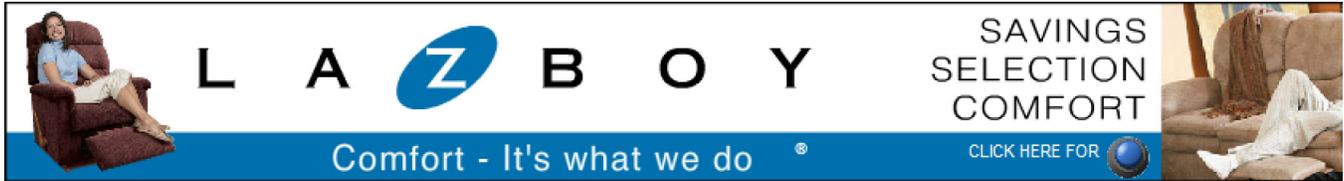


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SAN BERNARDINO: Public housing project may get a makeover

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A view of the World War II era units at Waterman Gardens public housing project. -(PHOTO-HOUSING AUTHORITY OF SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY)

The once-notorious Waterman Gardens public housing project in San Bernardino has been chosen for a pilot project that, it is hoped, will free up funds to help raze and rebuild the aging, World War II-era complex.



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Most public housing agencies can use rental income only for operating expenses and maintenance or upkeep.

They can't undertake major rehab, let alone the demolition and rebuilding, of public housing.

But under the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program — the brainchild of HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan — the Housing Authority of San Bernardino County would be able to use equity in the property as collateral for loans.

RAD also would give the Housing Authority long-term rent assistance from the federal government, the same way Section 8 landlords get rent subsidies for providing affordable housing.

That money will help National Community Renaissance of California, or CORE, fill a gap of about \$40 million in the \$200 million it needs to rebuild Waterman Gardens, said Steve PonTell, CORE's president and CEO.

CORE wants to demolish the 252-unit project and replace its deteriorating streets, sewers, water mains and electrical lines in order to build a modern, mixed-use complex.

It would include housing not just for low-income tenants but also moderate-income residents and senior citizens. Townhomes would be for sale to owners who will live in them.

Rebuilding would enable the nonprofit affordable-housing developer to increase the number of units on the 38 acres to 411. CORE also would develop a large



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community park linking the site to a nearby elementary school, if the school district agrees.

Although stricter management has rooted out problem tenants and street crime that once plagued it, Waterman Gardens still carries the stigma of public housing.

Nevertheless, CORE ran into a buzz saw of neighborhood opposition when it brought the plan to demolish and rebuild Waterman Gardens to the San Bernardino planning commission last summer.

“We were completely blindsided by the community’s reaction,” PonTell said.

CORE took the project off the table and regrouped, holding meetings with neighborhood associations, residents and other groups to explain that the new Waterman Gardens would have on-site management, residents would be screened and felons would be banned from the properties, PonTell said.

“Crime in our neighborhoods goes down when we come in and manage,” said PonTell.

Neighbors also were concerned about the 252 families that would be displaced when Waterman Gardens is demolished. Plans were revised to take the project down in phases and relocate families on-site to prevent disruption, PonTell said.

By the time the proposal went back to the planning commission last month, opposition had evaporated. Planning commissioners approved it 7-1.



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The project goes next to the City Council on Feb. 18.

Of 3,200 housing authorities nationwide, San Bernardino's was one of only 199 approved for the RAD pilot program.

It's a critical step in the process that enables CORE to seek loans, grants and low-income tax credits to tear down and rebuild Waterman Gardens, said Patrick Clancy, an adviser to CORE who has developed affordable housing in the mid-Atlantic region for 40 years.

If the program works, RAD could be offered to other housing authorities to transform substandard public housing into livable communities.

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