

The Exeter News

Housing mix well received

Portland model may come south

BY ADAM DOLGE

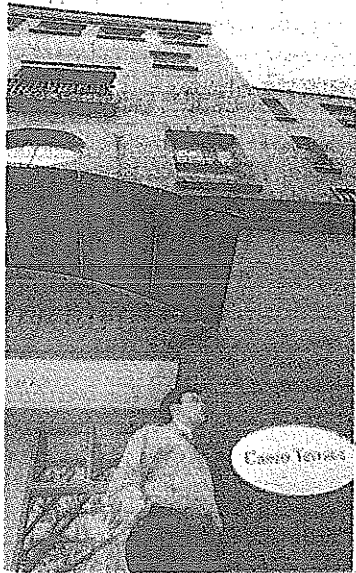
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PORTLAND, Maine — Joanne Whitcomb, a market-rate tenant in Casco Terrace, said she loves her neighbors.

She lives on the second floor, where six affordable work-force apartments and one other market-rate apartment are located.

"I have wonderful neighbors," said the 70-year-old assistant at the Portland Public Library. "It's a mixed group."

A mother and daughter who work for L.L. Bean live next to her, a single man with a child



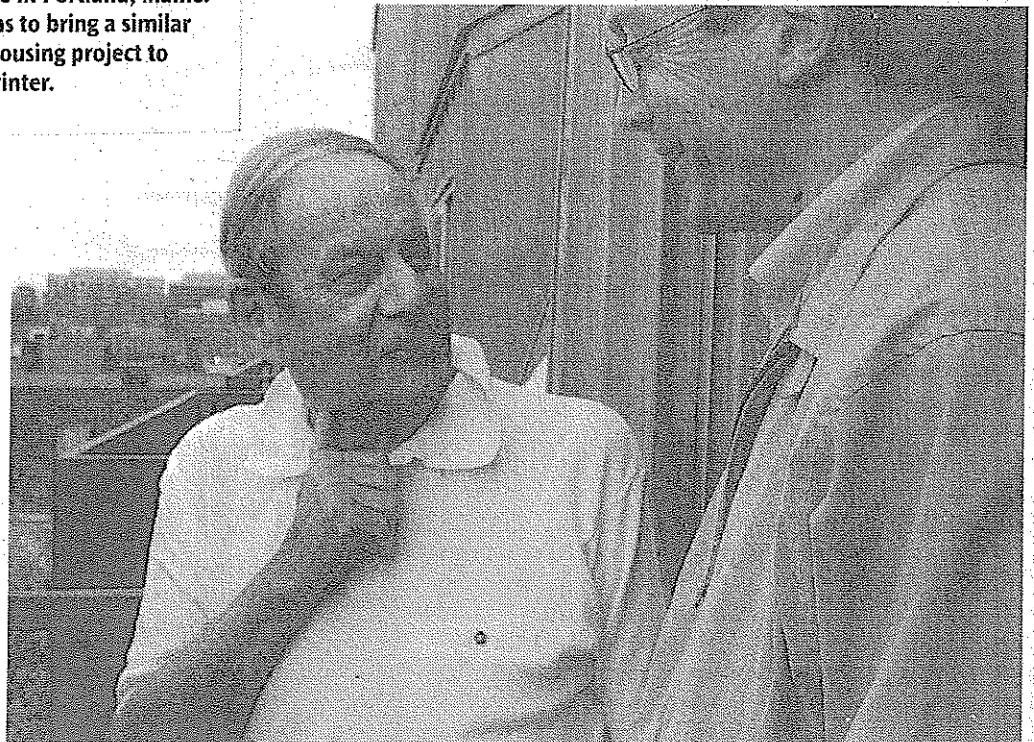
Amy Root-Donie photo

Nathan Szanton stands outside Casco Terrace in Portland, Maine. Szanton plans to bring a similar affordable-housing project to Exeter this winter.

