

Turlock low-income housing project starts

By Patty Guerra
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TURLOCK -- City representatives joined a nonprofit housing developer and investors Wednesday to break ground for a low-income housing project that's getting under way in the nick of time.

The ceremony was conducted under a cloudy sky at a weedy lot on West Linwood Avenue where the city and EAH Housing will build an 80-unit low-income housing development called Avena Bella.



Felix AuYeung, project director for EAH Housing, Inc., left, and Turlock Mayor John Lazar address attendees at a groundbreaking for EAH's Avena Bella project on West Linwood Avenue. March 28, 2012.

"This is such a wonderful site," said Mary Murtagh, president and chief executive officer of EAH Housing, pointing out nearby Cunningham Elementary School and a shopping center with a Save Mart supermarket.

The \$19 million project is one of the last funded by the city's redevelopment agency before the state dissolved such entities as part of a money-saving strategy. Other funds came from private investors and state tax credits.

"We dodged the loss of redevelopment agencies by one whisker," Murtagh said.

When complete in about 14 months, the project will consist of eight Mediterranean-themed buildings on a 4.3-acre site. Plans call for a mix of two- and three-bedroom apartments, as well as a community center, swimming pool, garden and computer lab.

EAH Housing also is the developer for Archway Commons, a 76-unit complex in Modesto. That project is about two months behind Avena Bella, said Felix AuYeung of EAH, project manager for both developments.

Both developments were planned to be larger, but were scaled down when funding grew scarce.

Turlock has about a "50-50 chance" of developing a planned second phase of 61 additional units, since the city included the entire project in its enforceable obligations list sent to the state before RDAs were dissolved, AuYeung said.

"Modesto has almost no chance" to get its second phase of 60 units, AuYeung said; the city had other projects on its list and didn't include a second phase for Archway Commons.

"But there are some other sources of local money," he said. "We'll see how the units are absorbed and what the need is."

But in Turlock on Wednesday, the mood was upbeat.

Mayor John Lazar said Avena Bella comes at the perfect time for an area hard-hit by a recession that's easing very slowly. He said the city is "long past due" in bringing improvements to the Cunningham School neighborhood and the west side in general.

"This project will be an economic engine for us," he said. "It will mean really good things for the city and it's a blessing to those that need assistance."

AuYeung and Murtagh applauded the city staff and elected officials for making everything go smoothly since they started working together in December 2009.

"About the only hitch would have been the rain, and that held off," AuYeung said. "We're fast-tracking here for sure."

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