

Point Reyes hails affordable housing plan

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As residents across Marin protest plans for affordable housing in their neighborhoods, Point Reyes Station is rolling out the red carpet for a family apartment complex in its rural backyard.

In a development that has galvanized civic leaders and housing activists, residential quarters built for the Coast Guard at the edge of town in 1972 could become home for three dozen moderate-income families.

The 37-acre Coast Guard complex, scheduled for sale at a federal auction sometime next year, includes 36 townhouse units, a dormitory, commercial kitchen, meeting room, dining hall, administrative offices, and outdoor recreation facilities just beyond downtown Point Reyes Station. The complex includes picnic areas, a playground, pool, tennis courts, trails and creek access as well as a path leading up the hill to West Marin School.



A stop sign and gate blocks unauthorized visitors to the Coast Guard housing complex at Point Reyes Station.

Coast Guard employees and their families, who now get vouchers to live elsewhere, resided there for years while staffing Communication Area Master Station Pacific in Point Reyes, which handles communications for military and civilian vessels at sea.

"The feds have declared this a surplus site and directed the Coast Guard to sell it," Supervisor Steve Kinsey said. "A coalition of community organizations, led by CLAM, the West Marin affordable housing land trust, has been working with me and congressman Jared Huffman to pursue acquisition for affordable housing."

Huffman, noting that acquisition of surplus federal property involves cutting through a complicated tangle of red tape, plans to introduce special legislation giving the county first crack at the property. Short of an act of Congress, "they could end up putting this up for sale to the highest bidder," he said.

"This is broadly supported," Huffman said. "The location makes sense. The community wants it. We just need to do it."

Kim Thompson, executive director of CLAM, or Community Land Trust Association of West Marin, called it "an extraordinary opportunity for the sustainability of West Marin's communities," and noted her group has rallied widespread community support. Thompson has 25 letters of support from businesses and organizations including the Point Reyes Village Association, Inverness Village Association and Coastal Health Alliance.

Mark Switzer, property manager of Point Reyes Family Homes, a 27-unit apartment complex next door to the Coast Guard site, said that from his perspective, the affordable home plan is a "generational opportunity" that offers "the best possible result for the community." Ramon Cadiz of the West Marin Chamber of Commerce agrees, saying the organization "wholeheartedly supports the re-purposing of the Point Reyes Station Coast Guard housing site for affordable community housing."

Affordable housing opportunities in West Marin have just about vanished amid skyrocketing realty prices, restrictive zoning and a web of environmental regulations — as well as speculators who snap up homes for use as vacation rentals for the affluent, Thompson said. She called acquiring the Coast Guard site "just the right thing at the right time" to ensure a diverse, vibrant community that provides workers, teachers, young families and seniors a place to live. "The Coast Guard site offers us the chance to unite the deeply held values of community and land



The Coast Guard housing complex might be used for affordable housing.

stewardship in a single embrace, and to provide physical assets that will strengthen the community for years to come," she added in an email.

But it's far from a done deal, and local officials are reviewing several strategies, including legislation directing the federal General Services Administration to negotiate a sale exclusively with the county.

"There is some possibility that this effort can be added to a bipartisan bill that has been moving along and may be acted on in the lame-duck Congress before the end of the year," Kinsey said. If that doesn't work, county officials "want to be in a position to compete for the site through a more traditional auction process," he said.

The Board of Supervisors discussed the situation and possible real estate purchase in a closed session Tuesday.

Because the site is zoned for open space and agriculture, and has no sewerage system, it may not be attractive to many developers — and its market value thus may be within the county's reach. "We are counting on these restrictions, as well as the condition of the units, to help bring down the appraised market value," Kinsey said. "At the same time, these same conditions will require some time and funding to make the complex functional if we are successful in acquiring the property." The Coast Guard has not allowed site inspections yet.

"If successful, this affordable neighborhood will accommodate almost 10 percent of the town's current population of about 870 residents," Kinsey said. "CLAM should be credited with building broad community support for the concept, a rarity not seen on the other side of the hill," he noted.

Kinsey will ask colleagues on the county board to "support the concept" when the board next meets Nov. 25, providing Huffman with the official endorsement he needs to get legislation rolling. "I can't handicap our chances for special legislation, but I think the significant property constraints should greatly narrow the field of speculators" if the property goes on the auction block, he added.

Huffman called it a "fantastic opportunity" to preserve workforce housing.

"We do not have too many opportunities like this in Marin County," the congressman noted.