

Spotlight On ... Rachel Iskow, executive director of Mutual Housing California



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It's already tough to make affordable housing pencil out. One way to make it tougher? Go net-zero energy. As head of Mutual Housing California, which specializes in affordable housing, Rachel Iskow has done just that, spearheading a project for farm workers in Woodland. The project, dubbed Mutual Housing at Spring Lake, is the first certified net-zero rental housing project in the nation, Iskow said.

What's the challenge to do a project like that?

"At first we thought it would be cost. What we found out was that it's about understanding what alternatives are out there. We found a lot of appliances that are common in Europe, but aren't used here, that are more energy efficient."

What's the magic bullet to get to net-zero?

"The biggest thing is to make your project all electric, no gas, because you can't offset gas usage. Then you offset the electrical usage with photovoltaic solar panels, and you need to have enough roof space to accomplish that on your structures, your carports, everything you can.

"You also have to have something that doesn't let in a lot of air from the outside, so it has to be very tight, and you have to have good air flow. That means things like vents on the bedroom doors to allow flow when they're closed. The last project we did in Davis got to 80 percent, but this went just that much further."

Can you repeat the Spring Lake model elsewhere?

"I think new sources are there, like cap-and-trade dollars. Those are designed to reduce greenhouse gasses, and you can show with this kind of project how you can do that. And then we're working on legislation to create more sources for affordable housing development."

What's the big challenge for building new affordable housing?

"There are two things. One is the decreasing amounts of land zoned for multifamily development. Sacramento has a policy where they allow some multifamily on commercially zoned land, and I think that's one approach that could make a difference. The other is convincing people and policymakers that you can't have high-quality housing for low-income

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people, working class, the seniors, disabled folks, without some kind of subsidy. There is support for that among the public.”

What details can you share about your pending project on Stockton Boulevard?

“We bought almost seven acres there at a very affordable price after the market crash, and we want to develop a mixed-use project of offices and affordable housing. We want to make it zero-net energy and have a large community garden, and we want to make it very bike-oriented. There would even be a place for bike storage and bike repair, and a bike sharing program. And maybe an electric car-sharing program too, so people who live there don’t have to have a car.

“We have four properties in south Sacramento that have a waiting list, so we know there’s demand. We hope to start applying for funding next year and get going by the end of 2016, maybe early 2017.”

What motivates you professionally?

“I love what I do. I came to this job because I used to work in social services, and it became really obvious that stable housing is a building block for economic stability and helping communities prosper. I’ve always been excited to be part of that.

“And I think also growing people in the field, teaching them various aspects of affordable housing, design, financing, working with people. To me, that’s really rewarding.”

The essentials

Age: 57

Education: Bachelor’s in sociology from University of California Berkeley; master’s in urban planning from UCLA.

Career: Worked with battered women’s group in San Francisco before getting master’s degree. In 1990, went to Rural California Housing Corp. and oversaw rental housing programs. Joined Mutual Housing as executive director in 1994.

Personal: Live in south Land Park with two adopted children: Yasmin, 16, and Alejandra, 13.

Something colleagues would be surprised to learn about you: “I never had any hobbies until about two years ago when I became a succulent fanatic. I love succulents and cacti, propagating them, giving them away, seeing them thrive in the Sacramento sun.”