

# Woodland housing project offers promise of closing economic divisions



The sun was beating down mercilessly during open house ceremonies for the new Mutual Housing project in southeast Woodland.

And to a great degree that was the point of the first 100 percent zero net energy rental housing development in the nation that was unveiled Monday afternoon and is capable of serving 62 apartments, or 230 people, who make their living as farm laborers.

However, the 3.28-acre site at 2170 Farmers Central Road, which first broke ground in December 2013, goes beyond simply using the sun's power.

Fundamentally, zero-net energy apartments produce as much energy as they use, which means that the buildings and objects inside are not what they might first appear to be.

So, walking through a typical three-bedroom apartment one would find more than a few differences. Sure, there are new appliances, clean floors, brightly painted walls and such. But that's where the similarities end.

First, the homes are all electric; no gas. And, as pointed out by Vanessa Guerra, project manager of the nonprofit Mutual Housing California, all the appliances are energy efficient. In fact, there's a device in each kitchen that measures the energy use in real time and shines red or green depending on power use by the family.

"When your color is green, it means that you're being very energy efficient," Guerra explained to a group of people during one of several tours Monday evening. "When it's in the red, you're using an average rate." If the light shines purple, then residents are using more than what a typical household would use.

Combined, all 62 apartments use about 300,000 kilowatt hours a year, which is then offset through the solar power coming from accumulators on the buildings and over the parking lots.

And there are other differences which qualify the complex for "zero net energy" qualification. The homes are "sustainable" in that the paints and finishes don't emit as many toxins. In fact, cabinets and flooring are made of recyclable and long-lasting materials.



On a very sunny Monday, 3rd District Congressman John Garamendi talks about the solar-powered and green community Mutual Housing project in the Spring Lake Subdivision. *Courtesy Photo Jim Smith-Daily Democrat*



Members of the Kalpulli Tlayolotl dance troupe cast their blessings on the Mutual Housing at Spring Lake during a grand opening ceremony Monday. *Courtesy Photo Jim Smith-Daily Democrat*

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](http://mutualhousing.com).

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Rachel Iskow, Mutual Housing executive director, told about 70 area politicians, financiers and others in the community attending the grand opening, that the purpose was to build a community which could be healthy and sustainable. She called the apartments “asset building,” indicating that residents would not only have nice places to live, but places in which they could grow as well.

Designed for farm laborers, the homes are wireless-enabled, providing access ports for computers so children can do their homework electronically and families can get online education.

As the sun continued to beat down on those assembled, Iskow said the apartments were meant in part to “close the divide between low wage and high wage workers.” After rents, utility costs have always been the greatest worries of minimum-wage workers. Because of the efforts going toward energy conservation, utility costs are kept low in the apartments, giving residents a leg-up and allowing them to use their money for other purposes. Some people are reportedly paying power rates as low as \$8 a month.

The concept was celebrated by area politicians including Congressman John Garamendi, Assemblyman Bill Dodd and Woodland Mayor Tom Stallard.

Garamendi said in many respects Guerra represented the “story of America” in that she was raised in Esparto, became well educated and was now giving back to her community by managing the project that was environmentally friendly as well as assisting those who put food on tables across American and the world.

Stallard said the complex “could only be new once but can stay nice forever” thanks to the work of the residents and managers. He also noted that 5.14 acres was acquired for construction and only 3 acres used, meaning more land was available for development when funds are found.

Dodd praised Mutual Housing and the ability of Woodland to find a way to help farmworkers. He said there were 5,000 farmworkers living in the county and the apartments gave 230 people a place to live in safety, be healthy and grow.

The remaining acres will be built when the nonprofit receives funding.

The city of Woodland helped fund Mutual Housing at Spring Lake as did the USDA, state Department of Housing and Community Development, State Treasurer John Chiang, Citibank, Wells Fargo, NeighborWorks America, Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation Community Fund, Roseville Bank of Commerce, Dignity Health – Woodland Healthcare, Bank of America, Comerical Bank, U.S. Bank, Union Bank of California, Mechanics Bank and Insperity.