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Sustainable Redevelopment Builds Better Communities

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By Lillian Henegar

Lillian Henegar is director of policy and outreach for the California Redevelopment Association (CRA) and can be reached at lhenegar@calredevelop.org. For more information about CRA, visit www.calredevelop.org.

Today, redevelopment is also sustainable development. Redevelopment agencies not only focus their efforts on urbanized, infill areas, but also play a leadership role in cleaning up brownfields. By promoting urban-centered growth and restoring once-contaminated areas to viable use, redevelopment activities help preserve the environment and open space, and reduce urban sprawl and commute times.

To recognize redevelopment agencies and professionals that consciously incorporate sustainable development principles in the projects they build, the California Redevelopment Association (CRA) launched its Award of Excellence for Sustainable Development in 2007. The award acknowledges those who have taken exemplary steps to integrate sustainable design, features and strategies into their development projects. The Awards Committee evaluates projects in several categories: water conservation, reducing dependence on the automobile, energy-efficient design and operation, and beneficial materials and waste management.

Because redevelopment is first and foremost about building better communities, CRA urges nominees to demonstrate how a development's use of sustainable strategies and green technology promotes community livability, transportation efficiency and walkability. Projects with a residential component must demonstrate accessibility to two or more activities on foot.

The nominated projects all demonstrate that redevelopment agencies and professionals are incorporating sustainable development principles into their projects and discovering the rewards for their communities in doing so.

South Brea Lofts Incorporate Innovation and Energy Efficiency

The Brea Redevelopment Agency's South Brea Lofts project won the CRA 2008 Award of Excellence for Sustainable Development. The redevelopment agency took on a hard-to-develop site with 16 irregular parcels, a number of dilapidated outdated retail structures plus four auto repair shops that bridged its revitalized downtown and an older neighborhood. If developed well, it could transform the area from decline to vitality. The agency decided that a successful strategy would entail developing 47 mixed-use live/work for-sale units, 10 of which are affordable. The 2.8-acre development also includes 7,500 square feet of retail space. The total site acquisition costs, relocation expenses, demolition and interest on bond payments amounted to \$8.4 million.

South Brea Lofts' features reflect the sustainable development principles for conserving water, reducing dependence on the automobile, using energy-efficient design and providing pedestrian access to a number of activities.

The most noteworthy sustainable aspect is the neighborhood electric vehicle (NEV) that comes with each live/work unit. These zero-emission vehicles, approved for driving on public streets, are useful for local trips. When a unit is sold, the NEV remains with it. The development also features easy access to public transit routes.

The project incorporates several water conservation strategies, including a stormwater retention system that treats water on-site, filters it and cleans the debris before placing it into the storm drain system. Energy conservation measures include Energy Star appliances and two-stage heating, ventilating and air conditioning units. The construction includes environmentally friendly materials such as oriented strand board (OSB) ply wood and other components with longer life spans.

Sustainable Development in Action

In addition to Brea, several other award-nominated projects demonstrate how it's possible to build a variety of redevelopment projects that meet their community's needs while incorporating sustainable development principles.

For its multifamily housing project, Laurel Crest, the City of Lancaster surveyed prospective residents and found that they were three times as likely to use alternatives to automobiles for traveling to work. Thus, the project was located within walking distance of a transit station and nine bus lines. By working with the city Planning Department, the parking space

requirements for the project were reduced 38 percent, decreasing the amount of heat-generating asphalt.

The City of Arcata's conservation strategy for the Courtyards at Arcata housing development includes using Energy Star appliances, passive solar heating, super-efficient heating systems and indoor electricity monitoring meters in each apartment's hallway. Arcata invested in the latest technology in solar heating for the project; the Courtyards' solar hot water panels heat six 350-gallon tanks and six apartments share each tank. Consequently, the tenants' hot water is free, further reducing their overall monthly expenses.

Another project with solar panels, the City of Poway's Solara, consists of 54 apartments for very low- and low-income families and a 2,100-square-foot community building with a computer learning center. This development is fully solar-powered using on-site photovoltaic panels that meet the energy demands of the complex.

The Mark Twain Neighborhood Library is the City of Long Beach's premier library and its first green building. The design allows for as much natural light to penetrate the building's interior as possible. During construction, 83 percent of the waste materials were recycled and at least 10 percent of the building materials were recycled products.

Like all of these developments, the City of Santa Cruz's Nuevo Sol project incorporates water-efficient landscaping. A community garden is also a part of the design for this single-room occupancy rehabilitation project for the formerly homeless and people with disabilities from the Santa Cruz community.

Financing Green Development

Financing green strategies for public projects is an ongoing challenge. Many of these green technologies and strategies aren't yet mainstream and can be more costly than conventional construction and design. Thus, it's notable that these projects creatively leveraged redevelopment funds with grants, bonds and other mechanisms.

Poway's Solara cost \$19.8 million to construct, and it now operates with positive cash flow. The development team pulled together a financing package for the extensive solar investment of this project so that rebates and tax credits financed \$1.2 million of the photovoltaic cost, and a redevelopment agency financed the remaining \$775,000 through a permanent loan.

The Mark Twain Neighborhood Library's construction funding came from the California Public Library Construction and Renovation Bond Act of 2000, which required a 35 percent local match that was provided by the Long Beach Redevelopment Agency. The Long Beach Public Library Foundation launched a \$1 million endowment campaign for the ongoing support of the Family Learning Center, and gifts included \$150,000 from the Cambodian Business Association.

