

# Because People Matter

## Greening Affordable Housing: Because it just makes sense

By Wendy Carter and Meg Johnson

In 2002, when the nonprofit Sacramento Mutual Housing Association (SMHA) was completing construction of Victory Townhomes in North Sacramento, people would often stop their cars to inquire as to the cost of the homes, assuming the attractive buildings were market rate condominiums. They were further intrigued with the solar panels on each townhome. Most were shocked to learn that the housing would be for rent, and income restrictions would limit occupancy to very low income families.

In 2002, solar panels were unheard of in rental communities. Victory Townhomes was the first multifamily development in SMUD's service area to install solar components. In addition to solar panels on the townhomes, the building at the front which houses a large community gathering space, offices for organizers and service staff, and a computer learning lab, has a roof with solar roof tiles.

Why did the mutual housing association break the barriers of installing solar energy components in its affordable development? Why is the association planning new housing communities that meet high standards for green construction? How will they keep rents low and still incorporate cutting edge green features?

The choice at Victory Townhomes was an easy one. Low-income people are challenged by meeting their utility bills each month. Many elderly residents won't turn on air conditioning, at great risk to their health, because they can't afford to pay the electric bill. SMUD had a special program that, combined with incentives created by then State Treasurer Phil Angelides under the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program, cut the cost of the solar components by about 50 percent.

In the City of Davis, the mutual hous-

ing association owns land upon which it plans to build 69 apartments for disabled and low-wage households.

City leaders are committed to sustainable development. There is a city ordinance that creates a minimum green standard for all new development. SMHA's New Harmony housing development will exceed this standard. The SMHA believes that exceeding the standard will elicit goodwill among city residents, something that affordable housing could use. The SMHA's leaders also want to push the envelope to bring down the cost of operations, resident utility bills and add to the sustainability of the larger Davis community.

The staff of SMHA has had to develop new capacities in green building methods and materials. They became members of Build it Green, the creator of the Green-Point Rating System, and the US Green Building Council, the creator of the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System. The two organizations provide training, networking and professional certifications to advance sustainable development of commercial and residential facilities.

By hiring local architects whose staff are certified green designers, including Cynthia Easton, Bob Kuchman, and Jim Zanetto, the SMHA's recent housing designs will be models for other developers. Some steps are no-brainers. Sensitivity to placement of buildings on the site will lower energy use by maximizing sunlight in the winter and shade in the summer. Landscaping that clusters together plants that need similar levels of irrigation can significantly decrease water usage. Using building materials that are locally produced, are toxin-free or low-toxin, and are manufactured with renewable resources, purchasing energy

efficient lighting and appliances, and installing air filtration systems inside the housing all contribute to improving the health of residents and a sustainable community. Locating housing near public transportation decreases use of cars by residents.

Architect Jim Zanetto said, "We recognize the significant contribution buildings make to global warming and environmental degradation generally and feel obligated to minimize these impacts." The answer is not to halt housing for low-wage workers. Lack of access to affordable housing near jobs creates its own environmental problems, as people are forced to drive long distances to their places of employment. Low income people can't afford newer vehicles. They are driving older vehicles that lack modern energy efficient features, thus contributing at a higher rate to air pollution if we don't provide housing convenient to their jobs.

*More information on the Mutual Housing Association's green building efforts is available on their website at [www.mutualhousing.com](http://www.mutualhousing.com) or call Wendy Carter at 916-453-8400 ext. 11. Readers may also visit solar community Victory Townhomes, located at 1075 Dixianne Avenue (at Lexington) in North Sacramento.*



Sacramento Mutual Housing Association develops housing that is affordable to a diversity of households. Our housing builds strong and stable communities through resident participation and leadership development.

For more information, call (916) 453-8400 or visit our website at [mutualhousing.com](http://mutualhousing.com).