

Housing planned for Sacto LGBT seniors



Work is underway in Sacramento to create affordable housing that's welcoming to LGBT seniors.

When it's completed, Lavender Courtyard by Mutual Housing, a project of the nonprofit Mutual Housing California, will include from 50 to 60 apartments for people 62 and older. The development should be open in about three years, dependent on funding. It will be in the Washington Park neighborhood at 16th and F streets, not too far from the gay Lavender Heights district.

"Rents are skyrocketing" in the area, said Rachel Iskow, a lesbian who is Mutual Housing's CEO, and seniors and families are among those being displaced. The hope is to "allow some seniors to be able to stay," she added.

There's also a concern about older LGBTs having to go back into the closet if they have to go to mainstream senior facilities, where homophobia can still be common, Iskow explained.

How much the units will rent for isn't yet known, but Iskow said if apartments were being leased this year, rents would be from \$370 to \$770 for one-bedroom units and \$483 to \$858 for two-bedroom units, depending on household income.

"We'll start taking applications about halfway through construction," Iskow said. "The best case scenario" would have construction start by the end of 2016, but it may have to wait until 2017.

The site consists of three vacant parcels that Mutual Housing is proposing to merge. The merger can be done at city staff level and the agency won't have to go to a public hearing. Together, the parcels are about 26,000 square feet.

Mutual Housing paid \$768,000 for the land using a land acquisition loan from NeighborWorks Capital, a Maryland-based nonprofit. Other funders for the Lavender Courtyard project include Bank of America and Wells Fargo, among others. The total cost of the project hasn't been finalized.



An artist's rendering shows the planned senior housing project in Sacramento.
 Photo: Courtesy Mogavero Notestine Associates

Mutual Housing California develops housing that is affordable to a diversity of households. Our housing builds strong and stable communities through resident participation and leadership development. For more information, call (916) 453-8400 or visit our website at mutualhousing.com.

“The biggest challenge is going to be securing the money,” Iskow said. Among other problems, “The federal government has significantly reduced funding to local jurisdictions for affordable housing, and we no longer have redevelopment money.” Governor Jerry Brown abolished local redevelopment agencies in 2011.

Senior service providers in Sacramento will be encouraged to get training from Openhouse, a San Francisco-based nonprofit that helps LGBT seniors.

The training is “a really important part of this, even starting that conversation about how to provide housing in a sensitive way to LGBT seniors,” Iskow said. “We haven’t had that conversation locally.”

An LGBT leadership committee to help provide input and get the word out has been formed, and the Lavender Courtyard project has many supporters in the community.

Gay Councilman Steve Hansen said there’s “a huge unmet need for LGBT seniors who need an appropriate senior living setting.”

The location is “perfect” because it’s within the LGBT community, Hansen said.

He added, “It’s an infill site that hasn’t had any building on it for 30 years, so it helps get rid of blight.”

In an email, Don Bentz, executive director of Sacramento’s LGBT Community Center, said, “This is a historic moment in our community’s evolution. We are witnessing the first post-Stonewall generation reaching retirement age. These trailblazers deserve to spend their senior years just as they lived their entire life ... out, proud, and true. Creating a safe, welcoming environment where LGBT seniors can thrive is an important milestone.”

Michael Farnham, 57, a gay man who’s helping with outreach, said he would move in to Lavender Courtyard “in a heartbeat.”

Farnham said the project is close to transit and he could even walk downtown for doctor’s appointments, the library, and other services.

He’s seen people who are experiencing health issues and other problems as they age “losing their homes because they can’t afford the mortgages anymore,” and he said, “If there was a place like this available, it would have been a lot better for them.”

Besides the apartments, the development will include community meeting space, as well as solar photovoltaics for energy generation.

SF project moving forward

In the Bay Area, San Francisco’s Openhouse has been working for years to open housing at 55 Laguna Street that’s welcoming to LGBT seniors. The development is currently under construction.

Joel Evans, the nonprofit’s director of development and marketing, said the project is set to be completed in the early fall of 2016 and people will be able to start moving in that October.

The agency regularly holds housing workshops to help people address finances and other issues.

The next workshops are Friday, October 16 and Friday, October 23. The sessions are held from noon to 1 p.m. on the third floor of San Francisco’s LGBT Community Center, 1800 Market Street.

Reservations are required. To reserve a spot, call (415) 296-8995, ext. 314.

More information is available at www.openhouse-sf.org.