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In the News

New "green" apartment complex provides homes for low-income seniors

By Theresa Harrington, Staff writer, Contra Costa Times (4-30-08)

WALNUT CREEK — After living in Rossmoor for nearly two decades, 84-year old Wesley Hester has a new home in Walnut Creek that costs less, yet still offers opportunities for socializing. "I like the setup," Hester said, as he walked slowly through his third floor apartment overlooking a landscaped courtyard Tuesday. "I wanted something that involves human contact."

Hester was the first resident to move into Villa Vasconcellos, a 70-unit affordable senior apartment complex on Geary Road designed to accommodate low-income seniors, as well as those with disabilities. The developers held a grand opening ceremony last week, celebrating the public-private partnership that made the project possible and welcoming residents including Hester into the community.

"Villa Vasconcellos includes a residential program that will help low-income seniors age in place in a graceful and independent way," said Carolyn Bookhart, senior project manager for Resources for Community Development, which built the apartments. The three-story complex includes a large community room, two courtyards and two community garden plots that local Girl Scouts helped to create. In addition, it features environmentally-friendly "green" features such as solar panels and interior finishes that keep the air healthy to breathe.

Walnut Creek and Contra Costa County contributed money to the project to provide housing for seniors, who make up more than 25 percent of the city's population.

"It's so important to enjoy the richness of life and housing is an important part of that," Supervisor Gayle Uilkema said. "Very seldom do you walk into a room and have tingling all over because you know someone is going to have a wonderful life there."

Uilkema said many seniors on fixed income, especially those with disabilities, are vulnerable to becoming homeless. The project was built for people 55 or older whose annual incomes are less than \$30,150 for one person or \$34,450 for two people. Rents range from \$263 to \$734 per month, based on income. Applications are still being accepted for 18 available one-bedroom apartments.

The project, which replaced a vacant Alzheimer's center, is an improvement in the neighborhood and will provide valuable housing and services to seniors, said Mayor Gwen Regalia. "It's a lovely facility," Regalia said. "I've always felt that communities should be judged by how well they educate their children and how well they treat their elderly. Already, a sense of community is developing among the residents, said Rae Vasconcellos, an affordable housing advocate for whom the project is named. She praised the non-profit

developer's mission "to build housing for those who have the very fewest options in life."

"For me, that is a hallmark statement," said Vasconcellos, who serves on the nonprofit's board of directors. "There really are people who can fall by the wayside through no fault of their own." Resident Jacki Debenedetti said she was looking forward to planting in one of the garden plots and getting to know her new neighbors. "I urge all of you residents to come out of your units," she said to those assembled in the courtyard. "The more you socialize with other people, the longer your life will be."

Hester, who grew up in Oakland and Berkeley, said Tuesday that he enjoys greeting other residents as he walks down the hallway. He noted that many residents are immigrants such as one new friend from Russia. Hester, who is black, said he appreciates this broad multicultural environment. "Here, we have Asians, African Americans and people with various kinds of problems — and everyone's making it," said Hester, a former Berkeley City Councilman who now lives on a pension and Social Security. "As we get older, we have to try to understand what life is all about. And each of us probably has a different answer, because our experiences with life are all different."

Hester has outlived his wife and his later longtime partner. He remembers both women fondly, pointing out their photos prominently displayed in his living room. He doesn't know what the years ahead will bring, but he's optimistic, as he settles into his new life and home. "My hope," Hester said thoughtfully, "is it's one of joy and happiness."

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