

Homeward bound

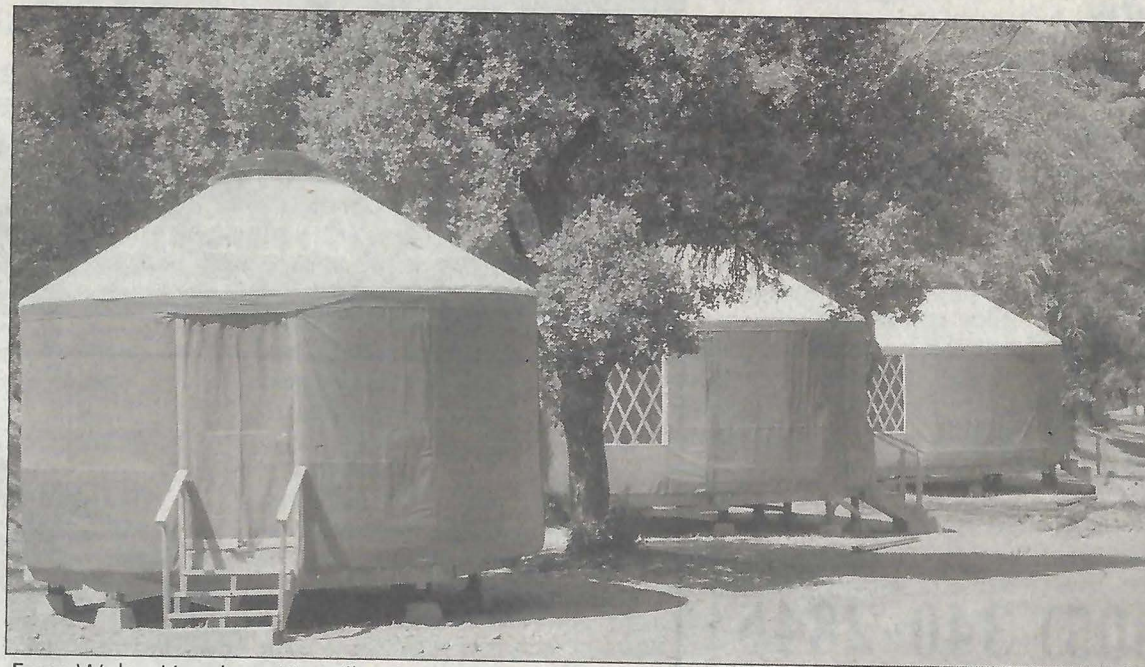
Summit offers hope for affordable farm worker housing

by Stephanie Kinnear

On Thursday morning, Jan. 29, the Santa Paula Community Center appeared to be hosting a rock concert—there was gridlock, true parking chaos and a crowd sizeable enough to bolster the ego of any modest pop star. However, the line snaking out the front door wasn't a ticket line, and the people waiting patiently weren't groupies; there were no guitars or flashing lights. The event taking place was far from a rock & roll show—it was the first ever Ventura County Farm Worker Housing Summit, and the venue was pushing maximum capacity.

It is fitting, after all—Ventura County isn't Nashville or Hollywood. The local economy isn't driven by music or glitz, but by something much less glamorous and infinitely more essential—agriculture.

Right now, there are somewhere between 19,000 and 36,000 farm laborers living in Ventura County—they're hard to count—and very few of them are able to secure anything that resembles decent housing. Because of a disastrous combination of low wages and exorbitant rent, it is common for these workers to live in substandard conditions: 12 men share a one-bedroom apartment and families live in tool sheds. This constitutes a crisis, and that is why The Ag Futures Alliance of Ventura County along with S.O.A.R. (Save Open-Space and Agricultural Resources) and the Ventura County Farm Bureau



Farm Worker Housing - Yurtville, CA

vibrant seaside village. "I would like everyone to see that farm worker housing is not a burden to the community, it's an asset," concluded Wagstaff.

The program then moved from presentations to a more open forum discussion. The general consensus seemed to be that all the ingredients needed to launch a number of successful projects in the county were readily available. The money is there, as was demon-

solutions that provide everything: family housing, single worker housing, dormitories, rural and urban housing, etc. Because this is such a large undertaking, it will require what Wagstaff referred to as "a champion" and what Barbara Macri-Ortiz, of Advocates for Civil Justice, called "political will" to get these projects off the ground. In other words, it will take grassroots movement at the city level, but per-

toria and the Meta St. Apartments will all be finished by May 2004 and will provide housing for approximately 103 farm working families. There is no set rent—each family will pay 30 percent of their income. It is a tremendous start but still leaves thousands of families without decent housing.

Hector Elizarraraz hopes to find a place in one of these Oxnard developments. Elizarraraz was one of the only, if not *the* only

attendance at the Summit were County Supervisors Steve Bennett, Linda Parks, Kathy Long and John Flynn, as well as numerous city council members from throughout the county and representatives from local Congressional offices.

As overwhelming as the problem seems at first, it is heartening to know that within the county things are already happening. As Macri-Ortiz pointed out, "Oxnard services everybody." In Oxnard there are currently three separate farm worker housing projects slated to open in the spring of 2004. The Camarillo Economic Development Corporation is responsible for all of them. Villa Cesar Chavez, Villa Vic-

Photo courtesy of Napa Housing Authority

brought nearly 300 people together to begin outlining solutions.

