

Naples News

Immokalee to Benefit from a New Family Rental Housing Complex

By Tracy X. Miguel
September 15, 2007

Big Cypress Housing Corp. Inc. plans to develop rental housing units for legal migrant and seasonal farmworkers in Immokalee, west of Carson Road. The nonprofit housing organization will construct 92 multifamily rental housing units on the 20-acre property, named the Reserves at Eden Gardens. The \$15.3-million development project is to be under way this fall, said Steve Kirk, president of Rural Neighborhoods Organization, a Homestead-based, nonprofit housing agency.

This summer, Collier County commissioners approved an agreement with Big Cypress Housing Corp. Inc. for \$192,000 in Community Development Block Grant funds to be used for the development and construction of 55 multifamily rental housing units, which will be used for the first two phases of Reserves at Eden Gardens. Of the affordable housing apartments, eventually 88 will be for agriculture employees and four for formerly homeless residents.

Part of the money for this project was borrowed from 14 different sources. Of the financing, \$9.6 million is loan or investment dollars and the balance is grants, including federal and state loans and local and private grants. There is \$866,000 of Collier County grants approved by commissioners. "Putting together 92 units using 14 sources for loans and grant money is a complex nightmare," Kirk said.

Fred Thomas, former director of the Collier County Housing Authority and an Immokalee activist, applauds the project. "We need as many organizations to get involved in making sure that we have enough housing for the low-income families in our community," said Thomas, chairman for both the Immokalee Community Redevelopment Agency Advisory Board and the Immokalee Master Plan and Visioning Committee. Thomas sees a need of more projects in Immokalee that provide a "safe, satisfying and nurturing environment for our children. People get emotionally distraught when they look at some of the living conditions here in Immokalee provided by mom-and-pop landlords," he said.

Kirk said the development process, which started in 2004, has lagged much longer in Collier than in other counties where he has built affordable units. Rural Neighborhoods would like to build more housing because there is a "tremendous need" in Immokalee, Kirk said. Nancy Frees, director of the Immokalee branch of the Collier County Health Department, echoed Kirk. "We want good quality healthy living spaces for migrant farmworkers," Frees said. Frees reported that, as of August, the Collier Health Department had inspected 1,404 units or 7,497 beds that are licensed as migrant housing in Immokalee.

In the past 10 years, Rural Neighborhoods has built 973 units around the state, including in Homestead, Ruskin, Fort Pierce and Immokalee. Currently, there are 313 units, including Reserves at Eden Gardens in Immokalee, that are financed or under construction. In 2004, Rural Neighborhoods built 79 apartment units for agriculture employees, named Main Street Village on Main and 11th streets.

Currently, there are 50 people on the waiting list there. On average, only three people move out a year, Kirk said. Family rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$535; a three-bedroom is \$605; and a four-bedroom apartment is \$645. About 20 percent of tenants pay that amount for rent; Kirk said the majority of tenants have rental assistance, which bases the rent on how much they earn. On average, a person who earns \$18,000 a year will pay \$300 monthly