Santa Cruz received a grant from Ecology Action to fund the photovoltaic panels for Nuevo Sol. The Green Communities Initiative, which is a national program to build environmentally healthy homes for low-income families, financed the environmentally friendly design elements of Lancaster's Laurel Crest project, and the California Energy Commission administered rebates from the Emerging Renewables Program.

To leverage its limited funds, the Arcata Redevelopment Agency secured a \$3.5 million HOME program grant to build the Courtyards project. The ambitious green building features added approximately 8 percent to the construction budget. As other agencies with limited resources may have to do, the agency and the City of Arcata had to prioritize what was included and funded in the project; they chose to include solar panels but not covered parking.

Reducing Residents' Monthly Utility Expenses

The award nominees not only looked at how to finance their sustainable development projects but also how to maintain these projects economically in the long run, especially those targeted for low- and moderate-income families. Utility expenses are a significant housing expense for low-income households, and reducing such costs through green development can help keep families in their homes.

Several projects addressed this issue. For example, with the extensive use of photovoltaic panels for the Courtyards at Arcata, its residents should receive electric bills with zero charges six months out of the year.

The Laurel Crest project forecasts a 13 percent reduction in annual electricity costs, made possible by incorporating several design elements meant to reduce energy consumption and costs. Further, leveraging cost-saving environmental efficiencies reduced the operating expenses by more than \$340,000 annually.

Long Beach is also home to Olive Court, a multifamily housing project that reduced utility costs by orienting the buildings for natural light and ventilation, installing Energy Star appliances, using low-flow showerheads and toilets, building operable skylights to encourage natural cooling flows, and caulking and taping to provide greater energy efficiency.

Fostering Community Interconnectedness

A successful and sustainable redevelopment project must incorporate attributes that go beyond materials, technologies and water and energy conservation measures -- it must foster a true sense of community. It's not enough to simply incorporate sustainable development principles; redevelopment must also build and enhance connectivity. Redevelopment's mission is to remove blight and restore a community's vitality, and sustainable development strategies must fit with those purposes. All nominees demonstrated this interconnectivity with community as well as accessibility to amenities and services.

The South Brea Lofts project is integrated with the existing neighborhood so that its NEVs are useful for trips to the store, post office or the nearby golf course. The development is located near downtown and various bus routes, and during the work week a free trolley traverses downtown with stops close to the Lofts. The design of pedestrian access further enhances the connectivity of this development with the community. Officials anticipate that the South Brea Lofts will be an impetus for future development, and a new mixed-use project is already in the works.

The Courtyards development is located in an area of Arcata called Valley West, where two major highways isolate the residents. The area developed quickly with a strip mall, mobile home parks and apartments, but it lacked a defined sense of community. The redevelopment agency's goal was not only to provide affordable housing but also to facilitate connectedness with the established shopping and commercial areas.

Long Beach's Olive Court is the lead development in an underused and deteriorated section of a major city transit corridor. The residents are easily connected to other areas of the city, nearby services and amenities. An affordable senior housing development is under construction nearby. Other plans include a park expansion, a branch library expansion and several new restaurants. Olive Court is two blocks from the city's largest high school and close to two major hospitals.

The Long Beach neighborhood surrounding the Mark Twain Library was one of the city's most diverse and underserved areas. The library had only 24 seats and no public restrooms. How was it going to help the community improve literacy and education among its residents? Nearly eight times its former size, all the spaces in the new library are in full use, including the Community Room, KidZone, Story Theater, Teen Theater, group study rooms and all 84 computers. The Family Learning Center, which provides homework help, computer training and English as a Second Language software, estimates it will help more than 5,500 students annually, and the expanded library averages more than 1,200 visitors a day.

In its award submission narrative, the Long Beach Redevelopment Agency described the library's opening day and one mother who cried quietly as she surveyed the library's new computer room -- for the first time, her children would have access to computers.

The Mark Twain Neighborhood Library received widespread support from its multicultural community. The surrounding area is home to the second-largest Cambodian community outside Asia. Nearly 45 percent of the residents are under 19 years of age, and more than 7,000 students are bussed out of the area to school. The community needed a library that could accommodate the students' study needs and provide more safe places for youth to be after school. With crime and gang-related activity on the rise, the community came together with in-kind and financial support for this project.

To create a sense of community, many of these projects incorporate meeting rooms and shared space, such as Nuevo Sol's community garden. The Courtyards at Arcata also features a park with a wide variety of equipment for all ages open to all children in the surrounding neighborhood. Poway Redevelopment Agency transformed a floodway adjacent to Solara into a greenbelt and river walk connecting the multifamily housing development to a nearby city park. And Lancaster's Laurel Crest campus includes a swimming pool, tot lot and a community center that houses a small library, computer learning center and meeting space.

Encouraging Future Sustainable Development

Redevelopment uses sustainable development to build better communities. Agencies throughout the state can use sustainable development to reduce energy use, automobile dependence and tenants' utility costs, while creating the interconnectedness among people and activities that foster a sense of community. By recognizing the achievements of redevelopment agencies with its Award of Excellence for Sustainable Development, CRA hopes to encourage similar efforts throughout California.

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