

Half Moon Bay Review

[SOUTH COAST]

Farmworker housing opens in South

COUNTY, POST
BUILD AT BLUE
HOUSE FARM

By ALEX ORLANDO

Several housing units have recently been unveiled for workers at a Coastside farm — and will soon be available to rent well below market rates.

On Sept. 18, the Peninsula Open Space Trust announced the completion of four three-bedroom units at Blue House Farm, the long-term tenant at the San Gregorio farm. In 2016, the nonprofit awarded Blue House Farm an agricultural lease for 74 acres of protected land in San Gregorio.

The Blue House Farm project is the largest of several that POST and the county have partnered on this year to create sorely needed affordable housing and help preserve farmlands throughout the Peninsula.

"Local farms not only add to the beauty of our region, but well-managed farmland plays a vital role in the health of our environment, our economy and our people," said Walter T. Moore, president of POST,



KYLE LUDOWITZ / REVIEW

Ryan Casey checks out one of the new farmworker housing units at Blue House Farm in San Gregorio. Four units were constructed in a partnership between the farm, San Mateo County, and the Peninsula Open Space Trust.

in a prepared statement. "We hope that these new housing units will go some way to making life more comfortable for workers in this industry."

Two of the four units were made possible through Measure K — a half-cent sales tax passed by voters in 2016. In 2017, the Board of Supervisors approved \$300,000 to fund the

housing units at Blue House Farm through the county's Agricultural Workforce Housing program, which is supported by the tax measure.

Blue House Farm funded the purchase of the other two units.

"I was seeing a lot of turnover with my field worker crew," said Ryan Casey, own-

er of Blue House Farm. "I realized that, to gain stability, I needed to provide housing for my team.

I was lucky enough that the county had just launched a program to build low-income housing here on the coast. Now we have some."

SEE FARM 9A

[FARM]

Cost of living hurts farmers

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The opening of the new units comes at a time of particular scarcity of housing for Coastside farmworkers. The project aims to stem the flow of laborers leaving the area due to exorbitant rents and grueling commutes.

"Most of these farms have work for their workers year-round, but if (farms) don't have places for them to live, it's very hard to retain them because of the cost of housing," said Daniel Olstein, director of land programs and stewardship at POST. "Ryan has workers traveling from Watsonville and from Santa Cruz, and that's a real challenge. The opportunity to provide housing on or near his farm is hugely beneficial in making this operation sustainable."

In 2016, a report released by San Mateo County and completed by BAE Urban Economics, a real estate consulting firm, identified a lack of housing as a "key concern for (agricultural) producers in recruiting and retaining employees."

The report found a critical need for approximately 1,000 housing units that would be affordable for agricultural workers and their families in San Mateo County.

The depletion of available farmlands has only worsened the plight of farmworkers fighting to make ends meet. Since the 1980s, the Bay Area has lost nearly 200,000 acres of agricultural land, often succumbing to development surges and the shuttering of production facilities. In San Mateo County alone, over 35 percent of farmland has been lost in the past 30 years.

"Providing housing that is suitable and affordable for farmworkers helps to preserve agriculture on the Coastside," said San Mateo County Supervisor Don Horsley in a prepared statement. "Many agricultural producers told us that a lack of housing is a key concern in recruiting and retaining employees."

"Farms are a key thread in the fabric of the Coastside community landscape, and we thank POST for its great work striving to keep them viable," he added.

Horsley, as well as Casey and officials from POST, gathered at the farm on Sept. 18 for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to mark the project's completion.

Known for heirloom tomatoes, strawberries, peppers and leafy greens, Blue House Farm offers more than 50 types of organic farm products through farmers markets, a community-supported agriculture program and local grocery stores. ■