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## Amenities are magnets for Hartford's newest apts.

BY **GREGORY SEAY**

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PHOTOS | CONTRIBUTED

First-floor gym with a basketball halfcourt is among the many amenities at Spectra Boutique Apartments on downtown Hartford's Constitution Plaza.

With 1,000 or so new downtown Hartford apartment units coming online in the next few years, and lingering uncertainty over how much of the new space will be filled, landlords are using amenities to differentiate their properties or keep up with the competition.

According to a 2014 Apartments.com survey of 2,500 apartment renters across the U.S., 50 percent said "convenient utilities/amenities" ranked high on their list of priorities for choosing where to live. Downtown Hartford's newest rents range from \$1,450 a month for a one-bedroom, with a single parking space included, at The Grand on Ann Street to \$2,400 and up for a two-bedroom unit with sweeping downtown views at Spectra Boutique Apartments, overlooking Constitution Plaza.

Since the converted 179 Allyn St. apartments downtown reopened in June, newcomers have wasted little time taking advantage of two of the building's tenant amenities — the resident lounge and fitness room.

Located on the second floor, the carpeted lounge, with large, flat-screen TV, sofa and upholstered chairs, small refrigerator and a coffeemaker has become a gathering place for some residents who have formed a book club. Another group uses the space for theatrical readings and rehearsals, said Massachusetts landlord Roberto Arista.

Next door, a mirrored fitness room equipped with several treadmills and a weight rack is available to 179 Allyn's more health- and image-conscious residents.

"These are the two main features we provide in all our properties," said Arista, co-founder/president of Dakota Partners Inc. of Waltham, Mass.

179 Allyn's amenities are also being replicated inside the half dozen office-to-apartment conversions completed or underway in downtown Hartford. Landlords say those basic features, combined with other more exclusive comforts — among them 24-hour concierge services and on-site parking — are there precisely to appeal to prospective renters.

In most cases, landlords' choices of amenities, they say, are more art than science. Landlords say they mostly rely on their earlier experience developing and managing apartment buildings in New York City, or urban Connecticut communities such as Meriden, New Haven and the Fairfield County region.

Buying and installing amenities isn't cheap. Indeed, the cost of such basic amenities as granite or simulated-stone kitchen countertops, oversize closets and built-in washer/dryers in nearly all the converted apartments downtown — except parking — are factored into the rents, landlords say. But to avoid being caught short, developers of the newest apartments are, where they can afford to, adding everything except a second kitchen sink to make their properties stand out.

### **Unique perks**

Up the street from 179 Allyn, at 201 Uccello, residents of the 22-unit The Grand on Ann Street, too, have access to a tenant lounge and a fitness center. But they also occasionally order meals from a special tenants' menu at the Tavern Downtown Restaurant, located on the ground floor of the same building.

At The Spectra Boutique Apartments, formerly the American/Sonesta/Clarion Hotel at 5 Constitution Plaza, at least two amenities there aren't duplicated so far anywhere else downtown: A wood-floor gym with a basketball half-court and a 46-seat movie theater with stadium seating and a 14-foot wide screen linked via WiFi to Netflix, Hulu, Comcast, Pandora and other online entertainment options, even PowerPoint presentations.

According to Spectra property manager Laurie Waddell, many of the 60 or so units leased since June have gone to tenants — many fresh from college — excited about those and the high-rise apartment's other "community" features. Those include the fitness center with elliptical machines and treadmills, weight room and space for aerobic exercise, a library and a lounge-community room with lots of upholstered seating.

"Many of them, by the time they see those [amenities], are ready to lease," Waddell said. "But others, when they come across the theater and the lounge, they're like, 'Where do I sign?'"

At 777 Main St., the 26-story skyscraper formerly home to Bank of America, the list of amenities touted on the skyscraper's homepage is long: Round-the-clock concierge; library; game room; fitness center; pet-friendly building. Garage parking, too, is available for a fee.

Even 777's views are amenities — and are priced accordingly. Monthly rents start at \$1,180 for a one-bedroom studio; a one-bedroom, from \$1,410; and two bedrooms starting at \$2,330 — all on the building's lower floors. Rents for each climb the higher tenants go in the building.

"Every building is unique," said Fairfield architect-developer Bruce Becker, owner of 777 Main. "There are a lot of people who want to move to Hartford now. Some of them want as many high-quality amenities as possible. We also try to use the amenities as a strategic tool. We tried to think creatively how could we compel people to move from a larger home in the suburbs and more car-dependent lifestyle to a more urban lifestyle."

777 Main's amenities, including an art gallery, resident lounge, yoga space, and a wraparound, 26-floor promenade with spectacular vistas, have enabled the building to lease more than half, or 160 of 777 Main's 285 units, since the first tenant moved in June 1, Becker said.

Also in the works, he said, is the addition of six more electric-car charging stations at the building, to raise to 10 the number of stations available to tenants.

777 Main also has more than 60,000 square feet of commercial space available. The landlord has signed with Blue State Coffee to open in August a coffee shop on the building's Main Street side, opposite the Old State House. Also signed is a "premiere fitness facility" that Becker won't name until a lease is signed.

"I also view the commercial tenants we're bringing into the building as among our more important amenities," said Becker, who has apartment properties in New Haven and New York City. "We're always thinking about what will make our buildings as attractive and enjoyable as possible. The common areas are important. They're the ones that define a sense of community and shared identity for residents."

COMING NEXT WEEK: Hartford apartment landlords share their "wish list" of downtown amenities they want added or expanded, to make the center city, and hence their properties, more attractive to urban dwellers.