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Public Safety a Priority in Redevelopment City strategies address crime to revitalize communities

By Kari Hamanaka

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Vacancies from the foreclosure wave may not have been the cause of blight and crime in some neighborhoods, but they certainly have not helped those situations.

"While we're getting more foreclosures, it's happening at the same time that state and local government budgets are dramatically decreasing," said Joseph Schilling, assistant research professor at Virginia Tech's Alexandria Center. "That means that at a time when local governments need to go out and be more proactive in terms of code enforcement and tracking and inventorying all these vacant and abandoned properties, their staffs are being cut back."

Although the foreclosure issue is causing vacancies on the single-family side, cities dealing with crime and thinning public safety and code enforcement resources are taking back their neighborhoods with more than just new construction.

Vacant property was the theme of a Web cast held in December by Local Initiatives Support Corporation and the National Vacant Properties Campaign, which focused on how property reuse could be part of an overall strategy to rebuild safe communities.

For most affordable-housing developers, it is a strategy they already know. Not only are new roofs and carpet desired, but so too are the adequate social and economic tools to ensure ongoing success and lasting property value.

Julia Ryan, director of the Community Safety Initiative at LISC, suggested that cities and community organizations work with prosecutors to ensure that offenders are not allowed to repeat crimes.

"At the community group level, you might be the one to engage a prosecutor into problem solving to designate a stay-away zone for offenders," Ryan said, "or have a prosecutor communicate to judges that there should be harsher penalties for vacant properties."

Los Angeles District Attorney Rocky Delgadillo took action last month, filing a lawsuit on nine leaders of the notorious 18th Street gang, the largest gang in Los Angeles.

The lawsuit, the first of its kind, is seeking damages for what was done to the property and the public, including the additional security costs imposed on area residents and business owners as a result of gang activity.

Delgadillo is the first in the state to be utilizing Senate Bill 1126, by Gil Cedillo, D-Los Angeles, which allows prosecutors, district attorneys and the attorney general to file lawsuits against gang members for neighborhoods affected by gang activity.

However, charges can only be pressed in areas where there is already a civil gang injunction. The 18th Street gang currently has five gang injunctions on its members with the lawsuit involving neighborhoods in two out of the five injunctions.

"The days of allowing vicious gang criminals to accumulate and spend their ill-gotten gains - sometimes even from behind bars - are over," Delgadillo said in a statement. "We're going to hit them where it hurts, in their wallet."

Stability, Please

At Citrus Grove in the city of Rialto, no lawsuit was involved to rid the neighborhood of its problems. It just took a facelift and some stable ownership.

"This was one of the worst neighborhoods in Rialto," said John Dutrey, the city's Housing Program manager, "There was high crime, gang activity, drug activity. We had a number of homicides taking place in the neighborhood. It was an area that had a negative impact on not only the surrounding area, but the city of Rialto."

Today, overall crime is down 68 percent and violent crime is down 79 percent ever since Rancho Cucamonga-based National Community Renaissance took over ownership and property management responsibilities for the apartments.

The \$37 million Citrus Grove project is now in Phase II of construction to add 42 units immediately west of the first phase. Construction is expected to begin in summer 2009 and anticipated for completion in January 2011.

"Prior to revitalization, there was a lack of definite ownership and management," said Rebecca Clark, executive vice president of National

CORE. "One of the things that could happen with the landlords not talking to each other was, if a resident was evicted, it would be easy to just go next door and handle leasing for units nearby and simply rent a unit in the same area."

The city and National CORE entered into a redevelopment agreement whereby the community's 160 condominium units were purchased and then given new roofing, windows, doors, landscaping and other upgrades.

"We explored many different options before working with the city and the redevelopment agency to turn it into a one-owner and one-property management company," Clark said.

Prior to revitalization, representatives from the developer, redevelopment agency, code enforcement and police department brainstormed on how to address crime in the area. The group questioned whether incentives to get the individual owners to take care of their properties or annual inspections would adequately solve the problem.

"We sort of exhausted the issue and decided this was such a major problem that the only thing that would turn it around was acquisition of all units and putting it under one ownership," Clark said.

Eight of the original units were demolished to make room for a 6,000-square-foot community center that offers social and educational programs. The center functions as one piece in the city and National CORE's multi-pronged strategy to not only rehabilitate but to provide ongoing services to the community.

Additional means of ensuring the immediate community is safe is the fact that Citrus Grove is gated and that there are crime-free lease addenda, which are enforced with the help of the local police and constant communication among National CORE, the city and police department.

National CORE has the same crime-free lease addenda at its projects in San Marcos' Richmoor neighborhood, where it has been working with the city since 1997 to redevelop blighted and failing properties.

Prospective residents also have to have good credit and cannot have criminal backgrounds, according to John Seymour, National CORE's vice president of acquisitions.

"We operate our properties with a big heart, but we also have a big stick," he said. "We have onsite managers that get to know the residents very well and understand their needs, and when residents live on the properties they take pride of ownership in their property. It's a culture we see."

In Richmoor, National CORE is working on a senior affordable-housing project, which has a mid-2010 groundbreaking date.

Adding Retail

The senior housing project in Richmoor will have a retail component, something National CORE's other San Marcos multifamily projects also have.

"The city is very interested in doing mixed use to bring in neighborhood-serving retail and a mix of affordable and market-rate for sale and affordable rentals," Seymour said.

In San Francisco, Bridge Housing has worked on several redevelopment multifamily projects that have included retail components.

In many cases, adding retail is another way of revitalizing formerly blighted or vacant properties with a new revenue stream.

Most recently, Bridge Housing was selected by the city of San Francisco to redevelop the Potrero Hills public housing project. The affordable-housing developer, which is based in San Francisco, held a workshop earlier this month that focused on public safety. More workshops will follow tackling other topics, including sustainability, parking and unit interiors.

Carol Galante, president and chief executive officer of Bridge Housing, said one of the main problems with the units is their isolation from the rest of the community with only one way in and one way out, along with the fact that the

buildings do not conform with the typical San Francisco street grid.

"They're in various stages of disrepair and there's just been a lack of funding available to keep them in good shape," Galante said. "Some units are unoccupied and boarded up, which creates its own set of problems."

While the project is in the very early stages of planning and construction is about two years away, the hope is to have it revitalized with a mix of below-market and market-rate housing similar to an earlier project Bridge Housing did in Oakland called Mandela Gateway.

The project site for Mandela was formerly a much smaller housing development and included land that was formerly part of the Mandela Parkway freeway.

At the time Bridge Housing became involved with the Mandela community, the housing authority was already in the process of moving some residents out of the development, which Galante said had fallen into disrepair.

"We acquired land from Caltrans to make this into a larger mixed-income community, and we're intending to do the same thing at Potrero: replace public housing, but also add in a variety of affordable housing," Galante said.

Mandela consists of a mix of rental apartments and 14 for-sale townhomes in addition to 20,000 square feet of commercial space.

"It increases revenues and the tax base in a community and helps financially to pay for the renovation if you have uses to add economic activity," Galante said of adding retail. "Most importantly, we have a spectrum of individuals who are going to live there and that's good from the social perspective of having a mix of incomes."