

Subsidies help some afford Jackson Ski resort towns turn to housing programs to keep workers local

By The Associated Press

JACKSON - After spending his day in front of a middle school classroom, teacher Brook Yeomans sometimes jumps on his skateboard for the short commute to his home, a two-story, coffee-colored townhouse with views of the vast Wyoming mountains.

The home is the equivalent of real estate gold: He and his wife, Jessica, recently purchased it for \$230,000, a far cry from its \$750,000 market price.

In most of the country, the two-income couple would be unlikely candidates for subsidized housing. But in this Rocky Mountain resort town, where the median home price is \$1.2 million, officials have made it a top priority to keep public employees and other middle-income residents living in town, and if that means subsidizing families with incomes up to six figures, so be it.

"We were so lucky," said Yeomans, who has a 2-year-old son and is expecting his second child this month. "Affordable housing has basically allowed us to have a family here. Because I can guarantee you that the minute we had a kid, if we couldn't find a place to live, we would have probably moved somewhere where we could."

Towns like Jackson are increasingly relying on affordable-housing programs to stay vibrant while the wealthy snap up million-dollar vacation properties with sprawling views of the craggy, snowcapped mountains. In one ski town, the city manager - who earns \$125,000 a year - lives in subsidized housing.

Christine Walker, director of the Teton County Housing Authority in Jackson, said the goal is to prevent people from having to commute from more affordable towns nearby. Since the wealthy are using the homes as vacation destinations, they aren't living there full-time, so the communities would wilt in the off-season without a steady population.

"This place will turn into Disneyland if we don't have anybody that actually lives here," Walker said. "It's like, 'OK, lights on,' and the whole work force will just commute in, work here during the day. And then, 'lights out,' and travel back."

School officials credit the program with helping recruit and retain teachers like Yeomans. The starting salary for a teacher in the Jackson area is about \$50,000 a year.

"We see what we call a 'churn' after about six to eight years," said Pam Shea, superintendent of Teton County School District. "Once people who've been here for a while, if they are not able to obtain housing, they will move away or to our neighboring communities."

Home prices nationwide may be in a downward slump, but prices in Rocky Mountain ski towns have steadily increased. Prices in Jackson, Aspen, Telluride and Vail are still on the rise. In 2003, the median home price in Jackson was \$542,000. The figure crested \$1 million for the first time in April and reached \$1.2 million at year's end.

One reason is the towns are hemmed in by public land and have little room to grow. Add a ski area or two - and in Jackson's case, quick access to Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks - and you get a textbook case of small supply, big demand and soaring prices.

A couple with two children in Jackson can make up to about \$130,000 a year and hold more than \$260,000 in

assets and still qualify for deed-restricted housing. The program limits property appreciation and requires homeowners to sell the home back to buyers selected by the housing authority. As many as 72 families put in for a drawing for each home that becomes available.

Compared to Jackson, housing prices in Aspen, Colo., are stratospheric and rising, with a median price of \$5.2 million. Yet the town might have the region's most aggressive affordable-housing programs. While Jackson developers set aside 15 percent of all units they build for affordable housing, Aspen developers must set aside 60 percent.

Aspen has about 6,300 year-round residents, but has built 2,800 units of deed-restricted housing. Just more than half of the work force lives in town rather than commuting from Basalt and other nearby towns in western Colorado's Roaring Fork Valley, according to Tom McCabe, executive director of the Aspen/Pitkin County Housing Authority.

"It's very expensive dirt here," McCabe said. "Doing business here is really an expensive proposition. It is in most resorts. Aspen tends to be at the astronomical end of the equation. So, if we can do it, we know darn well everyone else can do it."

In Telluride, Colo., even the town manager lives in deed-restricted housing.

Frank Bell makes \$125,000 a year but said he wouldn't have taken the job a few years ago if the town hadn't allowed him to buy a two-bedroom, three-bath, deed-restricted house at the Telluride ski area.

"The word 'affordable' can be a little bit oxymoronic," he said. "Most people wouldn't think of a \$600,000 home as affordable."