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Sacramento multifamily development earns ‘BIG’ recognition

By Jeffrey Steele

Sacramento, Calif.—The Highlands in North Sacramento has earned the highest rating given to an area multifamily development by Oakland-based Build It Green (BIG). The Highlands was developed by Sacramento | Yolo Housing Association, which develops and operates well-designed rental housing for modest-income households. Sixty-six of the community’s 90 units are reserved for formerly homeless people.

Mutual Housing chose BIG over LEED certification because the BIG program takes into account only California standards, and rates only single- and multifamily residences.

The Highlands offers 62 efficiencies, 16 one-bedroom and 12 three-bedroom apartment homes, and is set on a 3.5-acre parcel in the McClellan Redevelopment Area.

The story of the development is a complex one.

“Affordable housing often takes longer in the planning and predevelopment phases than other types of development, in part because of the complexity of putting together the financing subsidies, [and] in part due to the need to educate the community,” Rachel Iskow, CEO of Mutual Housing, tells *MHN*.

“Mutual Housing at the Highlands was in the planning stage prior to the economic recession and the housing bust.

The construction budget reflected a strong economy, [and was] much more expensive than it ended up being. We felt we could not afford upgrading to make it a fully green community, so it was not planned to be as green as it turned out to be.

When we finally had all financing commitments and were prepared to start construction, both labor and materials costs had come down significantly because the housing market had crashed.

When our contractor negotiated subcontractor bids, they came in much lower than the earlier construction estimates.

“That left room in the budget to upgrade many of the building components and build a greener community. It wasn’t ideal going back and adding in green components after construction documents were completed and we’d started construction, but the architect and contractor worked with us.”

The orientation of the residential buildings, as well as their ductless heating, evaporative coolers, tankless water heaters, higher-than-standard insulation and radiant barriers in the roof all provide energy savings, which should particularly benefit formerly homeless residents, Iskow adds.

“Any savings we can realize in utilities will go a long way toward making the community affordable for its extremely low-income residents,” she says.

The Highlands scored a whopping 121 points from BIG, much higher than the 99 or fewer points earned by most developments. The fact the community tallied such a high score means that Mutual Housing made the right choices, Iskow says.

“It is inspirational for all of us, and important for marketing to neighborhoods where we want to develop in the future,” she says. “And most surprising? It turned out it was not that much more expensive.”



The Highlands scored big on its first green rating.



“Gertie” welcomes residents and visitors to the Highlands.