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Anticipated San Bernardino housing project celebrates opening

By Ryan Hagen, The Sun

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SAN BERNARDINO >> The nonprofit and government officials behind the plan to revitalize the notorious Waterman Gardens housing project made a lot of promises over the last few years — and faced a lot of skepticism.

So, when the officials celebrated the completion of the project's first phase Wednesday by opening 76 new affordable housing units, there was a bit of celebrating.

“We have fulfilled the promise,” said Steve PonTell, president and CEO of National CORE, “and taken a step to improve not only this

property but the entire community.”

Opposition began even before 2013, when the Planning Commission [gave the first of what would be a long series of approvals](#).

Developers had made bold claims before, and many residents blamed an excess of low-quality affordable housing for the city's low tax base, crime and other problems.

Skeptics, including Mayor Carey Davis, questioned how National CORE would fund such a major overhaul of a public housing project that had fallen into serious disrepair since its [1943 construction](#) and was known as a crime hot spot, and whether a redoubled focus on affordable housing would just deepen the city's problems.

Not if it's done right, PonTell said, and pledged to do it right.

And they did, Davis said Wednesday, calling it “a miracle.”

The ribbon-cutting Wednesday didn't answer every question — only time can do that.

Construction of the redevelopment project is scheduled to be phased in over the next six years.

In fact, the [Valencia Vista](#) project, at the northwest corner of Valencia Avenue and Ninth Street, isn't even part of the original Waterman Gardens, which sits southeast of Waterman Avenue and Base Line.

The rebuilding of that original 252-unit complex [began in June](#), when officials also announced that the name “Waterman Gardens” was out, with the two combined sites — 400 affordable, senior and market-rate housing units in total — now known as Arrowhead Grove.

Former occupants of that area now live at Valencia Vista.

The area already is showing signs of improvement, said police Lt. Rich Lawhead, who said he and off-duty police officers were invited to a barbecue at the complex.

“What an impression we probably made in that half hour we were there, on a human level,” Lawhead said. “... We’re really thankful to see a project doing this. This is not just a housing project. This really transformed the neighborhood.”

Soon after the celebration, Annie Griffis, 73, opened the door to let a friend into her Valencia Vista apartment. She moved there Nov. 14 from the Orange Street apartment she’d lived in for three years, back when it was still named Waterman Gardens.

“It’s a lot nicer,” Griffis said of her new apartment. “There aren’t all the ambulances and sirens at night, so I can sleep a lot better. The one problem is people who don’t clean up after their dogs.”

The new complex also features a community garden, play structures and an amphitheater.

The U.S. Green Building Council gave Valencia Vista its highest certification for energy efficiency and environmental design, LEED Platinum Certification, Tuesday.

Potential residents can sign up for a wait list at www.hacsb.com. To be eligible, a household must make less than 75 percent of the area median income, said Maria Razo, executive director of the Housing Authority of San Bernardino, another partner on the project. For a family of four, the area median income is \$61,400, according to the Housing Authority.

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