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The Almanac

Housing complex is model for collaboration *HIP Housing prepares Willow Road apartments for opening*

A combination of public, private and nonprofit funding is turning a new affordable housing complex on Willow Road into a showpiece of technology and collaboration.

"Affordable housing isn't what it used to be," Kate Comfort Harr, director of HIP Housing, told the Almanac. "People have this image of poorly constructed units where everyone's destitute."

The 12 units at 1157-1161 Willow Road, on the other hand, will incorporate free Wi-Fi, a community room, and, with a little luck, solar power for every apartment.

HIP Housing, a nonprofit specializing in finding affordable housing for San Mateo County residents, purchased the property in May 2012. Funded primarily through a \$1.85-million, 55-year, interest-free loan from Menlo Park's below-market-rate housing fund, the project also drew upon a private bank loan for \$573,600, plus \$50,000 from Redwood City, and a \$5,000 grant from Facebook, along with contributions from the county and Rebuilding Together, for renovations.

Redwood City chipped in because it had to either spend the money or lose it, and without being able to increase the amount through state or redevelopment funds, didn't have enough to actually build anything itself, according to Ms. Harr. "\$50,000 won't buy you a bathroom," she said.

But the contribution was key to the success of the project. County regulations required providing at least one handicapped-accessible apartment, and the Redwood City contribution helped cover the cost. "In the future this is going to be the new normal," Ms. Harr suggested, given state funding cutbacks. "Cities are going to have to work together."

Nine units at the complex are reserved for people earning less than 50 percent of the regional median income of \$81,300, and three units for those making less than 30 percent of that income. A total of nine apartments must go to people who either live or work in Menlo Park, and HIP Housing hopes to house up to five veterans there.

So far four veterans have applied for apartments, thanks to a collaboration between the Veterans Affairs administration and HIP Housing. "We really had to work to come up with a strategy," Ms. Harr said, explaining that finding income-qualified veterans who also live in Menlo Park was a challenge.

The Willow Road complex will be the first in HIP Housing's portfolio to provide free Wi-Fi, a feature that the nonprofit believes takes a step toward closing the digital divide between high- and low-income communities. An Oregon nonprofit that specializes in wireless access for affordable housing is going to get the complex online for \$5,000.

Sun Light & Power, a Berkeley-based solar power company, is interested in wiring every unit to run off solar power, according to Ms. Harr, but that's \$11,000 HIP Housing can't afford. Yet.

That may change if Menlo Park approves the nonprofit's request for permit fee reimbursement. Because the complex straddled two lots, HIP Housing had to submit and pay for two sets of plans and permits.

Construction started in January, and may finish by March. Rebuilding Together Peninsula will work on converting a storage area into a community room as part of its national