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Community Continues to Discuss Redevelopment of Potrero Hill Public Housing Complex

By Lisa Tehrani

It was standing-room only at a meeting to discuss redeveloping the Potrero Hill public housing complex held at the Potrero Hill Neighborhood House late last year. Under the auspices of HOPE-San Francisco, a collaboration between the Mayor's Office of Housing and the San Francisco Housing Authority, the 606-unit Potrero Hill Terrace and Annex will be one of four public housing complexes to be reconstructed over the next decade.

The City previously redeveloped five other public housing developments under HOPE 6, a now defunct federal program run by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. That program's funding was cut by the Bush Administration, prompting City officials to develop their own program to replace remaining dilapidated housing complexes. The Potrero Annex and Terrace will be the second public housing complex to be rebuilt under HOPE-SF.

Bridge Housing, an affordable housing developer, is leading the 18-month site planning process. The nonprofit is holding a series of community focus groups on such topics as safety, sustainability, building prototypes, open space and circulation and unit plans. The project, called Rebuild Potrero, has already held three meetings with existing complex residents. Bridge took residents on a bus tour to see other San Francisco public housing complexes, including Bridge-developed North Beach Place. That complex is of particular interest because it includes a mix of market and below market rate units, and consists of a mixed use design that blends in with the rest of the neighborhood.

Tony Kelly, Potrero Boosters Neighborhood Association president, believes it's essential to keep existing complex residents involved in the planning process. "There is such a history of mistrust and broken promises from the Housing Authority that Bridge has to be very careful to keep an open process. There was a lot of information about site planning at the town hall [meeting], but not much information about implementation. Bridge has to do better on that side of things," he said. He added that he'd like to see displacement of existing residents kept to a minimum, as well as opportunities for local hiring and business development.

Carol Galante, Bridge Housing's Chief Executive Officer, explained that she's committed to listening to residents' perspectives throughout the planning process. "I think their biggest concern is ensuring they have the ability to live in the new development and not to be relocated off site during the development process if at all possible. They also are interested in making sure their rights as existing tenants are protected," Galante stated.

Eddie Cattrell, Potrero Terrace Residents Association president, thought that the meeting was a success, and was happy to have the Boosters membership join in the discussion. "We are excited about it because it is long overdue. Most of the residents are all for it because these places are unlivable," he said.

Galante explained that all of the existing units will be replaced with below-market housing. Market rate units will also be built, creating an economically integrated community and helping to finance the development. She noted that residents have expressed a strong desire to maintain their existing services, such as the day care and family resource center. "Nothing has been set in stone and a lot is not yet determined in terms of where these activities will be located," she said, "but the strength of many of the existing services is impressive." Galante added that there are some preliminary discussions about keeping a leasing building that exists on site and planning a park or play space around it. There will also be neighborhood-oriented commercial space in the new development, potentially located at the property's edge so that it can be easily accessed by the entire community.

Fred Pollack, a partner with Van Meter Williams Pollack, the architectural firm hired to design the site plan, presented a design prototype for the area, drawing on the existing urban design in the rest of Potrero Hill. The redeveloped complex will incorporate such common neighborhood elements as porches, stoops and rear yards. There's also an interest in drawing on Potrero Hill's existing street pattern, such as having multiple ways to access the community. The design firm plans to incorporate the neighborhood's significant sun exposure and notable views into the site plan. Van Meter will perform the master plan and design some of the buildings, but other architectural firms will be involved at a later stage.

Pollack noted that there's a need to work with the existing infrastructure due to limited funding, which may influence the design. The area also has steep slopes and a lot of serpentine rock, which can make construction challenging and expensive.

Construction will likely begin in a couple of years, occurring in at least three phases over upwards of seven years. Existing residents will be relocated, either on or off site, as needed. Although preliminary proposal documents indicated the construction of 1,200 total units, that's no longer a relevant figure, according to Galante. Still, the developers are committed to a 1:1 replacement of the existing public housing units. "I'm sure everyone on the Hill is happy to see plans for a rebuild of Potrero's public housing moving forward. The sooner the rebuild can happen, the better for everyone," said Kelly.

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