Finding affordable rent in D.C. is hard, but there are signs of hope

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By Beth Luberecki October 17

Sam Kalda (for Express)

If you've looked for an apartment recently in the Washington area, you've probably experienced some sticker shock. According to commercial real estate research and advisory firm Delta Associates, the average rent price in the metro area is $1,784 a month. That's a lot of money to fork over for an apartment — no matter how great the view or location is.

For an apartment to be considered affordable, housing experts say, renters should be paying no more than 30 percent of their monthly incomes. So to pay for a pad that's closing in on $2,000 a month, a renter needs to bring home more than $71,000 a year.

While many people in the region make this kind of money, plenty of others don't boast yearly salaries anywhere near this figure. And they often have a hard time finding a rental that doesn't bust their budget

time finding a rental that doesn't bust their budget, especially since the number of affordable rentals in the area has been dwindling.

"Affordable rental housing is very difficult to find in D says Tamira Ra z, tenant organizing manager at the [Latino Economic Development Center](#), which works to preserve the city's stock of affordable rentals.

The story is similar outside the city limits. "The supply that was there before is no longer there," says Russell Danao-Schroeder, senior housing planner for [Arlington County's Department of Community Planning, Housing and Development](#).

A variety of factors has contributed to this decrease. Some formerly affordable rental properties have been converted into condos, while others have been sold and, with that change in ownership, seen increases in rent that no longer make them affordable. Most of the apartment buildings that have opened recently or are in development around the area skew toward the luxury side of the market, in part driven by high land and construction costs.

But there are some bright spots on the horizon. In November 2013, D.C. Mayor Vincent Gray announced that 47 affordable housing developments would receive approximately $181 million in funding and committed

another $100 million for affordable housing for fiscal year 2015, which began Oct. 1. To date, almost 12,000 affordable units have been produced or are in the pipeline, almost all of which are rentals. Some of those units are in newly constructed properties, while others

are in renovated buildings.

Other local city and county governments have put a similar emphasis on increasing the much-needed supply of affordable housing — and are seeing some positive results. Like the District and other municipalities, Montgomery County has a law requiring developers of new rental properties to make a certain percentage of those units affordable. "We're trying to work every angle we can to increase the number of affordable units," says Richard Nelson, director of [Montgomery County's Department of Housing and Community Affairs](#).

While the number of market-rate affordable rentals in Arlington County has decreased, there's been an increase in the number of committed affordable units — where some kind of agreement or restriction ensures that rents remain affordable over the long term. More than 3,000 of those types of units have been added over the past 14 years.

"We now have about 6,900 committed affordable units, or about 14 percent of the rental stock in the county," Danao-Schroeder says.

Governments aren't the only ones getting in on the act. Nonprofits like the Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing and Montgomery Housing Partnership have also been working to create more moderately priced options for renters. "We are committed to developing or acquiring at least 100 new units a year," says Nina Janopaul, president/CEO of the Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing.

The problem? Demand is still outpacing supply. In Part Two of this story, we'll tell you what to do to try to snag one of these units.