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Progress: Downtown condos key to city's plan

However, demand for units has been slow

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For some people, downtown Battle Creek just feels right. City developers just wish more people felt that way.

The Riverfront Condominiums, a project by Battle Creek Unlimited that opened in 2007, was selling at such a slow pace that six months ago the development was put on hold.

Despite a prime location at Michigan Avenue and Carlyle Street, the demand for the condos wasn't there. Now BCU is hoping to turn some of the units, which ranged in price from \$110,000 to \$316,000, into rentals, said Kathleen Eriksen, director of downtown development for BCU.

Rental prices aren't yet set, but Eriksen said it was important to get more price variations in the downtown market.

Battle Creek Unlimited, the city's economic development arm, views downtown residential options as a key component of its overall downtown plan. Not only do residents attract businesses, but they also help the city's image.

"Whenever you have people on the street, the perception of a downtown area, or any area, is that it's safer," Eriksen said. "Having people living downtown is actually creating the market that will support additional retail and then office-based services."

But recently, she said, developers have struggled with the cost of revamping downtown's historic structures compared with expected revenue returns.

"They really need to be in it for the long haul, because it's going to be a number of years before they start seeing the money back that they put into it," Eriksen said.

While interest in the Riverfront condos was weak, upscale rentals in downtown Battle Creek have had more success.

As of late April, only one of the 23 apartments in the historic Battle Creek Tower was vacant, according to leasing manager Angela Burkhardt.

While even the minimum monthly rent of \$1,000 is too much for some budgets, Burkhardt points out that the building falls under a Renaissance Zone, meaning residents pay no local or state income taxes.

Residents of the Battle Creek Tower said the building met their needs for a convenient, urban environment.

"It's living urban light," said former Pittsburgh resident Laura Duncan, who moved into the tower in June 2008 to start an administrative fellowship at Battle Creek Health System.

Not only is Duncan minutes from work and a short walk from bars and restaurants, but she said living on the building's 18th floor makes her feel safer than if her front door opened up to the street.

Tom and Susan Berry are two more transplants from bigger cities who settled into Battle Creek Tower.

The couple moved into their 16th-floor apartment over a year ago because it reminded them of their Chicago home. Even the countertops and appliances matched.

"It just felt like home immediately," said Susan Berry, who works for Kellogg Co., just blocks from the Battle Creek Tower.

"One of the greatest luxuries in life is simplicity," Susan said. "I walk to work, I walk to my hair salon, I walk to my exercise class."

From the Berrys' apartment, they can see many of the attractions that keep them downtown. They love Bici Bistro and shows at the Kellogg Auditorium.

One thing Tom said downtown lacks is a convenience store, a place to buy milk that's more convenient than Horrock's.

While the Berrys are content, they felt that more commercial offerings would be the forerunner to building downtown's residential population.

"When the people are here, then the market will be there," Susan said.

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