

## MARIN COUNTY

### Habitat for Humanity faces fight in wealthy community

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A group of residents in the pricey Marin County community of Strawberry are mobilizing against an affordable housing plan by the renowned charity Habitat for Humanity, saying it would blight their neighborhood.

The group is convinced that the plan to build four three-bedroom units of low-income housing in their neighborhood would result in increased traffic and parking congestion and lower property values.

About three dozen residents who live near the proposed construction site -- 16.5 acres just west of the Tiburon city limits -- are attempting to raise \$100,000 for legal fees to challenge the project, which still must be approved by the county Planning Commission.

"Habitat for Humanity goes into blighted neighborhoods and fixes them up. Here they are going into an enhanced neighborhood and blighting it," said Bill Duane, a 58-year-old resident of Bay Vista Drive, near the proposed site. "I'm not against low-cost housing, but this is social engineering. The county does not have the right to choose my neighbors."

Such a ruckus is not unusual in Marin, where homeowners have been notoriously hostile to development, especially the kind that threatens to lower the value of their property. But the charity made famous by former President Jimmy Carter would seem an unconventional target.

About 100 Strawberry residents packed a recent Strawberry Design Review Board meeting. They said they support, and in some cases have participated in, the charity's work, but do not believe the development will fit into their neighborhood, where most homes are worth between \$1 million and \$2 million.

"The homes are of a certain type and would not fit in. The placement of these homes would really stand out," said Alan Krepack, 54, a management consultant who has lived on Bay Vista Drive for 18 years. "There are other places in the county where low-cost housing would be more appropriate."

Habitat officials said they were surprised by the vehemence of the opposition.

"I think NIMBYism is a convenient term and it may well fit in this case, but it is also fear of the unknown," said Phillip Kilbridge, executive director of Habitat's San Francisco chapter.

The project, at the intersection of Eagle Rock and Knoll roads and Bay Vista Drive, originally did not include any low-cost housing. The San Francisco developer, Pan Pacific Ocean Inc., wanted to divide the property into seven parcels and build three large homes to be sold on the open market. But the county requires developers that create two or more market-rate residences to also include some affordable housing.

After learning about the affordable housing requirement, the developer contacted Habitat for Humanity, a nondenominational Christian charity that has built homes for the poor in 88 countries and in more than 1,600 U.S. cities.

The plan now is to build four additional units, each a little over 1,400 square feet, with single-car garages. The buildings would be designed to look like two separate Craftsman-style homes, and each unit would be affordable to a family of four with an annual income of \$56,000 or less. Each future homeowner would be required to put in 500 hours of "sweat equity" helping build their home.

"We believe that our model for developing homeownership with sweat equity is perfect for Marin County," Kilbridge said. "I would hope we would be able to partner with the neighbors so we can build a development that all parties would appreciate."

No development would be the best alternative, said several neighbors, but if it must be done, then it should at least comply with county guidelines, which require only one unit of affordable housing, not four.

"I'm perfectly willing to go along if the proposal complies with the guidelines, but it doesn't," said Dan Veto, 41, who lives on Bay Vista Drive. "I would be concerned if they were proposing to build four market-rate homes at that intersection. It's a very, very busy intersection."

Veto and others said the development would exacerbate traffic and parking problems in the neighborhood and destroy a valuable stretch of open space.

"They are getting rid of the last connection to open space that we have here," Duane said. "There are 50 different species of wildlife in this property."

It has long been the goal of county administrators and politicians to increase the amount of affordable housing in Marin, where the median price of a home is about \$850,000. The high cost of housing, say housing officials, has left teachers, firefighters, police officers and other relatively low-wage workers with no place to live in the county.

"The need for workforce housing in Marin is very great," said Johanna Patri, principal planner for the Marin County Community Development Agency. "We support affordable housing."

But Patri said it has been exceedingly difficult to find any place to squeeze in low-cost housing outside of the predominantly African American enclave of Marin City and the largely Latino neighborhood of San Rafael known as the Canal area.

The reception in Marin has been so hostile that a county chapter of Habitat for Humanity disbanded in the late 1990s because the volunteers could not get any low-income housing projects off the ground, Kilbridge said.

"The argument that affordable housing lowers property values is a specious argument," Kilbridge said. "It doesn't hold water."

He said it is "a shame" that residents would raise \$100,000 in an attempt to keep less fortunate families out of their neighborhood.

"Do you know how many nails that could buy?" Kilbridge asked. "To us that's a lot of money that could be of such incredible use to the community."

Residents say the Strawberry area already has enough affordable housing. Seven affordable housing units have been developed there in the past 10 years, including five rental units for employees in the nearby Strawberry shopping center.

"The idea that everybody is entitled to an affordable house wherever they want one is not valid," Duane said. "I would like to live in Cannes. I would like to live in Palm Beach. Everybody's got wishes, but that's not the way life is."

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