



Affordable homes draw flak in Marin

Posted 2/19/2007 11:21 PM ET

By John Ritter, USA TODAY

TIBURON, Calif. — Habitat for Humanity and Marin County seem like a perfect fit: A well-regarded builder of affordable housing meets a progressive locale acutely short of homes for low-income and middle-class workers.

The two have had a rocky relationship.

Habitat for Humanity volunteers in the county grew so frustrated with neighborhood opposition in the 1990s that they disbanded their chapter of the international organization. Habitat is trying again with four proposed houses just outside this upscale town along San Francisco Bay but is meeting more hostility.

Some neighbors worry that houses built by Habitat for Humanity would degrade values of their \$1 million to \$2 million homes, some with views of San Francisco Bay. They say the houses wouldn't stay affordable once original buyers sell them in this high-dollar real estate market.

"We're painted as Marin liberals getting our karma leveled by Habitat for Humanity," says Bill Duane, who lives near the 16-acre site where Habitat's houses and three others would be built. "Habitat usually goes into blighted neighborhoods and builds something that enhances values. These houses won't enhance the neighborhood."

The project, in early design stages, is several months away from a decision by the county. California law required developers to make 20% of new housing units affordable.

Duane says he and his neighbors aren't "NIMBYs," the acronym for Not in My Backyard, a label often stuck on affordable-housing foes. Neighbors think the bad traffic around the site on a vacant hillside would get worse, and they say the houses are poorly situated on land that floods in winter.

Habitat officials in other expensive real estate markets say need usually overrides NIMBY.

"All the business leaders support us because they have a big worker shortage," says Terri Marino, executive director of the Habitat for Humanity affiliate in Jackson Hole, Wyo.

In an area of multimillion-dollar vacation homes, "our houses are nicer than the typical Habitat home," Marino says. "That tends to squelch the NIMBY issue."

Overcoming stereotypes

Habitat is one of many affordable-housing developers. It is well-known because of its association with former president Jimmy Carter, its thorough screening of future homeowners and a requirement that the owners help build the houses they'll live in.

Relying on volunteer labor, Habitat for Humanity has built more than 200,000 houses around the world since 1976, including 30,000 in the USA.

"We haven't hit a storm in many years," says Victoria Goldsmith, executive director of the Habitat affiliate in Cape Cod, Mass., which has built 50 houses since 1988. "That's not to say that affordable-housing initiatives don't sometimes meet big neighborhood opposition here."

The notion "that there's something wrong with people" who live in affordable housing is misguided, Goldsmith says. Where real estate is pricey, affordable often means housing for teachers, civil servants, accountants and firefighters, as well as lower-wage workers.

Habitat tries to keep properties affordable long after the first owners have moved and neighborhood home values have risen.

In New York City, Habitat homes carry second mortgages that cover the difference between a family's purchase price and the higher market value. Families don't pay the second mortgage unless they sell during its duration.

"It dissuades them from flipping the house," Executive Director Roland Lewis says. Only one of 110 Habitat houses built in New York City in the past 10 years has been sold, Lewis says.

Habitat officials say they're careful to bring neighbors in early on planning and to design houses that fit local architectural tastes.

"Because our homes are high-quality, we can overcome negative stereotypes of affordable housing 50 years ago," says Lori Vaclavik, executive director of Denver's affiliate. "We've never been unable to build because of community opposition."

Marin County is one of the nation's costliest housing markets. Last month, the median price of a single-family home was \$935,000, according to DataQuick, a real estate information company. The county's slow-growth policies keep demand for homes strong, putting them out of reach for many middle-class wage earners.

Habitat's San Francisco affiliate, the developer of the four Marin County houses, is studying how to keep them affordable yet allow owners to share in the equity if they stay long-term.

"We have a dual responsibility," Executive Director Phillip Kilbridge says, "so that over time they're escaping a cycle of poverty, and we're also retaining a longer-term affordability."

Agreements to share appreciation, deed restrictions and other mechanisms could keep the houses affordable for more than 50 years, he says.

Susan Crosier, who has lived in the neighborhood for 22 years, says as many residents support the development as oppose it. "With four nice, freshly built houses and families that are thrilled to have a home, I think the neighborhood will be enhanced."

'Nothing against Habitat'

Being close to affordable housing has little effect on surrounding property values, according to the Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California.

"We have done property value studies, and we know it doesn't lower property values," says Betty Pagett, head of Habitat San Francisco's advisory committee. She says it takes a \$29 hourly wage to afford a two-bedroom apartment in Marin County, part of the reason 30,000 workers commute to jobs from outside the county.

The county considers Habitat's site ideal because it fills in an existing neighborhood without expanding into open space. Plus it's close to a bus line.

Opponents "may not like it, but it's not like there's anything at variance," says Johanna Patri, principal planner for the county's community development agency.

Some are unmoved. "We have nothing against Habitat," says Ed Sotelo, who has lived in the neighborhood for 50 years. "We're all working stiffs, you know. But they're contemplating putting this development at probably the most hazardous traffic corner of Marin County."