-Letter.

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Amy Root-Donie/adonle@seacoastonline.com

Casco Terrace resident Bill Curran, left, talks with developer Nathan Szanton out the Portland, Maine, apartment complex.

Proposed housing mix well received

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and a single woman with a child live in apartments down the hall.

In addition to the 14 market-rate apartments at Casco Terrace, there are 13 apartments that are affordable work-force housing. To qualify to live in affordable work-force housing, tenants must earn 60 percent of the median income level for the area.

Casco Terrace developer Nathan Szanton is proposing to build a similar mixed-income apartment building on Water Street in Exeter. The building, named Squamscott Project, will have 30 apartments, half market-rate, the other half affordable.

Casco Terrace — located on State Street, one of the busiest streets in Portland — is the first mixed-income apartment building that Szanton has built. The complex was built on top of an existing, vacant indoor-parking garage from the 1920s and was opened in June 2004. Nearly a year later, the tenants still cannot say enough about the place they call home.

Bill Curran Jr., 80, lives in an affordable work-force loft apartment at Casco Terrace. He grew up in the same neighborhood and actually worked at the indoor parking garage when he was in high school. When he heard about Casco Terrace, he said he was the first to apply for an apartment so that he could return to his "stomping ground."

"It's perfect for me," he said as he showed off his clean, open apartment, which comes fully applanced, has crisp white walls and has a view of Portland Harbor. "This is first class, you can tell just by looking at it."

The location is perfect for

Curran, a block away from the bus lines and walking distance to Portland's downtown. And, Curran said, the price can't be beat.

His apartment goes for \$657 a month, but because he has a federal Section 8 voucher, he only pays 30 percent of his income. Monthly, he pays \$306 for rent, which includes heat, hot water and an indoor parking space. The Portland Housing Authority pays the rest.

Curran retired at the age of 62 as a sports photographer at the Portland Press Herald after 41 years of service.

Whitcomb pays \$1,130 for her apartment, but there are little, if any, differences in quality between the two apartments.

Szanton said that to receive federal, low-income tax credits for his mixed-income housing he could not discriminate the quality between the market rate and affordable apartments. The only thing that can be different is where they are located within the building. For the most part, this gives market-rate tenants better views than the affordable apartments.

As Szanton is in the process of finalizing plans for a mixed-income apartment building in Exeter, he admits that many people worry that work-force housing equals slums. But contrary to that, tenants in his Portland housing live in high-end, modern and well-planned apartments. For those interviewed last week, living next to someone paying nearly half the rent is just fine.

"With affordable and market-rate apartments, I think what you need to do is screen," Whitcomb said, adding that working in the library she sees all sorts of people who could qualify to

live in an affordable work-force apartment, but they are not necessarily people she'd want to live next to. "They've done a great job screening."

Before tenants are accepted into the apartment building, the management, Portland's Dirago Management Company, does an in-person interview. They check with the applicant's past three landlords, if possible, and they perform a credit check. They have the option to perform a criminal-history check but have not yet had to exercise that option.

"For my needs, it fits me perfectly," said Arthur Batson, a 29-year-old market-rate tenant.

Batson — who works with his father for Lucas Tree, a company that clears trees for utility lines — has lived in apartments in Boston and New York City. He said he feels his apartment in Portland offers "more bang for your buck." He grew up in the Portland area and was drawn to the apartment because of its location, the indoor parking and their recent completion.

He said he doesn't notice his neighbors, many of whom live in affordable work-force apartments, and for the most part, everyone keeps to themselves.

Szanton is due back in Exeter to appear before the Zoning Board of Adjustments at its next meeting on June 21. He said he hopes that ground will be broken in the winter for the proposed \$3.1 million mixed-income apartment building.

"I believe that in order for our society to be healthy, we have to have places for people who don't earn high salaries to have a nice place to live," Szanton said in his office at Longfellow Square in Portland.