

Caloosa Belle

Low income housing designed to meet need

By Patty Brant; Caloosa Belle

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Housing is one of the most basic of human needs. The term includes a broad spectrum of abodes, from mansions down to minimal shelter. In this country, at this time, everyone should be able to afford a decent place to live. Like most places, adequate good housing is at a premium in this area. Those at the lower end of the economy feel that shortage even more keenly than others.

Pollywog Creek Commons, a 64-unit housing project geared toward low income agricultural workers, opened July 8. The complex was funded by USDA and the Florida Housing Finance Corporation, and developed by a non-profit organization called Rural Neighborhoods Inc. This affordable farm labor housing community is located at 137 Jaycee-Lions Drive and is currently accepting applications. Because of financing restrictions, possible tenants are limited to agricultural workers.

Executive Director of Rural Neighborhoods, Inc., Steve Kirk has taken some flak over this restriction, but he points out that USDA monies are tied to agricultural housing. Pollywog Creek architect Ted Hoffman said one of the main objectives of the overall project was to present an attractive face to the community along JayceeLions Blvd. The complex has a central park for kids and their parents, a community room, even a fitness room and computer room for residents' use.

Mr. Hoffman has done numerous projects with non-profit groups like RCMA and feels that amenities should be available to low income families. Although his designs are unique and forward-looking, he said, "My work is not about the architecture, it's about life and people." Inside, the two-, three - and four-bedroom apartments are subtly striking yet livable and come equipped with appliances and ceiling fans. It's the common space between the apartments that the most people experience, and that area is neatly landscaped. Since the project came in under budget, he said it allowed Rural Neighborhoods, Inc., to add unique Scandanavian climbing equipment for the kids. Pollywog Creek offers two - and three-story apartments, each with front and back porches. Mr. Hoffman lives in LaBelle and has numerous distinctive architectural projects to his credit including the RCMA facility off Cowboy Way.

Some 7-8 families are set to move in this week, with more names on the waiting list. Potential residents must meet strict guidelines to be approved for Pollywog Creek complex. They undergo checks on their tax statements, W-2 forms and even home visits to determine their basic home maintenance skills. Residential Manager Melissa Martinez has over 1.5 years experience in her field, previously working at the Immokalee Housing and Family Services. Her job is to make sure everyone who gets an apartment is qualified. All their documentation has to be in order, along with their Social Security and photo ID. She verifies employment records. She also does home visits at prospective tenants' homes to see their cleanliness and sanitary habits personally and to ensure that only those who are supposed to be living there, live there.

At Pollywog Creek there are 2-, 3 - and 4-bedroom apartments. Only two residents are allowed per bedroom. These are strict guidelines residents must adhere to, so staff has a big interest in their lifestyle before they are accepted into Pollywog Creek. Ms. Martinez works with applicants to make sure all requirements are met and that the families are good candidates. Residents are expected to take good care of their apartment. Credit, you see, is not the only measure of character. She is available Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m.-6 p.m.

Melissa grew up in a farm worker family, one of 12 children, so the position is a good fit for her. She truly understands the residents. Sometimes it's heartbreaking, she points out. Recently she dealt with a single mother of two (a daughter 21, son 17) living in a tent in someone's back yard. The husband walked out on the family a while ago and she continues to struggle to get on her feet, much the same way Ms. Martinez watched her own parents' struggle. She is the first in the family to earn an associates degree in business. In another year she should get her degree in management and human services from University of Phoenix. She said there are about 18 names on the waiting list for apartments at this time.

If a family is found in noncompliance with the rules, they have seven days to take care of the problem. These home visits are "telling" - do they care about housekeeping? Are too many people living there? What about pets? Pollywog Creek does not accept pets.

As he planned Pollywog Creek, Steve Kirk visited GreenTree South, built some 12 years ago by the Area Agency on Housing. The farmworker housing complex is well run by a management company, as is evidenced by the fact it's still in very good condition. According to Mr. Kirk, Pollywog Creek provides Equal Housing Opportunity to all eligible applicants with subsidized rents. Residents pay about one-third of their income as rent. Steve Kirk's vision is to build good nonprofit housing in small towns like LaBelle, Okeechobee, Immokalee and Ruskin. His company also builds community health centers and child care facilities and pulls financing, architecture and permitting together to build affordable housing, Mr. Kirk said these could not exist without the cooperation of local government.

The complex was built using \$6.5 million in USDA Rural Development loans and grants. About 80 percent of the funding was in the form of loans. USDA is one of the few remaining financing programs left. Only 20-30 projects per year are approved; of those only one or two in rural areas - and Mr. Kirk doesn't see the situation improving. In the future, he sees even less chance for small areas to get funding. The lion's share will continue to go to larger counties with better transportation. Although USDA money is tied to housing for agricultural workers, it could be that housing that starts out as agricultural could move to non-agricultural residents. In any case, he sees this project as a community asset for a long time.

It's a common misconception that this housing is only for farm laborers. The truth is, those who work in many different capacities of agriculture are eligible. Mr. Kirk said anyone interested in Pollywog Creek who derives a living from agriculture should at least pick up an application. "We want to be inclusive," he said. Mr. Kirk pointed out that he is not a "developer" who builds a project and leaves. Rural Neighborhoods is a charitable group that does rental apartments - and it will be here at Pollywog Creek for 30-40 years. "We will be an active member of the La-Belle community," he promises. These apartments are built to last with ceramic tile and all plywood frame cabinets, The complex is designed to add character to the neighborhood and a place that tenants will be proud to call home. It's meant to have a unique feel, to provoke comment and interest.

With Pollywog Creek Commons built, Mr. Kirk is now turning his attention to housing for the elderly on property adjacent to Pollywog on the west. He envisions 29 one-bedroom efficiencies. The HUD 202 project has been submitted and he should have an answer on financing in September.