The day began with a welcome from Santa Paula Mayor Gabino Aguirre, a man who is intimately familiar with the plight of farm workers. Growing up as part of a migrant farm worker family, he traveled between Texas, Oregon, Arizona and California. Aguirre's story worked as a perfect segue to a video, produced by Delaine Ellis of Point of View Films specifically for the summit - "Mi Casa Es Su Casa." The video was a combination of interviews with local growers and local farm workers inter-cut with footage of the unbelievably poor living conditions many of them are forced to endure.

Speakers were brought in from as far away as San Mateo County and as close to home as the Cabrillo Economic Development Corporation (CEDC). Eight separate models of successful farm worker housing projects were presented—each approaching the problem from a different angle but achieving similarly brilliant results. The last presenter, Fran Wagstaff of the Mid-Peninsula Housing Corporation, shared pictures of the Moonridge Community, a farm worker housing project just outside of Half-Moon Bay in San Mateo County. Moonridge appears to be what all future farm worker housing projects should model themselves after; with beautiful housing, soccer fields, computer access, and other community building resources, it resembles a quaint yet

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strated over and over during the various presentations. Funds are available, but a little creativity is necessary to draw in all of the needed revenue streams: USDA grants, state grants, private investors, donations, tax credits, banks, non-profits, etc. The land is available as well, even in a county like Ventura, where land is scarce and pricey. Again, it will take creativity. "The primary opportunities, particularly in Santa Paula, will be in redevelopment," explained Chris Sayer, a local avocado grower. Redevelopment is an attractive option because it is less expensive, and there is less red tape, but building on vacant land is also viable if strict zoning laws are challenged and modified for low-income housing.

If the ingredients are there, then why is there still a problem? It is a complicated question that warrants a complicated answer. In order to move forward, a large number of variables must first be addressed. "Farm worker housing" is an umbrella term that attempts to define a much more complex, multilevel dilemma. Once a project is started, should it involve the construction of houses, apartments or dormitories? Should the units be for rent or should there be an opportunity to buy? Will the project serve the needs of full-time employees or seasonal workers? Should the location be adjacent to farmland or in an urban center?

So really, the answer is that there isn't *one* answer—it isn't a, b or c; it is all of the above. Eventually there will need to be

perhaps even more importantly, it will take the support of individuals with decision-making ability and political pull. Luckily, in

actual farm worker at the summit on Thursday. Elizarraraz has been a farm worker in
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Pesticide-free in Santa Barbara

by Hillary Johnson

The Santa Barbara City Council voted last Tuesday to approve an integrated pest management (IPM) program, severely curtailing the use of pesticides on city property, and agreeing to work toward completely eliminating their use citywide. Effective immediately, all city properties will be subject to a policy mandating the use of least-toxic insect and weed control methods.

Over one hundred citizens showed up at the Council meeting to voice their support for the move, as did Coastal Commissioner Pedro Nava, who is running for the 35th Assembly District, the post being vacated by Hannah-Beth Jackson.

"When I spoke to the Santa Barbara City Council, I included comments regarding the Inuits in the Arctic Circle whose bodies have been contaminated by pesticides and toxins," Nava said by phone after the meeting. "What we do in Santa Barbara has an impact on babies in the Arctic Circle. We have a responsibility not to poison the earth, water and air. What we do here is a small step toward recognizing our duty."

Not only did the council vote to approve the new policy, it made some adjustments

that actually strengthened the program, raising the number of city parks using no pesticides whatsoever from the current 12 to 15, adding two community members to the IPM committee, and including a formal declaration to the effect that Santa Barbara's goal is to work toward a pesticide-free city.

The decision came about as the direct result of three years of lobbying by the Environmental Defense Center's Central Coast Environmental Health Project (CCEHP) and the Pesticide Awareness and Alternatives Coalition (PAAC). The IPM program was modeled after San Francisco's successful program.

"The plan that was adopted is one of the stronger ones in the region," said Eric Cardenas, the director of CCEHP. Cardenas plans to use the victory in Santa Barbara to try to persuade other Central Coast municipalities to move toward pesticide-free policies. "We'd like to see this model used in other cities in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. At the minimum, cities might want to look at taking parts of it and implementing them, and working toward a full-fledged policy. Because this is such a good solid program it would be a great model for other cities." Cardenas has already been approached by citizens' groups in Ventura County. ■

To find out more about how to bring IPM to your town, visit the Central Coast Environmental Health Project at www.ccehp.org.

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Ventura County since immigrating from Mexico 35 years ago, and for nearly that entire time he has rented a small house in Santa Paula—a house his sister Rose Elizarraraz described as “not in very good condition... very modest, with mold on the walls.” Now that house is being sold out from under him, and he is having trouble finding another place to live. He came to the summit (with his sister to interpret) in order to see what his options are.

If Ellen Brokaw has her way, soon Elizarraraz will have much better options, and more of them. Brokaw is a farmer and member of the Ag Futures Alliance of Ventura County, as well as the driving force behind the organization of Thursday's summit. “There is a wonderful community group here in Santa Paula. We need to get the same kind of groups going in other cities. The big challenge,” Brokaw explained, “will be to capture the energy and enthusiasm we saw here today and keep it going.”

As keynote speaker Lyle Wray, Director of the Ventura County Civic Alliance, said, “we need a large network of networks.” The Ventura County Farm Workers Housing Summit was the genesis of just that—a massive network of networks dedicated to the development of farm worker housing. The potential is there to make phenomenal changes in the lives of thousands of local farm workers—and not in some vague and undetermined future, but soon. ■