

**In Grants Pass, not enough housing options to go around**
*By Natalie Skowlund of the Daily Courier*

Late last August, Alitash Crockett moved to Merlin from Texas with her toddler son and a small dog.

Crockett, who was born and raised in Texas, said she moved here because a relative in the area offered a place to live while she readjusted from a tumultuous personal situation.

Still, Crockett had planned to find a rental of her own in or around Grants Pass.

Although she quickly found work as a medical assistant in the community's busy health care industry, sixth months later the 25-year-old single mother still hasn't found a home of her own.

"I'm really at a standstill on if I'm going to be able to find a place at this point," Crockett said. "If I can't, I will have to return to Texas."

Grants Pass, long an attractive place to retire for Californians, has been in a housing crisis for the past several years, and it's no secret to locals.

A third of renters here are categorized as "severely rent burdened," meaning they spend over 50% of their household income on rent. Two-thirds are "rent burdened," meaning they spend over 30% of their income on rent. Some other cities in the area, including Medford and Ashland, are just as bad.

What's the problem with the rental market in Josephine County? A combination of steep rental prices, insufficient local incomes and a short list of available rental options are to blame.

From 2012 to 2018, apartment rents in the area shot up 39%, according to the state Department of Housing and Community Services. Supply remains far below demand — estimates are the city lacks 2,000 housing units, and there is a gap of about 1,300 housing units for those making \$20,000 or less annually.

Meanwhile, virtually no new apartment construction of any size has taken place locally for years even as new homes are bought up by retirees from elsewhere and investors wanting to get in on the area's white hot real estate market.

In a local Facebook rentals group, Crockett posted in January that she was looking for a camper, manufactured home or apartment for her and her son with a rental budget around \$800.

But Crockett said that finding an affordable rental, even just a studio, has been tough going despite the fact that her healthcare job "pays decent."

"I'm a single mom, which means one income. I have bills on top of [my rent]. I have a phone bill, I have car insurance, I have gas, I have diapers to buy, groceries," Crockett said. "It's really difficult to find somewhere where you can afford rent and bills and all of that with the income I'm making."

Dustin King, a 36-year-old single father, said he moved to the area in 2019 and has been searching for his own rental place since last February.

Now it's 2021, and King still finds himself sleeping on a cousin's couch while he struggles to find a rental.

King, who works as a cellphone representative at Premium Wireless, said that limited available rental options are the largest hindrance to finding a stable living arrangement for him and his 4-year-old son.

"I have the funds to procure a place, but if there are so few places available it comes to first-come, first-served," King said. "I am not the only person in GP who is looking for a place or this would be so much easier."

Another single mother who asked to remain anonymous is seeking a rental for herself and her four adolescent children in Grants Pass.

She said that her minimum wage job is insufficient to cover most rent prices in the area.

Her eldest son, 19, also works a minimum wage part-time job while studying.

Between their two incomes, she said, they do not qualify for low-income housing assistance but also do not make enough collectively to pay three times the rent in a deposit.

"Most of my life I have never made three times the rent but have always paid my rent and bills," she said.

This mother said that although her profile as a renter is clean, her and her son's low wages often make or break their chances at being selected amid other rental applications.

"I do have good references and a good credit score, never been evicted, no arrest record, my son either," she said. "But it doesn't seem like enough when you compare it to our lack of funds."

Sparse rental listings in Grants Pass make the situation more difficult. "Every time a place comes available, it's usually gone in two or three days," she said. "I work overtime sometimes, so I don't always get to jump right on a place and apply."

Additionally, when she does find a plausible listing, both she and her son have to pay application fees just to be considered.

"I've tried every possible option I could think of," she said. "I just wish someone would give us a chance."

Single parents may find it particularly tough to find a suitable family rental on one income, but even upper-income couples with no children have struggled to find a suitable rental locally.

Carlene Donovan and her husband were in the news a year ago after they created and dispersed fliers in Jacksonville advertising themselves as potential tenants.

The Donovans had previously been living and working in Merlin and were hoping to find a home for rent in Jacksonville.

