

Elm Gardens: Convenience At the Edge of Northwest D.C.

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If you told people you were looking for an apartment with hardwood floors and reserved parking adjacent to a Metro Red Line station in the District for less than \$1,000 per month, you would get a lot of laughs. It's no joke, though. Such a thing exists -- if you can get in.

Elm Gardens is a 36-unit, light beige brick building next to the Takoma Metro station. The building, which is about 40 years old, sits just east of Piney Branch Road on the D.C. side of Eastern Avenue, the dividing line between the District and Maryland. Elm Gardens' neighbors across the street in Maryland's Takoma Park are an eclectic mixture of Victorian, Queen Anne, Colonial Revival and bungalow styles homes. Downtown Takoma Park, with its bead and music stores, Roscoe the Rooster statue, gazebo, shops and restaurants is just a few blocks east.

Elm Gardens is easy to miss because the long rectangular building's narrow side fronts the street. It sits between an identically constructed co-op to one side and a similarly sized red brick apartment building to the other. The 36 units in the three-story building open off three open stairwells.

Local landlord Montgomery Oaks Management Inc. bought the property in 1998. "At the time, this was the only property under renovation near the Metro station," chief executive Russell Katz said. "There were a lot of doubters. People said this wasn't a good area, but we've done so well here. We've had very low turnover."

As soon as Katz's company bought the property, renovations began. At that time, 21 of the units were uninhabitable, Katz said. "It was a bad place to live," he said. Elm Gardens' parking lot lies next to a Metro property, so many people used the property as a cut-through to the Takoma station. Katz had planned to place a "green screen" of bushes for privacy, but after a car theft from the apartment lot, he instead erected a wrought iron gate.

To fund renovations, Katz increased the rent ceiling in the rent-controlled building, obtaining the city-required 70 percent of the residents' agreement. Given the condition of the building, it wasn't a hard sell. None of the property's balconies was usable, for example. There was no intercom system for residents to let in guests. All the appliances were nearly 40 years old and many no longer worked.

Only two residents balked at the renovations and they were given relocation assistance. Of those who agreed to the rent increase, two moved elsewhere for other reasons, but 11 stayed and moved into renovated units in 1999. Of those, eight remain. "They really feel like this place is home," property manager Marci Thomas said.

Nawal Karsha, a five-year-resident, agreed. "Some of the people have been living here for a very long time," she said. Karsha liked the building and neighborhood so much that she once tried to help a friend get an apartment there, but there was nothing open. "I've never seen anyone moving in or out," she said.

She has no plans to leave. "I love this area," she said.

Karsha regularly makes trips to downtown Takoma Park to the Middle East Market, Mark's Kitchen, a music store, restaurants and independently owned clothing stores.

"I laughed at first when I saw it -- I thought 'downtown? That's it?,' " but now she appreciates its small-scale charm. "I can find all types of cheeses and pita bread that I don't usually find in normal stores," she said.

Karsha wanted a balcony, but none has been available as long as she has lived there. Only four units have balconies because the 1998 and 1999 renovations included removal of the unusable ones.

Montgomery Oaks built balconies on the four one-bedroom units that face the Metro station's green lawn. Ultimately, cost prohibited the replacement of balconies on all of the units. Other renovations included landscaping, new washers and dryers in the basement laundry room, new appliances, cabinets, windows and iron bars on first-floor windows.

First-floor units received bamboo flooring of the same environmentally-friendly quality as that used on Montgomery Oaks' eco-conscious apartment building a block away, Elevation 314. Second- and third-floor units have high-traffic gray carpet instead, because inserting additional sound reduction flooring insulation would have been prohibitively expensive. "We tried to do as well as we could . . . but we also tried to keep things smart," Katz said.

Resident Jesús Rivera moved into Elm Gardens in 2003 because he wanted an apartment close to Metro for his commute downtown. The Takoma station is 15 minutes from Metro Center and 27 minutes from Rosslyn. So, while Takoma is not a centrally located station, a resident's three-minute walk to the entrance minimizes the overall commute.

Rivera also wanted to be able to walk to conveniences. "Everything I need is here," he said, listing just a few of the stores within a several block radius: CVS, 7-Eleven, barber shop, liquor store. The neighborhood has no major grocery store, however. Residents have to drive or take the bus or Metro to the nearest supermarket.

Parking can sometimes be an issue, Rivera said, because there are only a few spots in front of the building on Eastern Avenue. He said his visitors can always find parking in the neighborhood across the street after daytime zoning restrictions end, or in the Metro lot for 25 cents per hour.

Overall, Rivera said, he is quite content with his home. "I'm very satisfied. It's a neat place."