

## Project helps Solano's most needy tenants

By Amanda Janis/Business Editor

In an area where the median home price is approaching half a million dollars and apartment rents start in the \$800-per-month range, the term "affordable housing" is an oxymoron for many Solano County residents, particularly those with very low incomes and/or disabilities.

A new breed of apartment complex was recently constructed in Fairfield specifically for such residents, offering reasonable rents coupled with various on-site support services.

Located on Alaska Avenue, Laurel Gardens Apartments is a collaborative housing project conceived by Berkeley-based Resources for Community Development, a non-profit organization dedicated to affordable housing, and Caminar/CLC, a non-profit social rehabilitation agency headquartered in San Mateo. The concept was quickly embraced by the city of Fairfield, which helped the organizations locate



The Laurel Garden Apartments in Fairfield is a collaborative housing project of two Bay Area non-profit agencies. (Courtesy photos)

a suitable property within its North Texas Street Redevelopment Area.



"It's very well designed and very well run," remarked Lark Ferrell, housing project finance manager with the city's community development department. "It's very inviting, and very much a community."

Laurel Garden's 30 units are expressly earmarked for low-income individuals with disabilities and the formerly homeless. Twenty-one units make use of Section 8 assistance, while eight units are subsidized by the Housing and Urban Development Supportive Housing Program. Residents pay one-third of their income toward rent - which equates to monthly payments of \$30 to \$460 - and benefit from on-site supportive services like case management, counseling, job seeking

assistance and health care referrals.

The purpose behind the project is to provide affordable

housing for tenants, enabling them to live independently rather than in group homes and assisted living facilities, or remain homeless, explained James Coles, senior project manager for Resources for Community Development. It caters to individuals with both physical and mental disabilities.

"It's unique to Solano County," Coles said, noting that within a month of its June grand opening, Laurel Gardens was fully leased. "There's just a great need for supportive housing for people with disabilities."

Laurel Gardens apartments are constructed for residents with special needs in mind. There are units with features tailored to hearing- and visually-impaired residents, such as doorbells that activate strobe lights and thermostats with tactile controls.

Most ground floor units are designed to be wheelchair-accessible, with plenty of room for maneuvering, Coles said.



The kitchen area inside one of the Laurel Garden Apartments in Fairfield features modern appliances and new cabinetry. (Courtesy photos)

"Some of the kitchen cabinets are removable so you can get a wheelchair underneath the counter," he explained. Additional wheelchair-oriented kitchen features include frontal range controls on stoves and ovens that are located at manageable heights.

The complex also boasts a computer lab, a recreation building for gatherings and events, and a basketball court

that converts to a badminton or volleyball court.

Sandy Carson, Caminar's housing director and Laurel Gardens' on-site service coordinator, said the project is a tremendous success.

"The county loves it. The redevelopment (agency) loves it because it helps fill their affordable housing quotas," she said. "We've gotten some people off the streets."

A touching example of one such resident, Carson recounted, is a working mother of three - with another child on the way - who was abruptly left by her husband. Prior to arriving at Laurel Gardens, the woman couldn't afford rent and had been living in her car with her children.

"It's been wonderful to see families come in and start blossoming again," Carson remarked.

Secure, affordable housing and assistance, she said, effectively raise residents' confidence and self-esteem.

"There's people that haven't worked in years that are going out searching for jobs now," Carson noted. "They have worth again."

Developments similar to Laurel Gardens are likely to become more prevalent in Solano County.

"We're looking forward to doing more," Carson said. "We're working with the City of Fairfield to do another project like this, whether it be rehab or new construction," she said.

The two organizations also hope to build a community to aid Vallejo's disabled, low-income residents, she said.

In Vacaville, a supportive housing community geared toward seniors may be on the horizon.

"We are in the early stages of looking for opportunities in Vacaville," Coles confirmed.

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