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Berkeley breaks ground on affordable housing project

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On Tuesday, Berkeley broke ground on Harper Crossing, 42 affordable homes for low-income seniors at 3132 Martin Luther King Jr. Way (between Woolsey and Fairview) in the heart of the Lorin District.

The homes, which were welcomed across the board, from local residents through city officials,

arrive at time when Berkeley is struggling with a significant lack of affordable housing.

Read more about affordable housing in Berkeley.

The \$16 million project was also a long time coming.

‘It has taken 20 years to get these homes,’ Berkeley Mayor Tom Bates said at a groundbreaking event held at the construction site Tuesday morning. Bates also acknowledged that the units represent only a fraction of what the city needs. ‘We need to be building all sorts of homes as we are facing a major crisis with home prices,’ he said.

The units will be exclusively for seniors aged 62 and older whose household income is at, or below, 30-60% of the area median. Green Point rated, the homes are close to Ashby BART and AC Transit bus stops, and will offer onsite services including adult education, health and wellness and skill-building classes, organized by the developer, Satellite Affordable Housing Associates (SAHA).

Rents will range from \$522 to \$1,000. According to the 2015 Nexus Study, the average market-rate rent in Berkeley now ranges from \$1,105 for a studio to \$2,914 for a 4-bedroom apartment. A more recent report, prepared by Berkeley’s interim city manager, said rents in Berkeley have increased 12% over the last year and now average \$3,584.

The 4-story Harper Crossing apartments were financed by what SAHA executive director Susan Friedland describes as an ‘alphabet soup’ of funding. The eight funders include the city of Berkeley, Alameda County Boomerang Funds, Silicon Valley Bank and the National Equity Fund. Berkeley made available a \$1.8 million loan from its Housing Trust Fund, and provided the land, which was valued at nearly \$2 million in early 2015.

Concerns were raised at the groundbreaking that the new units might go to applicants from outside the neighborhood or even the city. Several of those who addressed the gathering also spoke of a need to maintain the Lorin District’s historic racial and socio-economic diversity, which, they say, has already eroded due to rising house prices.

Both Bates and Councilman Max Anderson, in whose district the units are being built, expressed a hope that preference would be given to locals or those who have already been displaced from the neighborhood.

The Friends of Adeline group while welcoming the new Harper Crossing development, echoed those sentiments.

‘This is a step in the right direction, but we need much more affordable housing in South Berkeley,’ said Margy Wilkinson, a member of the Friends of Adeline. Wilkinson, who has lived in the Lorin District since 1980, said she had witnessed a dramatic change to the cultural, economic and ethnic diversity in the area.

Friedland said there were legal restrictions around favoring certain applicants. However, she said the best way to ensure that locals are in the running for the units is to spread the word about the new homes locally. ‘Let’s flood the neighborhood with awareness about applications,’ she said.

The last affordable housing project built by SAHA in Berkeley was Harmon Gardens at 3240 Sacramento St., completed in July 2011. Its Lakeside Senior Apartments in Oakland, which

opened in early 2015, had 2,422 applications for 91 units.

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