

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Half-finished condos eyed for affordable housing proposal in Temecula

By Jeff Horseman - August 1, 2009

Temecula officials insist awards, not skid row, will follow their plan to turn half-finished condominiums into affordable housing and a helping hand for homeless families.

Working with Riverside County, a rescue mission and a California nonprofit housing developer, the city wants to acquire the bank-owned Summerhouse project at Margarita Road and Temecula Parkway. Construction of the 110-unit complex stopped mid-stream when the economy went sour.

The plan is to pick up where construction left off and build 90 affordably priced apartments with one, two or three bedrooms. Renters would have to meet income guidelines to qualify.

Rents would depend on the apartment's size and tenants' income -- typically between \$20,000 and \$45,000 a year -- but might range from \$339 a month for a one-bedroom to \$985 a month for a three-bedroom, said Brad Wiblin, a vice president of Bridge Housing.

"This is housing for working families," Wiblin said. "These are people who already live in Temecula."

Another 20 units would be turned into transitional housing managed by the Temecula Murrieta Rescue Mission.

Local families rendered homeless by tough times would stay in the apartments and leave after getting whatever help they need to become self-sufficient, said Jim Palmer, president of the Orange County Rescue Mission, of which the Temecula mission is an offshoot.

Families would not be constantly rotating through the apartments and some could stay as long as a year, Palmer said.

"It's not a shelter. It's not a soup kitchen," he said. "It's not like what people see on TV."

The project also will not have a drug rehabilitation center, Palmer said, adding that families will be referred to the transitional housing by the city and churches and will be screened before they move in.

Because a lot of work has already been done on the units the city wants to acquire, "We're just ahead of the game," Wiblin said.

He and Palmer stressed that the dwellings will blend in with the rest of Temecula. The apartments' design will not change from the original Summerhouse plans, Palmer said.

"Someone walking by would have no idea those weren't expensive apartments," he said.

While city officials say the project could earn national recognition, some locals aren't convinced. Mayor Maryann Edwards said she's gotten e-mails critical of the project, including one asking "What do you think Temecula is, a trash can?"

"The image some people are trying to promote (about this project) is not only wrong, it's despicable," she said.

Other City Council members defended the project at last Tuesday's council meeting.

Edwards noted that Temecula already has hundreds of affordably priced housing units, including the Dalton buildings in Old Town and along Pujol Street.

"It could be the condo right next to you and you don't know it," she said.

While the project has a long way to go, officials hope the first families can move into the apartments by late next year. Bridge Housing is applying for state tax credits to help finance the apartments.

In the meantime, Wiblin encouraged the public to do its homework before judging the project.

"We bump into this in almost every city we work in," he said.