When they released their rental fliers, however, they had been searching for rentals in the area since November 2019 without much luck.

"We thought, let's try to talk to the owners themselves," Donovan said of the rental fliers. "Maybe they would rent something [to us] if they saw that we were good people."

Donovan said that the home rentals she and her husband encountered were consistently overpriced for the level quality. And, in general, listings were in short supply.

Donovan said that a couple of places they visited even had visible traces of rodents on the premises despite having high rents.

"There's not a lot on the market, and if someplace is halfway decent, the prices are obscene," Donovan said.

On top of that, she said, "Every place that we went to had multiple offers. Sometimes we'd be told someone had a stronger application. If you're making six figures and you've got no pets and no kids, how does someone have a stronger application? I guess they just make more money."

Donovan added that she is thankful that she and her husband finally managed to find a rental home in Grants Pass last April. "I am so grateful that we found a place before the fires hit because I know we wouldn't have been able to find anything afterwards," she said, referring to refugees from the Alameda Fire in Jackson County flooding the market.

Gina Lewis, a local landlord who owns two rental properties in Grants Pass, said that higher-income out-of-state renters can afford to pay steeper rents locally, often pricing out those who earn their living in the area.

While Lewis tries to keep her rental prices affordable to local tenants, she believes that she could easily ask for more in rent than she does currently at her two rental homes.

"Single family homes are in demand," Lewis said. "Realtors are contacting me and say they have a buyer, and my house is not on the market."

Lewis said she thinks that real estate is selling quickly to out-of-staters impressed by what Oregon has to offer.

"Once you find how great Oregon is, as opposed to [California], the market of housing is getting sold to owners and not renters," Lewis said. "I know three people who came here for vacation and put their [California] house on the market and moved here."

Rebecca Lewis, a professor of urban planning and public policy at the University of Oregon, has conducted research on affordable housing in Oregon.

Lewis, no relation to Gina Lewis, said that she was surprised to discover the extent of the housing affordability crisis in the state during her research.

"Across the state, numbers just honestly really shocked us in terms of what Oregon residents are paying in housing. Particularly renters, particularly for people that are lower income," Lewis said.

Lewis said that of the cities in Oregon that she surveyed, housing consistently ranked as one of the top issues. She said that Oregon in particular has struggled to establish the infrastructure needed to develop land for new residences in recent years.

"We have the land but we don't have the water and sewer and roads to be able to support development, and we don't have a good source of funding for that infrastructure," she said.

Two factors particularly applicable to the housing crisis in Southern Oregon are an influx of new residents from out-of-state and the impacts of the wildfires last September.

Lewis said that although she has not conducted research on those issues in particular, she believes they have likely affected the local housing crisis.

For one, the wildfires prompted many who lost their homes to move elsewhere.

"Southern Oregon fires have affected a lot of lower income housing units. There's likely not another unit available for those families to move into directly, so they're likely in transitional housing or moving out of the area because of the lack of a place to live," Lewis said.

And, with the pandemic enabling more professionals to work remotely, Lewis said those who can work from home are choosing to relocate away from large urban areas.

"There's been a shift to people wanting to live in places with amenities," Lewis said. "I think that sort of influx of population could continue to affect the rural areas in Oregon, because we have such great access to natural amenities."

Grants Pass City Councilor Vanessa Ogier said that if the city wants to be a viable place to live in the future, it will be important to act promptly on local housing issues.

"Our community is not building and supplying the type of housing that our community can afford," said Ogier, noting the predominance of single family home developments in the area.

Ogier said that the housing shortage could also dissuade professionals from taking jobs in Grants Pass.

"Professionals are not going to choose to practice here. [They] may go to other regions where housing is more affordable," Ogier said. "We're having a difficult time attracting folks because their biggest citation is [they] can't find somewhere to live."

"We're closing the door to them because one of their most basic necessities can't be met."



*ELAYNA YUSSEN/Daily Courier*

Alitash Crockett, a 25-year-old single mother, pushes her son Michael, 3, on a swing at Riverside Park. Crockett and her son moved to the area in the summer and have so far been unable to find a rental of their own.