

Seagrape already filling up Complex nears its completion in Middle Keys

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The need for workforce housing in Marathon must be greater than anyone could have imagined.

Applications are pouring in via telephone for the 84 available units at the Seagrape apartments, a Carlisle Group development nearing completion -- and a project many people thought would never get off the ground. Setbacks and delays plagued plans before construction finally began in August.

And as construction nears completion at the mile marker 51 complex, a sign was recently erected advertising available leases and a phone number to call.

John Sorensen, Carlisle's Keys representative, says at least 30 apartments were rented even before the sign went up.

"We normally wait until a certain day and then advertise in the paper for the day we're taking applications. We're not even going to do that because the people have found us before we even had a chance," Sorensen said.

It's hard not to find the buildings, rising on the oceanside of U.S. 1. They're painted blue with white trim, with white railings on the staircases.

It's been a tough road getting to this point, but the development should be finished within the scheduled 15-month construction period.

A rooftop fire in April added to a lengthy list of problems Carlisle's dealt with.

A court ruling over endangered species habitat and flood insurance in 2005 postponed the project one year. Then, in May 2008, the Marathon City Council had to approve site changes that arose when an engineering mishap led to a utility pole being installed in the middle of the complex's entrance.

The last snag was being denied South Florida Water Management District permits because of "low-quality wetlands" created by rainfall after the removal of invasive exotic plants. Ultimately, the permits were issued.

The Florida Housing Finance Corp. awards the tax credits Carlisle uses to fund its projects. The credits are dollar-for-dollar tax offsets that Carlisle sells for 85 cents on the dollar to finance its construction.

Seagrape comprises one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments. Residency is based on earning 60 percent of the median income in Monroe County, but some of the apartments will be offered based on 30 percent of the median income, at half the cost. The units range from 600 to 1,000 square feet.