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Project brings new life to Farm Labor Homes

A project currently under way to replace half the homes with new units is just part of a shift in how the development is managed.

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WALLA WALLA - Renee Rooker has overseen a dozen building and renovation projects for Walla Walla Housing Authority in her nearly 20-year tenure as the agency's executive director.

The authority helps provide housing for low-income families in Walla Walla, Columbia, Benton and Franklin counties.

Its mission, as stated on its website, is to "create housing choices and energize neighborhoods, while focusing on providing opportunities for families of low to moderate income to prosper with dignity and respect."

And Rooker means it. But never, perhaps, in as deeply personal way as she does with the current project - at the Walla Walla Farm Labor Homes - covering her desk.

Large color boards abound. Glued on are chunks of vinyl tiles in shades of mint cream, butter, olive and chili. Or nutmeg and cinnamon brown, marina and shadow blue. The same paint chip, a warm white named "cottonball," lives on each cardboard canvas.

"The color schemes are very vibrant. It's a nod to the culture, but also when you walk in the house you feel happy. It's not whites and not browns."

And adding color does not add cost, Rooker said.

All the hues will eventually fill rooms at the homes, where her agency has teamed up with Walla Walla County Housing Authority to build 60 new housing units for farm laborers. Funding came from state housing money and a private investor that has paid for about three-fourths of the \$12 million cost.

The project has provided more than 100 construction jobs and a number of indirect jobs, Rooker said. Included with the new four-, six- and eight-unit apartments will be raised-bed gardens, grass and trees and walkways.

The new apartments replace units built in 1974 that had a host of problems, including mold and neglect, Rooker said. Her own past has colored how she feels about that.

"My grandparents were farmers," she said. "I spent most of my childhood summers with them."

She remembers the living conditions of farm workers back then. "They were mostly shacks."

Not that a "Taj Mahal" is being created now, Rooker said. "This is very basic housing."

Yet it's a place that will offer a number of amenities, such as washers and dryers in each unit and a community building for continuing education and neighborhood gatherings.

And something intangible, as well.

After childhood, Rooker kept in touch with her agricultural roots, working for Grant County Housing Authority, much of that housing targeted for migrant worker use. Her passion for seeing that people are given decent living conditions has not dimmed since. "Hopefully we're creating a place where people can live with dignity."

In general, labor camps have endured a "bad rap" for as long as she can remember, she said. "Whether or not it was deserved."

According to a report compiled in 2010 by Susan Newton of Development Strategies Plus consulting firm, the local labor homes have indeed been beset by challenges for decades.

In interviewing community and housing leaders, county housing authority board members and using historical and legal data, Newton compiled a document outlining the history, function and problems of the place known locally as "the labor camp."

The 46 acres southwest of Walla Walla straddle two highways that reach into Oregon. The camp was established during World War II as military housing. When that need ended, local residents petitioned county commissioners for the establishment of a housing authority, said Farm Labor Homes manager Lisa Vasquez.

The development was officially established Dec. 27, 1948.

In 1972 a study was completed that recommended replacing the aging military barracks and other housing with new structures, which was accomplished in the mid-1970s building project.

However, in the years since, the vision for the homes got blurry. Board members often did not understand the need for appropriate upkeep and how to seek grant money to help with that and more, Newton's research found.

Homes were not regularly inspected and staff training was ignored.

Commenters cited poor financial management - highlighted by state audits - subpar condition of the homes and the negative perception of the camp in the larger community. As well, some board members did not understand their role well, along with the legal responsibilities that come with the position, respondents told Newton.

An audit found some of the residents did not have the necessary legal status to live in farm workers' housing and some board members were surprised to hear of the need for that, Newton's data showed.

An audit of 2006-2007 finances for the labor camp by state Auditor Brian Sonntag detailed lack of a financial review process, inadequate checks and balances for monetary transactions and poor financial record keeping.

However, the organization was found to be in compliance with state law and made progress in those troubled areas, Sonntag's audit found.

Perhaps most telling from Newton's work was the feeling the homes are separate from the rest of the community, and a lack of integration for Latino tenants is pervasive, not helped by an anemic effort to establish partnerships, the research showed.

Since Newton finished the study, the county housing authority's Board of Commissioners has new members and a fresh perspective, noted board Chairwoman Kate Bobrow-Strain.

The new board invited the city Housing Authority to consider building a working relationship and help the county housing authority evolve, she said. Newton's findings pointed out a perspective that the city housing authority had long-standing experience and success with finding funding and spearheading projects.

The two authorities came together to plan the 60 new units, which will not add any new homes but replace half the existing homes, Rooker said.

The old units have been labeled "deplorable" by housing professionals, Newton found.

The new homes, each equipped with front and back porches ("Porches creates a sense of ownership," Rooker explained), are as much about giving tenants a fresh start as they are about sturdy flooring and eco-friendly building products.

"We are very clear in our expectations. We do (tenant responsibility) education, we do inspections, maybe more frequently if the housekeeping is not up to our expectations," she said, adding that WWHA staff will work with a family one-on-one to teach basic cleaning skills when necessary. "The whole family has to learn to clean, it won't just be the women."

Known sex predators will not be allowed to live in the apartments and every tenant will undergo a criminal background check.

Applicants for units must be eligible farm workers, who traditionally make a little more than \$3,000 annually, Rooker said. A manager will live on site and the city housing authority will manage the new apartments.

"Providing this environment is an excellent thing," Rooker said. "And they will either make it or they don't make it. If not, they can find another place to live."

Only families can live in one unit and overcrowding will not be allowed, she said, adding that extended families living together is often culture-driven. "I feel in this economy, we'll see that kind of living more and more in all cultures."

Rents, higher than what residents pay now, will range from \$570 to \$716, Rooker said. "All income will be counted so it's not over-subsidized."

The vacated units will not be used for residents. Families who are accepted through an application process for the new units will begin moving in October.

"There is some concern about some residents in shiny, new housing and some not, Bobrow-Strain said. "But we also worry about how some residents will have to pay more rent. For some, the benefit of having very, very low rent outweighs a pretty apartment."

The Walla Walla County Housing Authority has made improvements since Newton's report, Bobrow-Strain said. The partnership with the city housing agency is proof of the upward trend. And now that the organizations have been "dating" for a year, it's time to think about "getting married" and looking at the second phase of construction, which would replace the rest of the old houses, she said with a chuckle.

Phase 2 would also add another community room and improve the soccer fields to give families additional activity options, Rooker said.

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Jeff Horner

Construction is expected to wrap up so families can move into new housing at the Farm Labor Homes later this year.