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The Villas at Harmon Bay - Gay-centric community

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Mike Moshos was among more than 100 people drawn to Cloud 9 Restaurant by the promise of cocktails, hors d'oeuvres and an opportunity to learn about the latest housing proposal for the Rehoboth Beach area, The Villas at Harmon Bay.

A half-hour into the event, with people crowding around drawings of the community that is to be built near Rehoboth Beach Country Club, Moshos conceded that he was favorably impressed by the project.

Its location, near both Rehoboth Bay and downtown Rehoboth, is attractive, he said. He also liked the fact that The Villas would contain only 32 homes but still feature amenities such as ponds, a swimming pool and a clubhouse.

And, he said, The Villas promises "a certain comfort level" -- a place where same-sex couples, such as he and his partner of 23 years, would be insulated from discrimination.

The Villas at Harmon Bay, where homeownership will be available to all who can afford it, is marketed as the "first GLBT community in Delaware."

While GLBT -- gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender -- people compose a substantial share of the residents and tourists of coastal Sussex County, they have perhaps never before been so specifically targeted by local housing developers. But with communities similar to The Villas arising elsewhere in the United States, such a development seemed like a natural for the Rehoboth area, said Kim Hamer, the real estate listing agent for The Villas.

"The developers wanted an option that didn't exist here," Hamer said. "We're calling it a diverse community of acceptance."

The Villas will be a gated collection of one- and two-story single, detached Florida style houses expected to be priced between \$600,000 and \$900,000. Buyers will own their own units and pay a condominium fee -- likely less than \$4,000 a year, according to the developers -- to maintain the grounds and facilities.

The project site is on Country Club Road, next to the former Three Seasons Campground.

Hamer's husband, Jeff, and another local businessman, Ernie DeAngelis, are partners in The Villas. Their other ventures include Hamer's Fins Fish House & Raw Bar in downtown Rehoboth and DeAngelis' Tomato Sunshine produce stand on Route 1.

Following the Aug. 30 promotion at Cloud 9, Kim Hamer said two of the planned 32 homes had been spoken for. The prospective buyers placed \$500 refundable deposits.

Hamer said the creation of The Villas is inspired partly by the popularity of communities such as Rainbow Vision in Santa Fe, N.M., and Stonewall Audubon Circle in Boston. Those communities, though, are geared to retirees and other older citizens while The Villas imposes no age restrictions.

"The nice thing about (The Villas) is that it's open to anybody," Hamer said. The developers emphasize that point; on seven pages of an eight-page brochure on The Villas, for instance, is the declaration that they do not "discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, creed, sex, marital status, familial status, age, disability or sexual orientation."

"The interest so far" in living in The Villas, Hamer said, "isn't only from the gay community."

The concept behind The Villas has at least one local doubter.

An extremely supportive, harassment-free atmosphere "can be very necessary for some," said a Delaware gay-rights activist, but it isn't necessarily in the best interests of the quest to end discrimination in society as a whole. Doug Marshall-Steele of Milton speculated that residents "might be lulled into a false sense of security in such a setting and never lift a finger to work for ... equality -- because one simply does not personally experience the need."

A more common sentiment might be that of Moshos, who, while enthusiastic about The Villas, said coastal Sussex already offers friendly, tolerant places to live.

Moshos, who works for a mortgage company as well as at a supermarket, said his own Rehoboth-area development, Woods at Seaside, is majority homosexual and the other residents there "are very warm and accepting."

Likewise, Judy Rosenstein, a retired New York City teacher, said she moved to the Rehoboth area "because it's a gay-welcoming community" so she feels no need to move from her current home to The Villas.

But she added that there is one form of housing she hopes to see built for people like herself. "I would like them to come up with gay assisted living," she said.

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