

Wednesday, August 5th



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[An Uncommon Way to Develop Portland Housing](#)

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By Karen Hery

Most people would have given up or not even gotten started on the journey Jim Swenson and Susan Fries embarked on in January 2013; a journey that has led to the rather uncommon PDX Commons senior co-housing project breaking ground in early 2016 on upper Belmont.

Swenson, Fries, their spouses and dozens of other people with earnest money already invested in this unique housing project have sat in meetings, sipped coffee with strangers, given presentations to hundreds, toured co-housing projects all over the US, studied co-housing in Denmark and attended conferences to learn what to do and not to do.

This is all to have a better place to retire in.

“There’s been just six to ten new development co-housing projects, depending on how you count, in Portland in the last 50 years,” says Eric Cress, co-founder of Urban Development Partners.

His group was hired by this group of thoughtful and persistent seniors to facilitate their dream. According to Cress, “Urban co-housing projects are rare and senior co-housing is quite new in the US.”

Neither Swenson nor Fries were looking to bring the senior co-housing movement to Portland. They both knew they didn’t like other options and were determined to find a better way.

“My parents did what many couples do,” explained Swenson, “They sold their house in a big city, moved to a smaller, less expensive town and figured they could live out their days there, happy and free of care.

“Problem was, when they needed help and care, they didn’t know anyone in their new town very well and

family was now very far away. I promised myself I wasn't going to do that.”

Fries, an avid gardener with a triple-sized lot in Irvington, thought she would live out her days in her beautiful garden until she realized one day that she didn't want to garden that much land anymore.

Swenson and his wife, Janet Gillaspie, originally thought they'd get together a group of their closest friends to build something better together. After 20 years of talking to friends, it became very clear that more than close friendship is needed to build this complex of a project.

PDX commons is a four story contemporary condominium-style building with over 5,000 square feet of space that new residents will co-manage together. The planned common space includes a commercial kitchen with seating for 50, decks and courtyards, workshop area, guest rooms and library.

Now six months from breaking ground, thirteen of the twenty-seven planned units are spoken for and not one of the buyers was in each other's close friend group before this project started.

“We know each other really well now” says Swenson. Monthly coffees and community dinners have kept the pioneering investors communicating and have given everyone interested in stepping into the remaining spaces a chance to meet potential next door neighbors.

If having that many adopted grandparents appeals to you, it turns out you can be one of those potential neighbors whether you consider yourself a senior or not.

Under fair housing laws and regulations, PDX Commons is a “designated senior community”. At least one person age 55 or over, must live in at least 80% of the housing units. They may, however, have children or younger adults living with them and there are no age restrictions on the remaining homes.

With the larger hurdles overcome such as finding land, designing to city code and securing an available contractor in an up economy, the major decisions that remain are about appliance styles, paint colors and flooring options.

The group uses a modified consensus process and has no doubt that there will be plenty of lengthy discussions before final decisions are made.

“This kind of development is time-consuming,” explains Cress, “It requires good communication. You have to like people to do it. It is way more work but it is also very energizing.”

The project has energized the group of food cart owners that the project will displace.

UDP, a developer who bought the land beneath the Good Food Here carts at 42nd and Belmont back in 2009. They held on to it until the right-fit project came along.

The cart owners knew when they signed their year leases for 2015 that the new development project was coming at the turn of the year. They too formed a common interest coalition, talked about going in together on land and looked at all their “housing” options.

A core group of the carts, coordinated by the owners of the popular Fish Box, will move across the street to a smaller lot. Most carts are staying put, for their busiest summer months, but a few have already moved away, knowing the end is near.

As Susan Fries contemplates which plants will make the move from a spacious homeowner's garden to

the co-housing rooftop planter boxes, at least one food cart is getting ready to expand into a brick and mortar spot with a larger menu.

Megan Walhood and Jeremy Daniels, the forces behind Viking Soul Food, are deciding what gets added to their expanded Scandinavian menu.

The cart will most likely relocate one more time before their restaurant opens up.

Follow the progress of PDX Commons and get information about their community-building coffee and dinner dates at PDXCommons.com.


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Portland Weather

 97214



Wednesday 08/05 0%

Clear

Clear. Lows overnight in the mid 50s.



Thursday 08/06 0%

Partly Cloudy

Some clouds in the morning will give way to mainly sunny skies for the afternoon. High 83F. Winds NNW at 5 to 10 mph.



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