

## Farmworker families to get affordable homes in Woodland

Vanessa Guerra's eyes gleamed with pride and a hint of tears last week as she watched dozens of farm laborers line up to apply for one of 62 energy-efficient, affordable homes and apartments in Spring Lake, Woodland's newest neighborhood.

Guerra, a former migrant worker who said she grew up in a rat-infested shack on an abandoned ranch outside Esparto, is the project manager of Mutual Housing at Spring Lake, a zero-net energy complex that will house 230 agricultural workers and family members, starting March 1.

"When I was younger, I could never imagine I would be able to give back to people who have lived the life I lived," said Guerra, 32, as she toured the tan, green and sky-blue townhomes and apartments. "It's really heartwarming that these innovative homes are available to families who work so hard and earn so little."

The \$13 million Spring Lake project is the region's first permanent housing built specifically for farmworkers, Guerra said. It was financed by a partnership that includes the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Citibank and Wells Fargo Bank, the state Department of Housing and Community Development and the city of Woodland.

"It's a good design, beneficial to the community," said Dan Sokolow, a senior planner for the city of Woodland, which kicked in \$1.26 million in loans that will be paid back through rental income or refinancing.

The zero-net energy feature – which means the complex will generate enough of its own solar energy to cover its utility bills – is key because after housing, utility bills are often farmworkers' biggest expense.

The new complex, located in southeast Woodland on the corner of Pioneer Avenue and Farmer's Central Road, features a computer room, a community center and a garden. To qualify to live there, families must earn between \$5,000 and \$45,000 a year, at least \$5,000 of it from farm labor, Guerra said. Monthly rent will be 30 percent of income.

Field workers, farm equipment operators, orchard managers, agronomists and veterinarians all can qualify as long as they are legal permanent residents.

"With a new start, you get a new life," said Maria Elena Mora, who was waiting in line to apply for an apartment. Mora, an immigrant from Michoacán, Mexico, said she picks, cleans, packages and counts sunflowers.

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Mayra Hernandez and her daughter Yareli, 20 months old, wait in line to make an appointment for an interview for better housing in Woodland. Hernandez attends Woodland Community College and was hoping she would be considered for the affordable housing for farm laborers. Photo by Renée C. Byer

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She now lives with her two sons in a \$92-a-month apartment with rancid carpets in Woodland.

“There are people selling drugs, my car was broken into and gangs fight in the parking lots,” said Mora, 53. “I want to feel safe.”

Maria Guerrero, 74, said she came from Jalisco, Mexico, and worked in the fields for more than 35 years, picking cherries, tomatoes and almonds. Now, she said, she struggles with arthritis and no longer wants to live with one of her daughters and three of her grandchildren. “I want peace,” she said.

Behind her in line was Lorena Gasca, 29, of Guanajuato, Mexico, who said she earned \$9 working in the tomato fields from 5:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. until her second child, Erik, was born four months ago. “My husband drives a produce truck and waters the crops,” Gasca said. “He makes \$20,000 a year and our rent is too high – \$910 a month.”

Others in line to rent one of the apartments included Mixtec Indians from Oaxaca, Mexico, now the backbone of California farm labor.

Their stories resonated with Guerra, who comes from three generations of farmworkers from Jerhauaro, a village in Michoacán, where her grandparents had pear and peach orchards. She said her grandfather was part of the bracero program that brought hundreds of thousands of Mexican laborers to California to work cheaply between 1942 and 1963.

Her parents followed, along with her two older brothers, said Guerra, who was born in Woodland. “My earliest memory is of our tiny house that was really cold in the winter and hot in the summer because there was no insulation whatsoever, and in the summer all we had was

a swamp cooler,” she said. “A lot of rats got into our attic. Before sunset, we would go out, fill up these coffee cans with rocks and have them at our bedside to throw at the rats and shoo them away.”

By the time she was 6, “my mom would make me and my older brothers little knee-pads because we had to be on our knees all summer,” harvesting cherry tomatoes and other fruits and vegetables, Guerra said. She remembers cutting peaches for \$1 a crate and sorting almonds. During the school year, Guerra said her mom would drop her off at the migrant day care center at a migrant camp built of Quonset huts in the town of Madison.

Migrant families were not allowed to stay there permanently, and many of the other children would leave with their families to follow the crops in October and come back in March, Guerra recalled. “It was very difficult for them to have to move to a new school halfway through the school year and then move back. If you don’t have stability in school then you end up getting poor grades, and it goes downhill from there.”

Guerra recalls being embarrassed as a teenager when she couldn’t afford new clothes and was ashamed to let friends sleep over. She built dollhouses out of cardboard boxes and old Legos, ultimately taking her building skills to Sacramento State, where she obtained a degree in engineering and construction management. Upon graduation, she was hired by Mutual Housing California, a Sacramento nonprofit, and supervised affordable housing projects in North Highlands and Davis.

The need for farmworker housing in Yolo County is great, said Mutual Housing California spokeswoman Dell Richards. She said there are more than 5,000 agricultural workers in the

county, most of whom make less than \$20 an hour.

Guerra’s boss, Rachel Iskow, CEO of Mutual Housing California, said the agency was able to seize a rare opportunity to build apartments for farmworkers at Spring Lake when no other builders came forward to build on land set aside for affordable housing.

Farmworkers wishing to apply can call (888) 418-4236 or email [springlake@hyder.com](mailto:springlake@hyder.com).

Read more here: <http://www.sacbee.com/community/yolo/article6567849.html#storylink=cpy>