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Yocha Dehe gives grant to design development for Mutual Housing net-zero community in Woodland (L.N. Productions/courtesy)

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Yocha Dehe Community Fund has given a \$30,000 grant to Sacramento/Yolo Mutual Housing Association to help with the design of the first zero-net energy community in Woodland targeted to agricultural workers and other low-income families.

Nearly 5,000 agricultural workers in Yolo County need housing.

“California is making rapid progress in green building, but agricultural workers have been shut out that in the past,” said Rachel Iskow, Mutual Housing’s executive director. “Developing a community for agricultural workers has been a long-term goal of ours.”

When open, Spring Lake will have 101 two-, three- and four-bedroom apartments at the corner of Pioneer Avenue and Farmer’s Central Road. About 60 percent of the apartments will be set aside for farm workers and their families.

“We are pleased to be a partner in this wonderful project that will help individual families in need and, at the same time, will contribute to our entire community,” said Marshall McKay, Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation Tribal Chairman. “This project fits very well with the Yocha Dehe Community Fund mission, which includes providing support to programs that help people help themselves as well as efforts to

promote responsible stewardship of our natural environment.”

“Through our programs, residents will be able to participate in creating a sustainable community and in actually leading that effort,” said Iskow.

Being zero-net energy means the community will produce as much energy as it uses with a variety of energy systems for the residential and common areas, including staff offices and laundry rooms as well as community rooms for financial education, leadership training and other workshops.

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In a survey done by Mutual Housing, nearly two-thirds of agricultural workers said that low utility bills were more important than having a washer and dryer, a large kitchen or an outdoor play area.

Residents should not have to pay monthly utility bills, a major concern for farmworkers whose average income is \$11.48 hourly from season employment.

"We are building in specific amenities, such as community gardens, that agricultural workers and their families might desire," said Iskow.

California is the second most expensive state in the nation for rentals. California continues to have one of the highest foreclosure rates in the nation, putting pressure on the cost of renting. Banks continue to hold foreclosed properties while construction of new housing has dropped significantly.

In order to afford a typical two-bedroom apartment, a person must

earn \$19.08 an hour, or nearly \$40,000 annually in Yolo County. More than half of Yolo County renters (52 percent) cannot afford to pay rent for a typical apartment without working more than one job. "Rural areas don't have adequate housing for families, especially agricultural workers, some of whom are doubling up in order to cope," said Iskow.

Mutual Housing currently is preparing documentation for city, state and federal housing agencies and is waiting for tax credit allocations and other funding. Once those come through, the nonprofit should be able to start construction, expected this fall.

Funding for the multifamily development is from the City of Woodland, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Housing Service, the State of California Department of Housing and Community Development Joe Serna Jr., Farmworker Housing Grant Program and the California State Treasurer's Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program as well as NeighborWorks America.

NeighborWorks Capital and Wells Fargo Bank are lending funds for the project.

Over the past decade, the Yocha Dehe Community fund has provided more than \$18 million in financial support to nonprofit organizations and service providers in Sacramento and Yolo Counties, and other organizations supporting the Fund's goals in education, community health, arts and culture, the environment, community development and social services.

The Yocha Dehe Community Fund was one of the first to be established by a Native American tribe in California and is a recognized leader in local charitable giving.

Founded in 1988, Sacramento/Yolo Mutual Housing Association develops and operates rental housing -- including projects in Davis -- for modest-income households. The communities have 2,750 residents, half of whom are children.