

Partnership helps make new homes

County, nonprofit POST team to create farmworker housing

Zachary Clark | June 12, 2018

A rundown home on a coastal farm that had been vacant for years is now occupied by farmworkers paying substantially below-market-rate rents because of a partnership between San Mateo County and nonprofit Peninsula Open Space Trust.

Known as the Red House at Cloverdale Coastal Ranches in Pescadero, the project is one of four in the works and the first of many more that the two partners are pursuing to preserve agricultural land and support the workers who steward it.

“We’re recognizing that protecting farmland and farming is more than protecting the land, it’s about making investments in farm infrastructure and housing is part of that,” said Laura O’Leary, senior farmland project manager for POST. “Housing on the coast is in really short supply and there’s a real need for farm labor housing.”

A study by the county in 2014 found an unmet need for up to 1,140 affordable units for agricultural workers. And since the 1980s, the Bay Area’s nine counties have lost nearly 200,000 acres of agricultural land, and 35 percent of San Mateo County farmland is now developed or no longer in production, according to a POST press release.

“I look at [projects like Red House] as a way of preserving the agricultural heritage of the region, local food security, and farmers take care of the land and make sure it doesn’t erode and that invasive species don’t proliferate,” said Supervisor Don Horsley, whose District 3 includes the coast. “It’s an area that I love and I want to make sure that we preserve it for the future.”

Horsely said he initially thought the building now known as Red House would have to be torn down, but the foundation was discovered to be in great shape, as well as the redwood joists and studs, which were not infested with termites. The building needed a new roof, plumbing and septic system, and a potable water source was secured by drilling a well.

All of those improvements were made possible, in part, by a \$150,000 contribution through the county’s Agricultural Workforce Housing Program, which relies on revenue from Measure K, the countywide half-cent sales tax extension approved by voters in 2016.

Red House is now home to an extended farming family of nine.

“I didn’t want it to be a dormitory for workers, I wanted it to be a comfortable place for a family to live,” Horsley said, adding that existing farm labor housing was often intended for a seasonal migrant population, but these days the workforce lives in the area year-round.

A similar project at Blue House Farm in San Gregorio entails the rehabilitation of two existing units and the construction of an additional two units, each of which will include three bedrooms and two baths for a total of 12 bedrooms. That project will have a ribbon-cutting ceremony Sept. 18, while another project in Pescadero currently in the permitting phase will bring two mobile home units with six bedrooms. A fourth project consisting of two units and six bedrooms in Pescadero is in the early planning stages.

These efforts are part of POST’s Farmland Futures initiative, which began in 2016 with the goal of raising \$25 million to support local farms through land protection and infrastructure improvements. Housing hasn’t traditionally been a part of POST’s mission, but the nonprofit has taken advantage of the county’s Agricultural Workforce Housing program. Launched in 2014, the program offers forgivable, no-interest loans up to \$100,000 to qualified farmers interested in rehabbing housing that must be rented at existing affordable rates — in some cases as low as \$3 a day — for farmers.

The program follows the opening of the Moonridge farm labor housing developments in the late ’90s, which offer 160 units of affordable housing for agricultural workers.

“Local farms rely heavily on labor and it is extremely challenging for those who are key to a successful farm to find affordable housing,” Post President Walter T. Moore said in the release. “Local farmlands provide many economic and environmental benefits to our region such as fresh, healthy, local food. They also keep wages and taxes within the community and help preserve our overall long-term environmental health. To keep farms healthy, we must provide shelter for farm staff. While small, this is just one example of how POST is working to preserve farmland through our Farmland Futures Initiative.”

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