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'Poor Door' Building Draws 88,000 Applicants for 55 Rental Units

By MIREYA NAVARRO

The glassy new tower in New York City that attracted an outcry for featuring one entrance for condominium owners and another one for low-income tenants has drawn more than 88,000 applications for the 55 affordable rental units, the developer said.

"I guess people like it," said Gary Barnett, founder and president of Extell Development Company. "It shows that there's a tremendous demand for high-quality affordable housing in beautiful neighborhoods."

The separate entrances at the building, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, drew heavy criticism last year from some officials and affordable-housing advocates who saw the configuration as representing unequal treatment. The arrangement, which spawned the catchphrase "poor door," puts the affordable apartments in a segment attached to the condo building and is allowed under zoning rules that the administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio says it is now working to change.

Despite the controversy, it is not surprising that people are knocking down the poor door to get in. Housing lotteries, which the city uses to distribute subsidized apartments in new buildings, have been drawing record numbers after the system began allowing online applications in 2013 and as the rental market has gotten tighter. The lotteries are expected to multiply after Mr. de Blasio's pledge to produce 80,000 new affordable units over 10 years. Already this year, 10 lotteries have been held for 698 units that received about 486,000 applications.

Mr. Barnett said 88,200 applications had been received by early Monday. Officials with the NYC Housing Partnership, the nonprofit that will screen applicants for the developer, said that applications could reach 90,000 by the time the submission period ends at 11:59 p.m. Monday. The total will not be known until mailed applications, which must be postmarked by Monday, are counted.

City housing officials said that the Hunters Point South Living project in Long Island City in Queens has drawn the most applications so far, more than 92,000 for 924 below-market-rate apartments in a lottery that closed last year.

The units at Extell's building are eligible to households with incomes between \$30,240 and \$50,340, with rents listed at \$1,082 for a two-bedroom, \$895 for a one-bedroom and \$833 for a studio in a prime location by the Hudson River. Mr. Barnett argued that the response shows that the poor door issue is a "made-up controversy."

"The most important thing is to provide affordable housing," he said. "It's what people really want."

Affordable housing advocates are divided on the issue, with some saying that the focus should be on building more homes rather than where to enter them. Although many residential buildings in New York integrate low-cost units, developers like Mr. Barnett say that segregating the rentals in a separate part of the building is preferable when market-rate units with the best views and amenities are for sale, and can draw top dollar, in turn allowing them to build more affordable units.

But in the case of the Upper West Side building, that means the poorer tenants will not have access to the pool, gym, bowling alley and private theater, among the add-ons used to entice buyers passing through the nonpoor door. (The renters will have their own laundry room, a community room and bike storage.) There are even separate addresses: 50 Riverside Boulevard for the condominiums, and 470 West 62nd Street for the rentals.

Mr. Barnett's company built the low-income rentals in exchange for the freedom to construct more square footage than city rules would otherwise allow, a housing strategy called inclusionary zoning. And under current rules, if the developer chooses to attach the affordable segment to the market-rate portion of the project, it is required to provide separate entrances.

But the two-door option, adopted in a minority of new residential projects, is not in keeping with Mayor de Blasio's liberal political stance, and officials are looking to change a range of housing codes and programs to prohibit them.

"We oppose so-called poor doors and will change the necessary rules so that when affordable housing is provided on-site, we will not allow separate entrances based on income," Wiley Norvell, a spokesman for the mayor's office, said.

The lottery process itself may soon be subject to review as well.

A bill introduced last week in the City Council would create a task force to review the lottery system and recommend whether it should be more flexible and other changes. For example, the Council might change the rules so that applicants would not lose their spot in line for an apartment if their income or family status changes while they are waiting, said Councilman Mark Levine, the sponsor.

Mr. Levine said he was also seeking ways to keep affordable housing developers from swamped with ineligible applications, which is common amid the frenzied house hunting of the city.

"The idea of creating a task force is so that we can look for ways to make the process fairer and easier," he said.

In the meantime, the first lottery winners at 470 West 62nd Street, near Lincoln Center, are expected to start moving in as early as August, Mr. Barnett said. On the other side, most of the 219 luxury condos, some of which go for more than \$25 million, have sold.