



Selecting an apartment is a decision you'll have to live with for a long time.

New lease on life

How to find the right apartment

By Carolyn DeMarco
staff writer

Selecting an apartment is a lot like buying a car.

You'll pay for status — a Bugatti or 1,200 square feet in the Bloomfields vs. a Yugo and a studio apartment in Ypsilanti.

Recognize that all apartments, like all cars, are basically the same in function. An apartment is basically four walls, a floor and a roof. It's the options that push up the price. The trick is deciding which options are necessary to your lifestyle.

Selecting an apartment is not much like buying a car.

Don't expect that an older apartment complex is cheaper than a new one, though it's sometimes the case.

"Like all real estate, purchased or rented," said Darlyn Syerson, leasing agent for Thornberry in West Bloomfield, "the key is location, location, location." In western Wayne and Oakland counties, at least, travel north and the prices go up until you pass out of the Bloomfields.

Highest average rents in the Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Washtenaw areas, according to a spring survey by Relocation Specialists in Southfield, are in West Bloomfield. The average West Bloomfield price is \$699 for a one-bedroom, \$825 for a two-bedroom.

Second on the list is Farmington Hills at \$542 for a one-bedroom. Other communities where average rents for a one-bedroom top \$500 are Farmington, Southfield, Troy, Bloomfield Township, Harper Woods and Northville.

On the average, the survey shows, you'll pay \$40-\$50 more for an Oakland County one-bedroom than counterparts in the other three counties.

But select Oakland County as your new home, and you'll have plenty of new apartments from which to choose. A booming trend in county construction has translated into the apartment market. Competition is stiff, said Jackie Herries, leasing agent for Indian Creek in the southern end of Farmington Hills.

"It's the most competitive it's been in my six years in the business. You've got to come up with something different."

The Observer & Economist in the last week of October listed more than 200 classified ads for apartments for rent in Oakland and Wayne counties, and 31 display ads.

As a starting point, check the O & E for one of a copy of one of several apartment building guides on the market available in bookstores, supermarkets and drugstores. "Apartment and Condominium Guide" is \$1. Its pages are filled with advertisements, and only advertisements are listed.

"Apartment Index" at \$2.50 is more comprehensive, listing prices and comparing sizes and features.

A free guide — "Apartment Shopping Guide" — will make its debut Monday, Nov. 9, and will be available quarterly at all Perry Drugs. It will be filled with ads and also will have maps.

Traditionally, apartment turnover comes in the summer. You may get a "move in" — for a summer, the first month's rent free, no security deposit or a microwave, if you're looking in late fall or winter. Or a two-bedroom for the price of a one-bedroom.

In attempting to compare apartments, come with questions for the leasing agents. Leasing agents are generally less busy in the apartments in mid-week and in the third week of the month.

Is there a resident manager? A 24-hour emergency line? How are the walls, outlet and inner, insulated? What utilities are included? Is heat extra, what are residents paying as an average in the colder months? Who is responsible if an appliance breaks? Are children allowed? What happens if I have to break the lease? How much decorating can I do?

Before signing a lease, see who your potential neighbors are by coming back and driving through the complex. It's important to you, look for types of cars, children's play areas, pets. Check out the rush-hour driving time to your work place. Ask about the incidence of crime, but don't take the leasing agent's word for it, suggested Juanita Taylor of the Towers of Southfield. "I tell people to call the police department. They'll give a past record."

And if you want to know how easy the management is to get along with, said Patricia Waple of Meridian Park in Livonia, ask a resident already

there.

Be realistic about what you can afford. You'll need to fill out a credit application, and most rental management companies run a credit check.

"People sometimes do not accept reality," Syerson said. "There's no way someone who makes \$10,000 annually can afford \$800 a month. A single person can count on spending 30 percent of his/her income on rent. A couple with a child will have more overhead and should expect to apply less of the income toward rent."

Many companies will accept co-signers for young couples where no credit has yet been established.

If you're single, think about getting a roommate. Look for "modern split" apartments, two bedrooms that offer each tenant a bath and bedroom with combined living quarters in the center. Insist that both parties sign the lease, so that in the case of a terminal rift, you won't get stuck with the entire rent bill.

Once you've decided on the right location, and the options important to you, comparison shop before you make a final decision, suggests Judy McKay of Country Ridge of the Farmington Hills West Bloomfield border.

But make sure you're comparing apples with apples," she said.

Use a checklist like the one accompanying this article and compare items like square footage, storage, the extras like appliances and weight rooms, the utilities included, the carpet cleaning fees when you leave, and the security.

When you've made the decision, you'll be expected to plunk down a deposit and fill out an application. After approval of credit, you'll be expected to sign an agreement and pay the first month's rent, a security deposit of up to 1 1/2 times the monthly rent, a carpet cleaning fee and sometimes a last month's rent.

Security deposits cannot be used as the last month's rent and are strictly to cover damages such as burns in carpets, chips in appliances, holes in wall or missing broiler pans. They cannot be used to cover normal cleaning costs. By law, they must be returned within 30 days of moving out, but the tenant must leave a forwarding address.

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— Darlyn Syerson
apartment leasing agent

Here's a checklist for apartment hunters

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Apartment shopping? You may want to clip this checklist when comparing potential new homes.

- Monthly rent?
- What utilities are included?
- If heat is not included, what is the average January gas bill?
- How much is the carpet cleaning fee? Is it refundable?
- How much is the security deposit?
- Are six-month leases an option?
- Are there any extra fees?
- What appliances are included?
- If washers and dryers are not, is there a community laundry room with coin-operated machines?
- Who pays for repairs if the appliances fail?

- Is there a resident manager or maintenance man on duty at all times or 24-hour emergency number to call?
- Is someone available to accept UPS or U.S. Postal Service deliveries?
- Is there a clause excusing the tenant if the lease must be broken because of a job transfer?
- Is there a month-to-month option after the one-year lease is up?
- What is the square footage?
- How many bedrooms?
- How many baths?
- How many closets? Size?
- Are window treatments included?
- Are there pools, showers, tennis courts, clubhouse, exercise rooms?
- What are the rules for use?
- Is there a garage or carport?
- How many parking spaces are allotted per unit?

- Is there a master antenna or is it cable ready?
- Are telephone jacks already in? How many?
- What storage is available?
- Can paint or carpeting colors be selected by tenant?
- Is wallpapering allowed?
- Are children welcome? Is a separate family building provided?
- Are pets welcome? Is there a cost?
- Where is the mail delivered?
- Where are the local schools, shopping centers, churches, service stations, library?
- Are the walks and roads plowed regularly?
- What security arrangements are there?
- A guard house? Steel doors? Deadbolt locks? Peepholes?