can afford:

■ More than 26,500 homeless people live on the streets in Washington, and shelters have to turn away more than 100,000 a year.

■ More than 430,000 households across the state pay more than 30 percent of their income in rent.

■ In King County, only 1 percent of apartments are affordable to those earning 30 percent of the county's median household income of more than \$56,000.

State lawmakers say they've kept their promise by not slashing the Housing Trust Fund — the state's main pot of money for low-income housing construction.