



The Oregonian

Urban pioneers start settling in

South Waterfront - An 18-year-old dream turns real Friday as the first wave of condo owners arrives

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In 1988, Ronald Reagan was in his final year as president, and a film called "Rain Man" won the Academy Award for Best Picture.

That same year, Portland's City Council passed the Central City Plan, which increased the density of development allowed near downtown. It was intended to lure housing north of downtown into an industrial zone then called "North Macadam."

The city hoped for maybe 20 condominiums each city block, but there was no guarantee large numbers of people would want to live near downtown or the medical school on Marquam Hill.

"We felt both those areas were going to go and be really popular," said Margaret Strachan, a city commissioner who helped push for the plan. "The Pearl went first. I think with the tram that other area's going to go nuts because it will be so convenient for the people up on the hill."

Friday, that vision started turning into reality, although on a significantly larger scale than anyone predicted 18 years ago.

The first few condo buyers in what's now known as the South Waterfront area backed moving vans up to the front door of the Meriwether condominium building Friday and started unloading their belongings. They're urban pioneers buying into what is arguably the city's most ambitious urban renewal area to date.

The Meriwether and other buildings under construction, rising 20-plus stories, are making 200 condos an acre the common density in the area -- far more than Portlanders in the late '80s ever imagined.

For Brian Topper, Friday was the culmination of more than 11/2 years of waiting for his 981-square-foot condo in the east building of the two-tower Meriwether. Although he wouldn't get the keys to his new place for another day or two, he insisted on dropping by to see a living room carpet be delivered and to set up for moving his furniture in today.

Standing in the living room, Topper gazed west at scores of workers in hard hats moving equipment hither and yon. Some were demolishing an old building to make way for a new park a few blocks away. Others were putting finishing touches on the Meriwether's west tower.

"This is what makes Portland Portland," said Topper, 33.

A few hours later, Victor Wong and his brother, Vincent, were lifting a coffee table out of a U-Haul truck. Dressed in blue scrubs marked "OHSU," the first-year surgical resident took a break from work at Oregon Health & Science University to start moving into his fifth-floor, one-bedroom unit.

"I'm going to be here at least seven years, so it's an investment," Wong said of the time he'll be in medical

school. "I like Portland."

Wong said he's especially eager to ride the aerial tram, currently under construction, from his new home to work on the hill.

"I'll help them build it if they need me to," he said.

Meriwether buyers will fast become residents as additional floors are finished between now and October.

As with the first residents of the Pearl District, the South Waterfront's inaugural occupants say they're prepared for construction noise and dust for a while. Insulated windows will help.

"This is exceptional," said Topper, opening and closing the glass door to his fifth-floor balcony to show how much noise it blocked.

Nevertheless, developers and their real estate agents are hoping to ease the transition in the new neighborhood. For example, Hoffman Construction Co. crews are attempting to do mostly "quiet" tasks when they begin workdays at 4 a.m. on the John Ross condominiums next door.

So what does Strachan, the former city commissioner, think these days when she drives by the gleaming towers rising from the long-vacant industrial area?

"I think of all the farmland that isn't going to McMansions."

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