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Bates Loft will appeal outside of Lewiston, developer tells council

BY SCOTT TAYLOR
Staff Writer

LEWISTON — A real estate developer told councilors Tuesday his proposed loft development at the Bates Mill would bring new tenants into the downtown, not steal good tenants from other downtown landlords.

Nathan Szanton, principal of Portland-based Szanton Co., said the development would be similar to other redevelopment projects they've completed in Portland and Exeter, N.H.

"What we've found is that people from outside of the community are very excited," Szanton said. "We've brought new people to the community, and they are good tenants."

Szanton plans to build 55 one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments in the Bates Mill

Building No. 2, redeveloping the part of the mill overlooking the Fountain Plaza. According to the plan, 18 of the units would be rented at fair-market rents. The rest, 34 units, would be for low-income residents.

Rents for single-bedroom units would start at \$640 for the fair-market renters, with lower rents for publicly supported units. Section 8 recipients would qualify for \$576 rents. Residents making 50 percent of the average median income could qualify for \$483 rents

Two-bedroom units in the development would rent for \$701 for Section 8 recipients. Residents making 50 percent of the average median income could qualify for \$577 monthly rent.

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Loft

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Rents for three-bedroom units would begin at \$896 for Section 8 and \$665 for 50 percent average of median income residents.

Szanton said his plan depends on having a mix of low- and average-income residents, and he intends to stringently screen all residents with a credit check, criminal background check and references from previous landlords.

"We've found the key to success is making sure you get really good tenants," Szanton said. "Getting rid of the bad apples during the screening process seems to entirely eliminate the problems."

But Councilor Stephen Morgan said that stance worries Lewiston's other downtown landlords. They may not be able to afford to do extensive credit and criminal checks, but could have a few decent tenants.

"The concern is that you're going to come in and cherry-pick the very best tenants in Lewiston," he said. Many downtown landlords' prop-

erties are already vacant and finding new good tenants is difficult.

"And then you come in and take away 18 more of the cream of the crop," he said.

Szanton said that was not his intention, and other councilors agreed. Councilor Tina O'Connell said she was confident the development would bring new renters to Lewiston.

But Morgan said he was also concerned about parking. Szanton said the project plans to purchase parking spaces in the city's Centreville Parking Garage — not the Lincoln Street garage that is currently being constructed.

"We were told that a new garage had to be built to make this, a development in Bates Mill, happen," Morgan said. "We even suggested using spaces in Centreville instead, but we were told that wouldn't do. And now you are going to use the Centreville spaces anyway. I'll admit, I have a bit of a chip on my shoulder because of that."

Councilors are scheduled to vote on the development and a 15-year tax increment finance incentive at their Aug. 10 meeting.