

Merit Manor makes old new again

34-year-old Clovis apartment complex prepares to unveil its upgraded, remodeled look.

The Fresno Bee

Merit Manor, a 34-year-old, 242-unit apartment complex in Clovis, wraps up a major facelift with a ribbon cutting at 4:30 p.m. May 23.

The occasion marks an ambitious makeover that started in November. Vandenberghe Properties, owner of the complex at Gettysburg and Peach avenues, remodeled the clubhouse and weight room, upgraded balconies and patios, planted lush landscaping, put on fresh paint and poured new asphalt throughout.

"We just needed to make old new again," said manager Marcy Jackson, who declined to reveal the cost of the project. "We just went to town."

The complex is 98% full, which is a robust occupancy rate for a property that was built in 1974.

Staffers plan to commemorate the remodeling with a video showing the complex before and after the renovation.

For convenience's sake

A 135,000-square-foot office and retail project that will feature a Circle K convenience store and gas station is headed to Palm Bluffs Corporate Center.

The 11.2-acre site on Nees Avenue between Palm and Ingram avenues is being developed by Mehmet Noyan and Ernie Graham. It will consist of nine office buildings for lease or sale and four retail structures.

Noyan said he already has interest in half of the office buildings, though the project is still going through the approval process at City Hall. The office buildings will range from 6,000 square feet to 10,060 square feet.

Restaurants are likely to be interested in part of the retail space, said Jim Huebner, a Retail California agent who is helping market the property. The restaurants would feed off the estimated 10,000 people who work in the business park.

Noyan developed Palm Bluffs for Calcot, a cotton cooperative in Bakersfield that used it for storing cotton.

The ribbon cutting was in January 2000, and full build-out was originally estimated to take 10 years. Seven years later, the park is home to more than 2 million square feet of commercial uses and only one parcel of five acres remains unsold — and a deal is nearing completion on that, Noyan said.

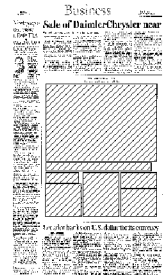
Apartment sale a big deal

Fourteen apartment complexes with a total of 2,271 units in Fresno and Bakersfield owned by Bascom Properties are for sale for \$180.7 million. It is believed to be one of the largest portfolio listings ever in the Valley.

"This is extremely rare," said Kitty Wallace, the Sperry Van Ness agent in Los Angeles who is trying to sell the apartments. "Buyers are coming from all over the nation to see this."

Bascom bought many of the apartments, fixed them up and watched the values rise during the recent real estate boom. They are for sale at a

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time when home sales are slumping and when some experts expect flat to modest appreciation of multifamily housing.

Wallace said investment opportunities remain strong in the Valley because the population is surging and construction is not.

"These properties are located in two areas that have seen some of the strongest apartment fundamentals in the country due to a lack of new apartment development and a rise in home prices," she said.

The properties range from the 70-unit Bridemont Terrace in Bakersfield to the 390-unit Stoney Brook complex in Fresno.

Wallace said she will sell them individually, as a single chunk or anything in between.

The apartment houses carry a price tag of less than \$80,000 per unit. About 75% of them are two- and three-bedroom units.

The average vacancy rate is 93%, which is off from the market average of 97%, Wallace said.

Total apartment sales in the Fresno area climbed from

about \$42 million in 1999 to about \$170 million in 2005 before falling to about \$122 million last year, according to Mike Harter, an investment specialist at Grubb&Ellis/Pearson Realty in Fresno.

Harter said in a recent forecast that he expects modest appreciation in apartment values in 2007, although rents could rise 3% to 5%.

For the first time in half a decade, real estate is competing with other investments.

But Wallace said she doesn't anticipate much trouble peddling the apartments in Fresno and Bakersfield. "We have investors on the table from New York and Florida and all over the country."

