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REAL ESTATE: Apartment prices decline in Las Vegas, amenities don't

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Tara Vista property manager Sally Torres walks the grounds of the apartment complex. Torres says she makes it a point to offer clean and safe apartments while maintaining a reasonable rental rate. Photo by Jason Bean/Las Vegas Review-Journal

Budget-minded apartment tenants may be willing to sacrifice features such as walk-in closets and hardwood floors for cheaper rent, but they still want swimming pools, fitness centers and barbecue pits that make staying home more enjoyable.

Paid utilities and washers and dryers in units topped the amenities list for renters from February to August on ApartmentGuide.com's site.

Although amenities are important, renters consider multiple factors before choosing an apartment. More than 35 percent of respondents to a survey by Apartments.com said location and neighborhood have the biggest impact on their decision to pick one apartment over another if rent is not an issue, followed by 19 percent who said the size of the apartment matters most.

Apartments.com has observed an increase in renters searching for larger apartments with three bedrooms, which could signal that more people are doubling up with roommates or moving in with family in response to the current national economy.

On the face of it, renters seem to rule the market. Apartment vacancies nationwide rose to an all-time high of 8 percent in the second quarter, while rents fell by a record 3.4 percent, with the worst declines in the West, data tracker MPF Research reports. CB Richard Ellis brokerage in Las Vegas is reporting 11 percent apartment vacancy and 7.2 percent rent decline through the first two quarters.

With unemployment at 13.4 percent in Las Vegas and companies cutting shift hours, plenty of renters need to be thrifty.

"People are looking for as cheap rent as possible with as many amenities as they can get," said Annette Gustin, manager of Canyon Club apartments. "Our market rents have decreased by \$100 a month from last year. I've been here four years and we've never been under 94 percent (occupancy) until this year. We're struggling to stay at 90 percent."

Canyon Club, near Eastern and Sahara avenues, is advertising one-bedroom units in the Las Vegas Review-Journal for \$499 a month and two-bedroom units for \$599 a month with \$199 move-in specials.

Along with swimming pools and laundry rooms, popular amenities include a fitness center and a computer room with high-speed Internet access, Gustin said.

The most common question these days from renters: What can you do if I lose my job?

Some landlords are including recession clauses, letting laid-off renters out of their leases without penalty or offering 60 days of free or discounted rent after a job loss.

Gustin said her renters sign a six- to 12-month lease with a clause that allows them to cancel the agreement if they give 30 days' notice and pay an extra month's rent. She's had to refer some of her tenants to local resources such as HELP of Southern Nevada, which pays rent for some people who have lost their jobs.

Renters are asking for month-to-month contracts after their full-term leases are up, said Peggy Abkemeier, president of apartment search site Rent.com. They would rather stay put than pay the money to move.

Almost 38 million Americans, roughly one in three households, are renters. They aren't moving as often as in the past, a recent Rent.com study showed. When they do move, they're taking longer to make their decisions and some are seeking furnished apartments to avoid additional expenses.

Tara Vista near Valley View Boulevard and Sahara Avenue has residents who have been there 20 to 30 years, manager Sally Torres said. They feel safe in the gated apartment complex and it's pretty quiet, she said.

However, Torres said Tara Vista competes with \$99 move-in specials and free rent offered at other apartments in the area. She's waiving the \$200 security deposit and \$100 cleaning fee to rent three remaining vacant units in her 56-unit complex.

Renters who commit to a one-year lease at Park View Point apartments in central Las Vegas get their electric bill paid for six months, assistant manager Jasmine Roman said. They also get one month of free rent and a reduced security deposit.

"I see a change in consumer behavior," Las Vegas apartment broker Christopher Bentley said. "Before it was all about upfront concessions. Now they'd rather have lower rents. People are looking to get their monthly budget down, not just something upfront, so they're looking ahead. That's an extreme shift."

And instead of sexy amenities that were popular just a few years ago like granite countertops and stainless-steel appliances, renters want ones that save money. They're calling up landlords to make sure windows shut properly, leaks are repaired, and weather stripping is up-to-date.

Gustin of Canyon Club apartments said she sends out monthly newsletters advising tenants to keep their air conditioning at 75 to 78 degrees during the summer and to change filters frequently. The owner also replaced many older appliances with newer ones, she said.

Swimming pools and balconies ranked high on renters' lists this summer because those renters have stayed home more than previous years, spending less on travel, according to Apartments.com.

And scores of renters displaced by foreclosures are looking for the conveniences of a house, said Arlene Mayfield, president of ApartmentGuide.com.

Dishwashers, washer and dryers in the units, yards and pet-friendly apartments have become more important to these former homeowners who, more than anything, want someplace to call home.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.