

Rural success story

Unique collaboration between agencies pays off

Saratoga Manor: Bringing the dream of affordable housing to a small community in California's wine country

By Sylvia Corona, RCAC housing specialist and Kristin Middaugh, RCAC public affairs specialist

Calistoga, California is the kind of small town where the American Dream seems alive and well. Here in the idyllic Napa Valley, located in the heart of California's picturesque wine country, struggles of any sort seem unlikely, and struggles with basic necessities such as affordable housing seem unthinkable.

Yet here, as in many areas throughout California and around the nation, working families often find it nearly impossible to secure an affordable place to live — let alone purchase. In fact, California's recent housing boom in this desirable area saw the median housing price in Calistoga jump from \$285,000 in 1997 to \$707,000 last year.

Calistoga's economy is largely service-based with the tourist and wine industries as major employers. A full 38 percent of Calistoga's residents are Latino and most work either in tourism-based jobs or vineyards. Not surprisingly, these relatively low-paying jobs effectively price a large number of hard-working Calistoga residents out of the home-buying market.

But there is hope.

An especially successful self-help housing project has helped many in the community rethink what is possible when it comes to affordable housing. Known as Saratoga Manor, the development not only provided safe and affordable homes to dozens of Calistoga residents, but



Women workers were a common site during the construction phase of the Saratoga Manor self-help project.

also managed to reshape the way many Calistogans think about what affordable housing looks like while also making impressive use of local, vacant in-fill property.

Recently, Saratoga Manor II, which consists of 18 two-, three- and four-bedroom self-help homes, was completed by residents who contributed a minimum of 30 hours per week to constructing their new homes.

Saratoga Manor II is the second phase of the original 22-unit single-family Saratoga Manor housing development.

Both phases of Saratoga Manor were developed through a partnership between nonprofit agencies Burbank Housing Development Corporation (BHDC) and Calistoga Affordable Housing (CAH) with help from several other agencies including Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC).

RCAC provided interim financing of \$1.1 million, while the City of Calistoga committed \$540,000 in loans for the project. The city funds were originally slated to come from the town's general fund, but Calistoga later was awarded a Community Development Block Grant to help fund the venture.

Total cost of the project was \$5 million with additional funding coming from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and State CalHome — which provided a majority of the subsidized home loans — along with several other federal and state loans and grants. Many



What was once a large empty in-fill lot is now populated with dozens of well-manicured self-help homes that comprise Saratoga Manor

of the homeowners also received California Joe Serna Farm Worker loans.

Even small, local organizations, such as the Napa Valley Wine Auction, provided assistance through small grants and fundraising projects.

"This project has been extremely successful," said Erica Roetman Sklar, CAH's executive director. "Home ownership does so much more than give a family a place to live. It's been really great to see these new homeowners really become part of the community."

The need for affordable housing in Calistoga is so great that the 18 self-help home builder/buyers had to be chosen via lottery from a group of nearly 70 pre-qualified applicant families.

Six of the Saratoga Manor homes were set aside for families earning no more than 80 percent of the area's median income (\$44,375 per 2000 U.S. census) and 12 were sold to farm workers earning up to 50 percent of median income.

As in all self-help housing projects, the future home owners were guided through the home-building process by construction professionals and no family moved into their new residence until all homes in the project were completed.

The Saratoga Manor II houses were the first ever owned by each of the families involved and, prior to moving into their new homes, many had lived in sub-standard and overcrowded conditions.

"Most of the rental housing stock in Calistoga is very old," said Sklar. "Some of these families were living in pretty deplorable conditions. Now they're thrilled to be living in clean, safe, new homes that they actually own themselves."

In fact, pride of ownership is evident everywhere in the Saratoga Manor neighborhood where flowers bloom in every front yard and children play along clean sidewalks and quiet streets. A small community park is also part of the Saratoga Manor project and families gather there regularly.

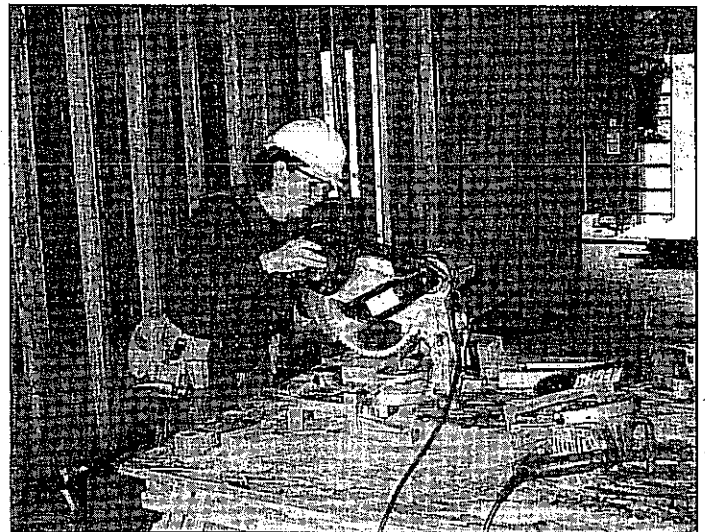
Community identity is so strong in the sub-division that RCAC specialists Sylvia Corona — who has been involved

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with the project almost since its inception — and Dennis Newburn were recently asked to conduct a three-day Home Owner's Association (HOA) membership and leadership training for residents.

"To me, the most wonderful thing about this entire project is the partnership that was formed between Calistoga Affordable Housing and Burbank Housing Development Corporation," said Corona. "It was a great thing to see people working together to accomplish something so important."

The new HOA is now the legal entity responsible for the governance and management of the entire Saratoga Manor complex and, according to CAH officials, those involved have, "embraced this responsibility with enthusiasm."



Isura Espinoza became adept at using power tools during construction of her Saratoga Manor self-help home.

The success of the Saratoga Manor project has not gone unnoticed in the affordable housing community. In fact, the project and the City of Calistoga were honored with an Award for Excellence in the Housing Programs and Innovations category of the 2005 California Cities Helen Putnam Award for Excellence Program.

But, the real winners of the project are the residents who now call Saratoga Manor home.

"Saratoga Manor was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for someone my age and in my income bracket to own my own home," said resident Christine Amey. "It gave me a great sense of accomplishment and pride. Owning a home was a distant dream that is now a reality." ❖