



## Stonebridge a shining example of affordable housing

NOVEMBER 08, 2012 12:00 AM • LEO AINSWORTH

The continued discussion of housing issues in St. Helena raises the question of how to successfully develop and manage affordable housing in a community the size of our beautiful city.

The family housing at the Stonebridge Apartments, located at 990 College Ave., is a proven example of how to create a sustainable community of children, parents and seniors.

The Stonebridge Housing Tax Credit property is a type of regulated affordable housing serving low- and very-low-income households on fixed, i.e. Social Security, or lower incomes between 50 percent and not to exceed 60 percent of the Napa County area median income (AMI). For example, a family of four with an income below \$51,650 per year would qualify for the program. Monthly rents are charged accordingly at the 50 percent or 60 percent AMI levels.

The current rent schedule is the following:

- A one-bedroom unit at 50 percent AMI is \$420, or \$768 at 60 percent;
- Two-bedroom unit, \$469 to \$918;
- Three-bedroom unit, \$514 to \$1,055;
- Four-bedroom unit, \$575 to \$1,169.

The 5-acre-plus Stonebridge parcel is composed of 10 multi-family buildings with eight units each from one to four bedrooms, a management office, a community center, two laundry facilities, extensive green recreational open spaces with two modular play structures, a barbecue area, and a 44-parcel community garden equipped with drip irrigation system where residents harvest organic fruits and vegetables year-round.

The Stonebridge board is very proud of our families and is very pleased when they tell us that they are leaving us to buy their own homes.

Many people ask: How does the city assure that building affordable housing projects will serve primarily the persons that live and work in the city of St. Helena?

Well, the story of Stonebridge answers that question.

When the property was built in 1993, more than 90 percent of the qualified residents were either working or living in the Napa Valley. In 2010, our records reflect that more than 98 percent of the Stonebridge residents worked locally. The applicant waiting list is also compelling; most applicants live in the Napa Valley and want to get closer to their job sites.

So what does it take to create an affordable housing community?

The principal factors involved in the development of an affordable housing community are political will, available land at a reasonable price, municipal or county as well as banking partnerships, and a project able to garner state or federal funding in the form of tax credits. Equally fundamental to the project are a management company and board that will assure compliance and long-term financial stability.

Stonebridge was the dream of our local visionary, David Garden; he sold the land at a discounted price and convinced the city of St. Helena to invest in the project by delaying the payment of city development fees. Together with the Rev. John Brenkle, they brought EAH Housing and Napa Valley Community Homes to locate the banking and governmental financing necessary to build our beautiful property. Garden was recently honored by the residents by having the Stonebridge Community Room named after him.

The Stonebridge board firmly believes the option to build smaller-unit satellite affordable housing in St. Helena is not a practical solution for the city. There are many challenges in building and maintaining small units. The biggest challenges include financing, managing and regulating. One of the great advantages to Stonebridge Apartments is the sense of community that will not be attainable with small, spread-out units.

Our board encourages the city to move quickly on solving its affordable housing requirements. The Stonebridge multi-family apartments took around 10 years to plan, develop and build.

In closing, we feel that the Stonebridge Apartments and its families are a shining example of what a well-developed and well-operated community can be built if all parties are committed to making it happen.

(Ainsworth, a St. Helena resident, is chairman of the Stonebridge Apartments board of directors.)