

San Bernardino panel approves Waterman Gardens affordable housing expansion

By Ryan Hagen, *The Sun*
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SAN BERNARDINO >> The troubled public housing at Waterman Gardens could be converted to private ownership and substantially expanded in a project being watched as a possible national model after the Planning Commission gave its stamp of approval on Wednesday night.

The eight-phase project would build a three-story, 74-unit senior housing project with courtyards and 337 multi-family and condominium units, with 80 percent of the total units subsidized, if the City Council also approves it.

The commission voted 7-1 — Commissioner Dustin Barnhardt voting no and Commissioner Kent Paxton abstaining because he was involved with the project when he was on Mayor Pat Morris' staff — to recommend the council approve the project, a strong showing after the rough hearing the project got in July.

Many important questions were unanswered or answered without written assurance at that time, commissioners said, but Chairman Larry Heasley said Wednesday that delaying the decision until now had given time for satisfactory results.

“Yes, we asked a lot of hard questions, difficult questions,” Heasley said. “And we received the answers.”

While the discussion often turned on technical points, the underlying concern for many who gave the commission their opinion was poverty.

There was an agreement that the city had too much of it, but a disagreement about the best solution.

San Bernardino resident Hans Vandertouw, channeling a common refrain in San Bernardino, said the city's downfall came largely because it encouraged too much affordable housing. Bring in more, he said, and you bring in more “unproductive” people living at the expense of a middle class that's increasingly leaving.

“For too long the focus has been on the poor who continue to populate this city at the expense of the middle class and businesses,” Vandertouw said earlier and reiterated Wednesday. “The middle class has been outnumbered by too many poor, marginally educated people without marketable skills.”

But the heads of many nonprofits and government programs that work with the poor attended the meeting, saying that stable, quality housing is a vital part of the plan to move people out of poverty.

Mayor Pat Morris was among those who made that argument, without pulling any punches about the existing condition of many homes in the area of the project, Waterman Avenue and Base Line.

“It is largely owned by absentee landlords who don’t give a damn,” he said. “They let their assets go, they basically suck the life out of their homes, and the turnover rate is tragic in those homes.”

Morris told the story of the first family he helped through Habitat for Humanity, who were very low income and spoke little English but now say they’re successful by many measures, which they say would have been impossible without stable housing, according to Morris.

Some commissioners were concerned that high-density, low-income housing would attract crime. But project applicant Steve PonTell, president and CEO of Rancho Cucamonga-based National CORE, said anyone looking to move in is carefully screened and can be evicted if they commit a felony. Managers will live on-site, part of a model that PonTell said has helped turn crime-plagued areas of Rialto and other nearby cities into pleasant destinations once National CORE took over.

That and other approaches will be combined to make Waterman Gardens a showcase, PonTell said.

“It’s our intent to use this as a case study in how to transform neighborhoods that can be picked up as a model nationally,” he said.

Interim Police Chief Jarrod Burguan said that in his experience high-density, low-income housing isn’t necessarily high crime, and a study by former Police Chief Robert Handy concluded the Waterman Gardens proposal would have no negative impact on crime.

Fire Chief George Avery said redesign and upgrades to the 1943 project would benefit the Fire Department.

At 80 years old, Waterman Gardens is by far the oldest large public housing project in the county, said Dan Nackerman, executive director of the San Bernardino County Housing Authority.