

Lode complex to be renovated for mentally ill, working poor

San Andreas apartment project not without critics

By Dana M. Nichols

April 22, 2012

Record Staff Writer

SAN ANDREAS - A dilapidated apartment complex in San Andreas appears to be headed for reconstruction and management by Visionary Home Builders, the Stockton-based nonprofit organization that builds homes and manages apartment complexes in a number of Central Valley cities.

In addition to rehabilitating apartment units - some uninhabitable - the proposed project would also designate five units that will provide supportive housing to mentally ill individuals who might otherwise be homeless.

The rest of the units will be priced affordable for the working poor, or families earning 80 percent or less of the area's median income. In Calaveras County, according to the state government, that is \$55,750 or less per year for a family of four.

Reserving some units for mentally ill residents is possible because county officials are contributing \$639,500 in Mental Health Services Act (tax on millionaires) funding to the project.

The Calaveras County Board of Supervisors has given its unanimous, informal blessing to Mental Health Services Act funding.

Supervisors said they were pleased to see a company with a history of effective management take over a property that is bank owned following a foreclosure and rapidly decaying conditions.

"I think it's a wonderful opportunity," said Board Chairman Gary Tofanelli, whose 1st Supervisorial District includes the Hillside Apartments behind a gas station in San Andreas.

Tofanelli noted that loans, grants and investors interested in housing tax credits will fund most of the project, which will employ local construction workers during its rehabilitation and permanent local staff after the construction is finished.

"Eight million dollars spent locally is just fantastic," Tofanelli said.

Not everyone in San Andreas felt unqualified enthusiasm for the project. Some business owners and neighbors expressed concern that plans to rehabilitate the apartments could increase problems in the area by drawing more low-income and troubled residents.

"It just seems like it is getting to be a dumping ground," restaurant owner Gretel Allen said of San Andreas. "I don't want to add to that."

Cliff Edson, also a restaurant owner, agreed. "The people who are moving into San Andreas are not our clients," he said.

Carol Ornelas, the executive director of Visionary Home Builders, said she has often heard similar concerns from neighbors when her agency has proposed to take over management of apartment complexes over 30 years.

But Ornelas said the apartments already exist and will be upgraded to provide affordable, well-managed housing. "This is about the people who live in your community already."

Ornelas said that with security cameras, a resident manager coupled with a requirement that all tenants have to pass criminal background checks, she is confident the renovated apartments will be a good neighbor.

The complex has 26 units. The renovation work will add four units as well as a management office and a community center. Tenants in Visionary projects are required to attend monthly meetings and to participate in community life, Ornelas said.

She said she already has had an engineer review the condition of the building and make an estimate of the renovation. "We would take it down to the studs," Ornelas said.

Contact reporter Dana M. Nichols at (209) 607-1361 or dnichols@recordnet.com. Visit his blog at recordnet.com/calaverasblog.

http://www.recordnet.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20120422/A_NEWS/204220319/-1/A_COMM02