

Big inventory has one agent smiling

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Residences selling for less than \$150,000 are becoming increasingly rare in Southwest Florida.

Those appearing on the market are often devoured in a matter of hours by bargain-hungry investors and desperate home buyers.

Many real estate agents are lucky to stumble across such elusive listings. Ross Bryans and his partner, John Petitti, have made it their business to accumulate a stockpile.

"John and I have a ton of product that everyone wants and no one else has," Bryans said.

Bryans and Petitti are converting the Brookwood Apartments, a 174-unit complex on 26th Street West in Bradenton that once provided housing for blue-collar workers. They've already sold more than 80 percent of the units to individual owners at prices of \$119,000 to \$155,000, and expect to unload the rest by December.

At the same time, Bryans and Petitti are working on two more Manatee County apartment conversions. They declined to reveal the details because the occupants haven't been informed about the pending changes.

"Our focus is to take 'D' quality apartments and convert them to 'B' quality condos," Bryans said. "We're giving these places a fresh start."

Converting apartments to condominiums has become all the rage in Southwest Florida. The trend spread from Sarasota, where about 25 percent of the county's apartments have already been converted, and reached Manatee County earlier this year.

Dale Friedley, with the Manatee County Property Appraiser's office, estimates that about 1,500 apartments in the Bradenton area are about to be converted.

The downside of the trend is that low-income apartment dwellers, or those with poor credit, are being displaced and are having to hunt for new places to live in an increasingly tight rental market.

The upside is that the converted apartments are providing affordable housing in an area where the median housing price has shot past what many workers can afford.

Bryans prefers to look at the upside.

"We've seen the market explode and affordable housing disappear," Bryans said. "We've positioned ourselves to provide affordable product."

Born salesman

Bryans brings plenty of experience to his job.

He earned his reputation as salesman in Ottawa, the federal capital of Canada.

He was 18 when he landed a job with one of the city's largest brokerages, Campanale Real Estate.

It was 1982. Interest rates were around 20 percent. No one was buying real estate and everyone wanted to sell.

"My mentor, Vince Campanale, told me to go out and get as many listings as possible," Bryans said. "A year later, interest rates dropped and people began to buy. I had 132 listings and sold 127 of them within 12 months."

From then on, regardless of market conditions, Bryans has always focused on securing product.

In 1995, he was sent to Sarasota to help sell 800 units belonging to Canadian investors, including the 90-unit Central Park Condominiums in Sarasota.

He did a rapid study of the market, moved into the Central Park complex, joined the condo association, consolidated all sales under his shingle and began working to upgrade both individual apartments and the complex as a whole.

Instead of trying to sell the units all at once, he rehabbed them gradually and sold them one or two at a time. By 1997, they were all gone.

His reputation cemented, he kept getting calls from Canadian investors who wanted him to help move their inventory.

As a result, Bryans was tapped to head sales efforts at a half dozen condo and town house projects, including Plaza de Flores at Palmer Ranch, Cedars East on Longboat Key and Harbor Pines in Bradenton.

Until Brookwood, the majority of the projects involved converting "A" quality apartments to condominiums or selling newly constructed space. But now Bryans is concentrating full time on rehabbing and selling lower-quality, more affordable places.

According to Bryans, affordable housing is the safest sector in an overheated real estate market. It has the least inventory and the greatest demand.

"The conversion market is hot," Bryans said. "Everyone is doing it, and too much of anything isn't good. But because we're dealing in low-end, affordable product we'll be safe if the bubble bursts."

Bryans explained that demand for less expensive housing will only increase if the market turns down.

"Those people selling \$300,000 and \$400,000 homes will need somewhere to live."