



Bob Wiese pets his dog Jake in the apartment they share in the Ya-Po-Ah Terrace. The complex is set to be remodeled floor-by-floor starting early this year. [CHRIS PIETSCH/THE REGISTER-GUARD]

Changes at Eugene's tallest building

A renovation will ensure that Ya-Po-Ah Terrace residents can continue to receive subsidized housing

By Christian Hill
The Register-Guard

As 2018 was winding down, the resident-organized New Year's Eve pajama party wasn't the sole source of anticipation building inside Eugene's tallest high-rise.

The start of the new year will launch the biggest renovation project in the history of Ya-Po-Ah Terrace, months after the 18-story building on Pearl Street turned 50 years old.

The two-year, \$29 million construction project will bring new comforts to the building's residents but, most importantly, ensure that its 210 units of subsidized housing for senior citizens aged 62 and older is available for

decades to come. The project will be paid for exclusively with public funding through both the federal low income housing tax credit program as well as state and city dollars. The project financing closed on Dec. 21.

Without Ya-Po-Ah Terrace, local officials said, these retirees likely would be priced out of a rental market that many working families can't afford. The residents could lose their independent

livelihood or, possibly, face homelessness. The average age of the building's tenants is 76 years and their average annual income is \$15,910, mostly drawn from Social Security, according to city statistics.

"I would be telling my kids, 'Guess what, Dad's coming to Nebraska,'" said Bob Wiese, 78, who's lived at Ya-Po-Ah Terrace for 16 years.

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He shares a one-bedroom apartment with his 8-year-old dog, a Lhasa apso-poodle mix named Jake. He pays \$473 a month in rent for his fourth-floor apartment.

The building was the brainchild of the Evergreen Union Retirement Association, a private nonprofit organization formed by five local labor unions that saw a community need for low-cost housing for senior citizens in Eugene. The association continues to own the building and contracts with Portland-based Manor Management Services to operate it.

The building's name means "very high place" in the language of the Kalapuya Indians who inhabited the Willamette Valley prior to the arrival of white settlers.

Its location at the foot of Skinner Butte proved controversial as it partially blocked the view of — and from — Eugene's landmark geographic feature. In response, city officials approved building height limits in portions of downtown and the Whiteaker neighborhood, regulations that remain in place but were amended earlier this year to accommodate the planned expansion of Fifth Street Public Market.

The association secured construction loans through the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development through its Section 202 program. Today, Ya-Po-Ah Terrace receives about \$700,000 a year in federal rent subsidies.

In August, the subsidy agreement with HUD was set to expire. Patrick O'Toole, Manor Management's property manager, said the rehabilitation project was "absolutely vital" to securing a new 20-year subsidy agreement that can be extended another two decades.

Developers had reached out to Evergreen's board of directors about potentially selling the building and converting it to market-rate housing, but O'Toole said the owners would have none of it.

"These guys never even thought about it or wavered," he said.

Portland-based Walsh Construction is the project's general contractor. Crews already have fenced off a staging area and the



The biggest renovation project in Ya-Po-Ah Terrace's history is set to begin this year. [CHRIS PIETSCH/THE REGISTER-GUARD]

work will quickly ramp up now that the holiday season has passed. Workers will install both a construction elevator on the building's east side and hydraulic lifts on its front and back — visible features that will remain for the project's duration.

Once finished, Eugene residents will see little difference in the building's workmanlike exterior, although its line will be slightly cleaner. The building is getting air-conditioning, so the portable units that stick out of many of the windows will disappear.

The building's tenants, however, are excited about the world of difference they'll experience inside.

The air conditioning means they will no longer have to open windows to cool their apartment on hot days — and hear the full blast of the horns from trains that run a short distance from Ya-Po-Ah Terrace. And crews will install thicker and better-insulated walls and windows to further muffle the noise. The city is working to establish a "quiet zone" that would silence the horns as trains run downtown in the future.

With the horns blasting, the sound level on the south side Ya-Po-Ah Terrace can exceed 75 decibels, deemed unacceptable under federal noise standards.

"People won't be complaining about the train as much," said Lola Frank, 88, who lives on the building's eighth floor.

Another benefit will be new plumbing and shut-offs for individual apartments. Currently, if there's a plumbing problem in one apartment, workers must shut off the water for an entire

vertical stack of apartments, inconveniencing many residents instead of just one.

"The building is well maintained but there are just things that we can't do without doing this rehab," said Kelsey Weillbrenner, the building's administrator.

The project also will add energy-efficient lighting, more parking stalls for disabled people, a new fire alarm system and upgraded fire suppression equipment.

But the work won't be without a major inconvenience for Ya-Po-Ah Terrace residents as they'll have to live elsewhere for up to 10 weeks while their floor is under construction. The move-outs will begin in February or March.

The residents will move into long-stay hotels, other apartments or vacant units within the building, Weillbrenner said.

Frank and Wiese were taking the coming move in stride, seeing it as a chance for a change of scenery.

"I try to tell myself it's going to be a big adventure," Frank said.

Wiese said he's sure the first 14 residents to move out will be "bombarded" with questions upon their return to Ya-Po-Ah Terrace.

Frank said leaving won't be easy but she's looking forward to the comforts of a Ya-Po-Ah Terrace ready to serve the housing needs of the community's senior citizens for another half-century.

"This is my home," she said, "and I'll be so glad to get back to it."

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