Great grape

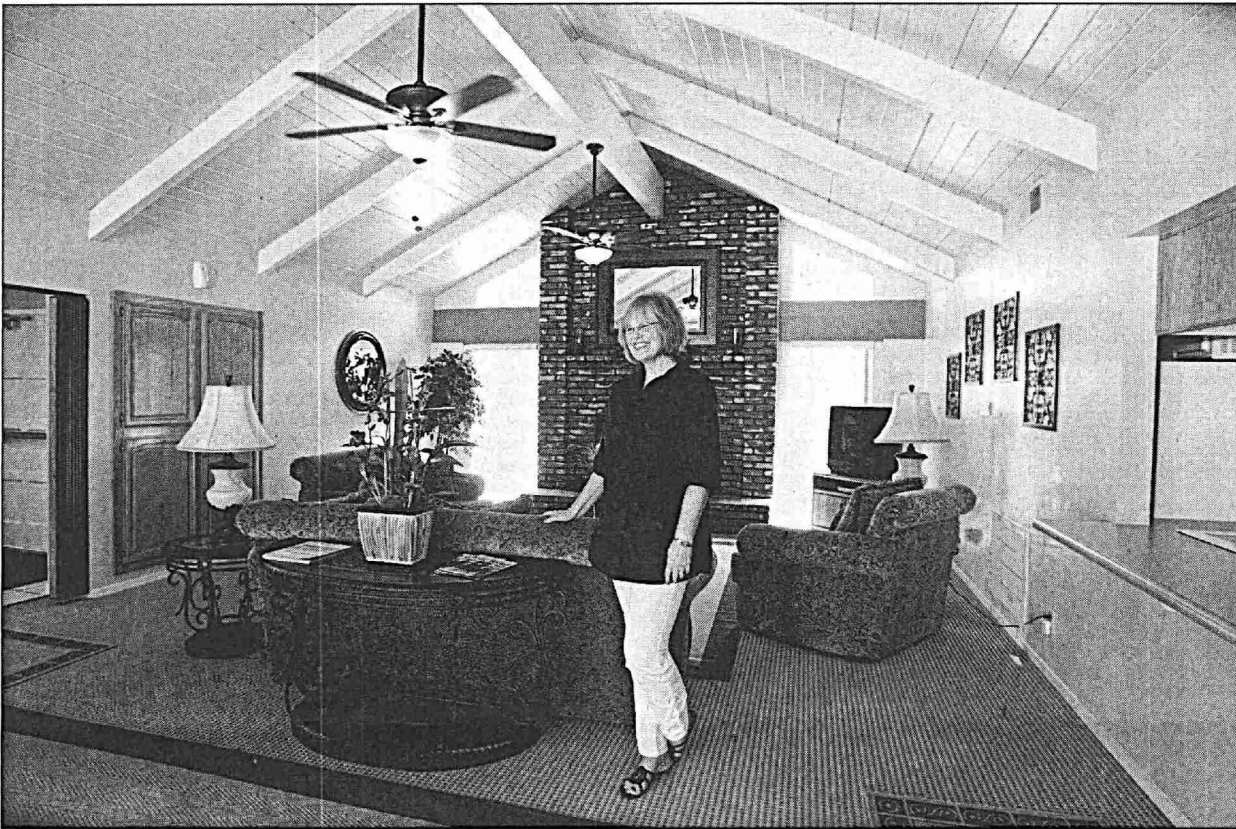
A new late-season green seedless table grape, the Pristine, is about to make its debut this year.

The Pristine was developed by Anton Caratan, president of Anton Caratan & Son in Delano, after 22 years and more than 225,000 cross breeds. The result is a large, crisp grape with a long shelf life, Caratan said.

Anton Caratan has licensed Four Star Fruit and Delano Farms to grow and market the Pristine in the United States. He has licensed Sun Fresh International's parent company to grow and market the variety exclusively outside the continental United States.

Four Star Fruit and Delano Farms are devoting several thousand acres to the Pristine, believing the new variety could have the same impact on the green seedless industry as the Crimson Seedless had on the red seedless industry when it was introduced in 1989.

► Sanford Nax and Dennis Pollock contributed to Word on the Street. It was compiled by Nax. The reporter can be reached at snax@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6495.



TOMAS OVALLE/THE FRESNO BEE

Marcy Jackson stands in the remodeled clubhouse at Merit Manor Apartments, which also upgraded patios, planted lush new landscaping and poured new asphalt.