

The Almanac

Viewpoint - Wednesday, December 17, 2008

Guest opinion: Habitat has supporters in Belle Haven

by Jennifer Doettling

Thank you for making your readers aware of Habitat for Humanity Greater San Francisco's recent meeting with the Belle Haven community (Almanac, Nov. 19). Unfortunately, several key points were missing from the story that we feel should be shared with your readership.

First, there are people in the Belle Haven community who are in favor of the Habitat development on Terminal Avenue. Many recognize the need for more affordable housing in Menlo Park and the value of partnering with Habitat to achieve this goal.

We have a strong record in East Palo Alto, Redwood City and other local communities where our partnerships with civic organizations, businesses, faith groups, volunteers, working families and many others have helped to provide more than 100 Habitat homes, just on the Peninsula alone.

Second, we are concerned about the suggestion that Menlo Park is "dumping" Habitat's below market rate (BMR) homes on Belle Haven. Dumps are sites for garbage and discarded items, and we feel this language has no place in a discussion about housing for real working families who have real needs.

Furthermore, it sends the message that Habitat homes are somehow inferior or substandard, which could not be further from the truth. Habitat has incredibly high standards for the construction quality, livability and aesthetics of our homes, and we are proud to say that our homes help to improve the neighborhoods in which they are built.

In general, studies have shown that housing for families with low and moderate incomes does not diminish property values. Often it is the case that these new housing developments actually help to increase the value of surrounding properties.

We hope that in time the Belle Haven residents who oppose our Terminal Avenue development will reconsider their position. Support for the development will help 22 deserving families obtain a safe and decent place to live. These are hard-working members of the community who may currently live in unsafe, unhealthy and inadequate living conditions.

Through the Habitat program, our houses are sold to partner families at no profit and are financed with affordable, zero-interest mortgages. The Habitat for Humanity approach encourages self-help by providing a "hand up — not a hand out." That's why our partner families also invest considerable effort into their dreams, including up to 500 hours of "sweat equity" to help build their own homes. Homeownership gives Habitat partner families the chance to break the cycle of poverty, establish financial stability and to build an equity stake in their communities.

Habitat for Humanity Greater San Francisco remains very optimistic about the Terminal Avenue development. We look forward to a continued dialogue with the Belle Haven community and hope to find a solution that mitigates any concerns, yet enables the development to move ahead in a way that is most advantageous for the community.

Jennifer Doettling is the communications director of Habitat for Humanity Greater San Francisco.