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SAN BERNARDINO: Public housing still hot-button issue

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BY CASSIE MACDUFF | July 24, 2013; 05:55 PM | Comments (0)

A developer with a track record for turning around troubled, subsidized housing has a plan to transform the once-notorious Waterman Gardens project in San Bernardino into safe, modern housing.

National Community Renaissance has done similar makeovers on at least two complexes in Rialto and has seven low-cost housing projects in Rancho Cucamonga.

Working with the Housing Authority of San Bernardino County, it now wants a crack at the 38-acre, World War II-era public-housing project in San Bernardino.

Planning commissioners and neighbors, at a hearing last week, were leery.

Some worried that moving residents out of Waterman Gardens during the rebuilding would push them into nearby neighborhoods, spreading crime.

Others worried that after a recreation and aquatics center is built, and landscaping and medians are installed, the city won't have the money to maintain them.

Assurances that the developer will provide for upkeep and work with police on security issues, and that the Housing Authority will relocate the residents, did little to calm the qualms.

I met with project partners Steve PonTell, Dan Nackerman and Mike Gallo on Tuesday, July 23.

PonTell heads National CORE; Nackerman, the Housing Authority; and Gallo, a job-skills program that has trained and placed 289 workers in two years.

Revamping Waterman Gardens would update obsolete buildings that don't meet fire and safety codes. But the effort also would add owner-occupied townhomes, market-rate apartments, on-site job training and placement, and be a pilot project to move people into jobs and off public assistance.

Low-income housing is a hot button. And any hint of building apartments — call them townhomes, condos or whatever — always is a flashpoint in San Bernardino.

It didn't take long for the issue of crime to come up.

Planning Commission Chairman Larry Heasley said criminals may be using Waterman Gardens as a home base to victimize surrounding neighborhoods.

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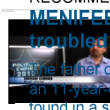
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PonTell said people with criminal records, or even arrests, are kicked out.

City Attorney Jim Penman leapt into the fray, saying that would be illegal and "the city cannot be a party to an illegal agreement."

Nackerman countered that federal laws enacted in the late 1990s allow housing authorities to evict tenants on evidence they're involved in crime, convicted or not.

Some legitimate questions were raised, such as where the money will come from to build the project. PonTell said the company will apply for federal funding; no city money will be required.

But the project needs planning approval before it can apply for the federal funds.

I asked the partners how they will counter the fears about the project.

They said they'll try to educate the public about the need for stable housing as a first step to helping people become self-sufficient.

If the city passes up a chance to replace obsolete public housing with modern homes and built-in social supports, it will be a shame.

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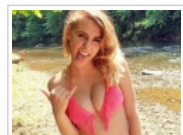


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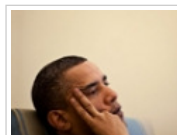
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