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City's fears of farmworker housing fears melt into pride

by **Dana Tims, The Oregonian**
Thursday July 30, 2009, 8:00 AM



Scott/Edwards Architecture

A two-acre wetland, recently planted with native grasses, shrubs and trees, collects rainwater runoff at the Plaza Los Robles farmworker housing facility in Molalla. Administrators at Hacienda Community Development Commission, the project's developers, recently flew to Washington D.C. to receive first-place honors in the category of rural development at the National Development Council's 2009 awards competition.

When plans to build new rental housing for farmworkers were first unveiled in Molalla three years ago, the angst was immediate.

City Council members fielded calls from upset citizens. The local newspaper published letters from agitated readers. Neighbors living near the targeted four-acre site worried about their property values.

"The vision of farmworker housing connotes certain stereotypes for some people," said Pietro Ferrari, whose Hacienda Community Development Corp. proposed the plan to build a 24-unit residential community for farmworkers and their families. "That's what we were faced with."

Ferrari, the Portland-based agency's executive director, paused midsentence, laughed and added, "In the beginning, the best we hoped for was indifference."

Much has changed since then as the Plaza Los Robles housing facility near Molalla's downtown has evolved into an accepted and even valued thread of the community's fabric.

City officials, when visited by outside developers looking to launch projects somewhere in Molalla, routinely suggest driving by Plaza Los Robles as a way to demonstrate what can be done under city design rules.

"I've taken architects out there as a way of

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showing just how much architectural freedom is available here," Shane Potter, Molalla's planning director, said. "It's a perfect example of the sorts of projects we'd like to see more of here."

And the community garden, initiated by some of the Plaza Los Robles' teens, is regarded as a civic jewel for its splashes of bright summer color.

The project has now turned heads elsewhere.

In May, Ferrari flew to Washington, D.C., to receive first-place honors for rural development at the National Development Council's 2009 awards competition. The award went far beyond just the bricks and mortar, singling out Plaza Los Robles' sense of cohesive design and culturally specific services.

"It recognized the best in what we always try to achieve," Ferrari said. "We're not just building housing, but community."

Overwhelming need

Hacienda CDC selected Molalla as the place to build its first farmworker housing because of the town's proximity to nurseries and agricultural land in Clackamas and Marion counties. There are at least six farms in Molalla, for instance, and the state's largest egg producer, where a number of the tenants work, is only five minutes away.

The farmworker facility, built to "green" architectural standards, consists of six two-story buildings containing eight two-bedroom units, 12 three-bedroom units and four four-bedroom units. It also features a community learning center with a large meeting room, two public restrooms, manager's office, private office for case managers, four computer stations and a laundry room.

Exterior features include playgrounds, a commons area surrounded by inward-facing living units and a two-acre wetlands that encompasses fully half the total site.

Rental rates are structured to meet U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines calling for tenants to pay no more than 30 percent of their income toward rent and utilities. At Plaza Los Robles, rents are \$590 a month for a two-bedroom unit, \$695 for three bedrooms and \$730 for four bedrooms.

Comparable market rents this year in Clackamas County are \$809, \$1,178 and \$1,415.

Still, many of the project's residents are struggling, largely because of the larger recession now affecting all segments of the economy. It's typical, Ferrari said, for Plaza Los Robles' residents to find work only three days out of 10.

"Even a year ago, you wouldn't have found this issue," he said. "They were fully employed, often with both the husband and the wife working."

Even in the best of times, however, the going can be difficult for farmworkers. Farmworkers and laborers are among the lowest-paid workers in Oregon, with an average estimated annual take-home pay of \$19,915 for a family of four, according to the Oregon Employment Department.

Based on the most recent U. S. Department of Agriculture census, there are 2,833 year-round farmworkers in Clackamas County, but only 104 units of housing specifically for farmworkers.

Long waiting lists can be frustrating for the many who don't get in, Ferrari said. Among



[Peggy Shekell/Special to The Oregonian](#)

[Plaza Los Robles resident Fabiola Romero strolls with her baby, Eduardo Paniagua, on a recent morning. Like many of the other 40 children at the complex, the infant is eligible for a day-care program that allows his parents to work in the fields to pay rent on apartments that range from two to four bedrooms.](#)

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the lucky at Plaza Los Robles is a family of four who, before a spot opened up, paid \$350 a month to rent a garage to live in near Molalla. If they wanted any cross-ventilation at all, they had to keep the door open.

[video documentary of the project](#)

"We always want to think that the labor camps of old don't exist anymore, but they are still around," said Charlie Harris, project manager for CASA of Oregon, a Newberg-based nonprofit agency that has helped build 1,500 units of farmworker housing in the state over the past two decades. "They are shockingly close, in fact. You can drive just a few miles out into the country in some places around here and see things that look just like something from the 1920s or '30s."

When talking with the general public, Harris said, he constantly has to address the issue of workers who are in the country legally and those who aren't. In the case of Plaza Los Robles, again because of USDA requirements, renters must be U.S. citizens or permanently admitted legal residents.

"All in all, we're making progress," he said of the long-term effort to provide suitable housing for workers deemed crucial to tending and harvesting Oregon's crops. "But as a practical matter, there's a lot more to be done."

Community success

Portland architect Sid Scott, whose Scott/Edwards Architecture firm designed Plaza Los Robles, said he got a sense of just how well things have turned out when his office fielded a call from a Molalla resident. The caller admitted to initial skepticism but added quickly that the project is now viewed as one of the nicer new developments in town.



[Peggy Shekell/Special to The Oregonian](#)

[Plaza Los Robles resident Fabiola Romero strolls with her baby. Eduardo Paniaqua, on a recent morning. Like many of the other 40 children at the complex, the infant is eligible for a day-care program that allows his parents to work in the fields to pay rent on apartments that range from two to four bedrooms.](#)

"It's something of a local showcase," Scott said. "We are very proud of that."

In City Manager John Atkins' view, Plaza Los Robles has gone a long way toward bridging the divide between Molalla's white and Latino communities.

"The project turned out to be a real community asset," he said. "At the same time, it introduced a lot of people to families who are earning a living, buying groceries and hardware and supporting this town."

Things have come a long way, in other words, since the days when Potter, the city's planning director, was "getting angry phone calls left and right. It was really an ugly process."

Thankfully, he added, that is no longer the case.

"Maybe it was just the fear of the unknown," he said. "But in the end, people were amazed by what was actually created."

-- Dana Tims; danatims@news.oregonian.com

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