

Upscale rental homes in path of freeway a 'screaming deal'

by **Cathryn Creno** - Sept. 8, 2010 10:34 AM
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Life got more luxurious a month ago for two Ahwatukee Foothills single dads because of real estate owned by the Arizona Department of Transportation.



Renting a house from ADOT



ADOT buying homes in planned freeway's path

The state owns 20 upscale Ahwatukee rental properties in the path of the planned South Mountain Freeway. And, until plans for the freeway are more firm, the agency rents the houses to anyone with a good track record as a tenant. Typically, officials say, there is a waiting list to get in.

Robert Jones and Mark Monterichard, single dads who have been close friends since they met at work 15 years ago, a month ago moved into two ADOT houses in the same cul de sac in an area called Foothills Reserve.

"It's been good so far," said Jones, who pays \$1,000 a month to rent a two-story, 1,900-square-foot, three-bedroom house.

"The upgrades are nice," he said. "I have granite and shutters. It had a pool that they filled in, so that kind of sucks. But in general, it's a good place."

Monterichard pays \$1,250 a month for a four-bedroom, 2,900-square-foot place three doors away. His house has an upstairs playroom, a three-car garage and backs to a green belt.

ADOT leasing agent Kathy Kline said she does no advertising because typically she has people waiting to get into the agency's homes. All are within the attendance boundary of Desert Vista High School, which has been listed by *U.S. News & Report* as one of the best schools in the nation.

Prospective tenants typically find out about properties through a link on the home page of the ADOT website, www.adot.gov, she said, adding that she can get as many as four calls in a day.

Jones and Monterichard found their places on the website. Their friend Rene Roberts, who recently ditched a house in the freeway path through a short sale, spotted the rentals while looking for information about how to sell her house through ADOT's hardship program.

Roberts did not qualify to have ADOT buy

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her house, but the three buddies say they wound up in a good situation anyway. They now share child care and make dinner together several nights a week.

Tenants do not have to have perfect credit to rent from ADOT, but they can't have criminal records or prior evictions from other rental properties, Kline said.

She said some applicants are former Ahwatukee homeowners who have lost their houses to foreclosure but want to keep their kids in Ahwatukee schools. Others are looking to buy houses in Ahwatukee and want live nearby to be ready to jump on a deal.

"People love this area," she said.

One property Kline recently leased is a few blocks from Desert Vista. It has a finished basement, new carpet, a play room with a fireplace, three bedrooms, three bathrooms and a deck. The rent? \$1,000 a month. Renting from ADOT can cost \$900 to \$2,300 a month, depending on a house's size and amenities. The \$2,300 rental is a 4,500-square-foot custom home in west Ahwatukee.

"It's a plush joint," said Chad Blostone, a member of the Ahwatukee Foothills Village Planning Committee who is familiar with the property. The renter "is getting a screaming deal," he said.

The downside of renting from ADOT includes month-to-month leases, no backyard pools because ADOT does not want the potential liability and no cosmetic fixes to properties.

If the carpet is ragged, tenants throw a rug on it. Tenants also must make due with

whatever appliances the previous owners have left. If the refrigerator and microwave are missing, renters supply their own.

Some also can see Pecos Road - what ADOT plans to be the future path of an eight-lane, 22-mile extension of Loop 202 from Chandler to Laveen - from their yards.

That doesn't seem to bother many tenants.

"It's the best deal in town," said one tenant, who requested anonymity because she doesn't want acquaintances to know she and her husband have lost their jobs and home. Thanks to ADOT, they moved into a larger house that has an upstairs playroom for the kids and a downstairs bedroom suite for their grandmother.

The tenant said they prefer having a month-to-month lease because her husband is negotiating for a construction management job in another country and they may need to move abroad soon.

In the meantime, they are paying \$1,350 a month for a 3,800-square-foot, two-story, five-bedroom house.

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ADOT takes in about \$250,000 annually from rent Ahwatukee's hardship homes, agency spokesman Tim Tait said.

Although ADOT does not have the money to buy out everyone in the planned freeway path - that would come from the federal government once freeway plans are final - it does use state money to buy out homeowners who qualify for its hardship program: People who were transferred to jobs out of state or who developed illnesses that forced them to move.

Raul Torres, ADOT's Property Management section manager, said the agency maintains and rents out the homes because tearing them down would hurt neighborhoods. "We don't want to be sporadically tearing down houses," he said. "That creates an eyesore."

Construction of the planned \$1.9 billion freeway is expected to start about 2013. But plans first must be approved by the federal government. ADOT also is in talks about the possibility of moving the freeway alignment south to the Gila River Indian Community.

Not surprisingly, the slow pace of the freeway planning and the fact that ADOT is buying some homes and not others is irritating to many remaining homeowners in the area.

"Tell ADOT to come to *my* house and buy it for 150 percent of its value," one weary homeowner said, snarling, when a reporter knocked on his door.

Because of neighborhood tension over the freeway, ADOT protects the identities of homeowners who qualify to have their homes purchased through the hardship program as well as those of renters who move into the properties the agency owns.

For instance, Tait said, ADOT does not put "for rent" signs in the yards of the houses it owns. And ADOT staffers avoid driving agency cars when it goes to homes that might qualify for the program.

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