

NAPLES NEWS

Everglades Community; Association; Group to build affordable housing for Immokalee farmworkers

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July 27, 2000

In Homestead, farmworkers have a choice of living in what one resident calls paradise. The community is called Everglades Village. The housing project was built by an organization called the Everglades Community Association, a public-private group whose goal is to build decent and affordable housing for farmworkers. "In the last five years we've built close to \$40 million worth of housing and community facilities, including a health clinic and day-care centers," said Steve Kirk, the executive director of the ECA organization. "We only operated mobile homes until 1995 when we built Everglades Village. So we have made a difference."

Until recently, the ECA focused all of its efforts on South Dade, but now it has turned its eyes north and west. The organization is working on three projects outside Miami-Dade County, including a project in rural Collier County. The ECA plans to build a 79-unit apartment project in Immokalee called Main Street Village. The units will be geared toward farmworker families, including seasonal workers. "About 1-1/2 years ago we decided that agriculture probably wasn't going to grow in Dade County," Kirk said. "We wanted to take the lessons we learned and apply them elsewhere, and we concluded then that we wanted to look at other communities, primarily agriculture communities. Immokalee is one of the closest ones to us."

The units will all be single story, each with a separate entry door. The project will have two-, three- and four-bedroom apartments. "Main Street Village is going to be a very attractive project," said Barry Goldmeier, president of Advanced Housing Corp. in Miami, a for-profit affordable housing development company that is acting as a consultant on the Immokalee project. "It's something that should be appealing to the tenants. Since they are single-story there will be no one above you or below you. Having your own front door and back door will give it a single-family home appeal."

The ECA plans to build the project on a small section of the Roberts Ranch property, which is located at the intersection of Highway 29 (Main Street) and Roberts Avenue. The group has 9 acres under contract and plans to close on the land by the end of the year. "We really liked this property quite frankly because it was right in the middle of town," Kirk said. "A lot of workers say they don't want to live far from town. They want to be close to stores and other things."

About 25 percent of the units will be set aside for the very poor. Monthly rents for those units will run from \$197 for a two-bedroom to \$226 for a four-bedroom, Kirk said. Most of the apartments will range from \$370 a month to \$480 a month, he said. "We're hoping that for as many as two-thirds of the units there will be rental assistance that will allow residents to pay 30 percent of their monthly income in rent and utilities," he said. It will actually be possible to have identical units going for different amounts of money depending on the income of the residents. income of residents, Kirk explained.

Zoning is already in place for the project. The ECA, however, is still working to obtain financing for the project and hopes to have it in hand by Sept. 30. The project should be completed by summer 2002, Goldmeier said. Construction should take anywhere from 9 to 12 months, he said. The ECA is raising its own funds to build Main Street Village, which is expected to cost about \$6 million including land costs.

Greg Mihalic, director of Housing and Urban Improvement for Collier County, said it's been a long time since a farmworker housing project has been built in Immokalee, other than the units that are being added to Farmworker Village, a public housing project. "It's been a while," he said. "Some projects were proposed and never happened. But Immokalee is on the rise so developers are looking at Immokalee." Mihalic is working with ECA to obtain tax credits for the project.

The ECA is also working on two other farmworker housing projects in Hillsborough County that together will cost about \$10 million. While the Immokalee project is targeted at farmworker families, the housing in Hillsborough is being built for single farmworkers. The projects will be built in the communities of Dover and Ruskin. They will be funded in part with some of the federal funds received by the state last September to build housing for single workers. The U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded to the state a \$9.1-million grant. About six weeks ago, the ECA received contracts for the federal funds, Kirk said.

The ECA operates nearly 600 farmworker rental units in the Homestead area. Since 1995, the organization has built 239 units in Everglades Village. The group is building another 143 apartment units in a second phase. The project is different from the one planned in Immokalee because it includes three daycare centers, a neighborhood retail center and a community health center. But, if the success of the Homestead project is any indication, units should lease quickly in Immokalee. "We always have a waiting list at Everglades Village," Kirk said.