

Prefab Apartment Complex Clears Review Hurdle

Unico Properties' modular, prefabricated "Inhabit" apartment complex on Dexter Avenue North has won a key approval, and could be ready for occupancy as soon as next spring.

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Seattle's first prefabricated, modular apartment complex won an important approval this week, and the project's backers say its first tenants could start moving in as soon as next May.

That's just nine months from now — a remarkably compressed timetable for any development, especially one that doesn't yet have city permits and doesn't plan to break ground until November.

But most of the 66 units of Unico Properties' Inhabit project would be built in a factory in Idaho, trucked to the site on Dexter Avenue North and lifted into place by crane. That promises to trim months off the construction schedule and save money as well, Unico President and CEO Dale Sperling said

He spoke after the city's Queen Anne-Magnolia Design Review Board, an advisory group, gave the proposal its blessing Wednesday night, a key step in securing a land-use permit.

Seattle-based Unico, known mostly as an office developer, began exploring prefab, modular multifamily construction several years ago as a way to provide relatively affordable in-city housing.



THOMAS JAMES HURST / THE SEATTLE TIMES

It retained architectural firms Mithun and HyBrid to design two prototype Inhabit units, built them in a Skagit County factory and put them on display in downtown Seattle last fall.

The company applied for permits for the Dexter Avenue site earlier this year.

Unico Vice President Jonas Sylvester said the company plans to unveil three or four more Inhabit projects in Seattle in the next year or two. Unico already has control of several sites, he said, but he would not say where or how many.

The company's plans for the steeply sloping site at 1701 Dexter Ave. N. call for 62 modular units, configured in stacks of three and four, atop a concrete base that would contain parking and four "live-work" units.

Most of the apartments would be 450-square-foot studios or 525-square-foot one-bedroom units. Sylvester wouldn't discuss what they might rent for, but Unico has said in the past that Inhabit units would target people making between 80 and 150 percent of the area's median annual income, now about \$50,000 for a single person.

The company also has said that an Inhabit complex could be delivered for up to 15 percent less than a conventional apartment project.

Douglas McNutt, of the Queen Anne Community Council's Land Use Review Committee, said the group supports Unico's proposal. "It could be a prototype for the future," he told the review board.

Unico plans to close on the land next month, Sylvester said. Sperling said the modules will be built by Guerdon Enterprises of Boise, Idaho.

Project architect Robert Leykam, of Mithun, said Unico plans to have all needed permits and start building on the site in November. The wood-frame modules would be assembled in Boise in January and stacked on the base starting in March.

Installation would require just two or three weeks, he said. Finish work would take another two months, and the complex would be ready for occupancy in May or June.

"It's just five or six months from start to finish," Sylvester said. That means less disruption for neighbors, he added.

Dexter Avenue North is a major bus and bicycle corridor. Inhabit would provide 63 parking stalls, but Leykam said he expects not all would be rented.

Robert Humble, of HyBrid, another project architect, said some upper-floor units would have views of Lake Union, and all tenants would have access to a rooftop deck. "There's going to be no better place to watch the fireworks on the Fourth of July," he said.