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BOB CAREY/Los Angeles Times

HOMESITE: Salvador Ferreira stands on the Hueneme Road property in south Oxnard where a 58-unit project is to be built after a long struggle. The compound will include single-family homes and rental apartments exclusively for farmworkers.

Farmworkers to Reap Harvest of 4-Year Fight for Decent Housing

A \$13-million project is expected to break ground in March, four years after Oxnard laborers sued over slum conditions.

By FRED ALVAREZ
Times Staff Writer

Oxnard broccoli harvester Salvador Ferreira knows plenty about hard labor, but he had no idea how much work it would take to build a small batch of homes for farmworkers.

In March 2000, he and fellow laborers won a legal battle over the slum conditions of

their rental houses. Their victory spurred a plan to raze the ramshackle dwellings and replace them with single-family homes and apartments for those who supply the muscle for Ventura County's \$1-billion farm industry.

But it has taken this long to piece together financing and win city permission for the \$13-million project. Final approval is expected next month, and the 58-unit project is scheduled to break ground in March — exactly four years after settlement of a lawsuit paved the way for the south Oxnard development.

"We are waiting patiently," said Ferreira, 38, a father of four who was so instrumental in the legal fight that a street

in the project will be named Salvador Drive in his honor.

"We know it's very difficult to accomplish these things," he said. "But the fight is not just for us; it's for all farmworkers who find themselves living in poor conditions."

That fight is building momentum and paying dividends in Ventura County. Three other farmworker housing projects are in the pipeline: a 24-unit rental project in Santa Paula, a 24-unit apartment complex in downtown Oxnard that is expected to receive its first tenants March 1, and a north Oxnard rental complex in which at least 27 units will be set aside for farmworker families.

In recent years, county offi-

cial have conducted a survey of farmworker housing needs and loosened zoning codes to encourage housing construction for agricultural workers. Those efforts have been bolstered in the last year by passage of a statewide housing bond and by a \$250,000 donation from Washington Mutual to provide start-up costs to developers interested in building farmworker housing.

The achievements and challenges that lie ahead will be highlighted Thursday in the county's first Farm Worker Housing Summit, a gathering of business and civic leaders, elected officials and others interested in providing shelter for a workforce af-

[See Housing, Page B9]

Farmworker Housing Nears Approval

[Housing, from Page B1]

ected by the county's housing crunch.

Soaring rents and skyrocketing housing prices have taken a toll on all segments of the workforce, especially farmworkers, who, according to one recent survey, earn a median income of \$12,000 a year.

One policy group reported that the severe shortage of farmworker housing is threatening the stability of the county's oldest and most prominent industry.

As a result, the issue has drawn unprecedented interest from housing advocates, growers and others who believe that in order to keep farmers in business — which voters have said they want to do, through the adoption of farmland preservation measures — steps must be taken to shelter those who work the harvest.

"This is an effort to impart the urgency and importance of this issue to the public," said poverty law attorney Barbara Macri-Ortiz. She has been at the center of several legal battles to prompt commitments to low-cost housing.

"If we are to save agriculture, there are certain things as a community we must commit ourselves to doing," she said. "I see this summit as a proclamation of that commitment."

The summit will begin with a 17-minute video documentary featuring farmworkers discussing their housing needs. Included is an interview with one family who lived in a tool shed for lack of affordable shelter.

Panel discussions will follow, including presentations by housing advocates from around the state who will showcase model projects.

Peter Dreier, executive director of the Napa Valley Housing Authority, will talk about the creation last year of River Ranch, a 60-bed migrant farmworker dormitory in that grape-growing region.

The \$3.4-million project was constructed only after voters loosened zoning restrictions allowing landowners to section off small swaths of land to build farmworker housing. Growers

then agreed to pay up to \$10 an acre per year to help cover the cost of operations.

The project, built on land donated by Joseph Phelps Vineyards, marked the first new farmworker housing in Napa's wine country in more than two decades.

"There was a clear need for additional farmworker housing, and the community came together to address that need," Dreier said.

Santa Paula-based Leavens Ranch will highlight its efforts to supply company housing to its permanent workforce. Veteran grower Link Leavens, who manages 700 acres of lemon and avocado orchards for the family farm, said the ranch pays utilities and provides on-site housing for 23 full-time workers.

Leavens said the family decided to supply those benefits to have workers close by in case of an emergency. But the decision also was guided by the fact that workers can't find affordable housing in today's real estate

market, he said.

"The no-growth philosophy in Ventura County has driven up the cost of housing, making it tough on farmworkers," Leavens said.

His full-time workers earn \$10 an hour on average plus benefits. "It's not like we're paying minimum wage, but even so, it just doesn't cut it in this economy."

Salvador Ferreira knows all about trying to survive on a farmworker's salary. It was meager earnings that first brought him and his family to a timeworn collection of battered shanties off Hueneme Road about a decade ago.

The 1930s-era compound was a draw for generations of farmworkers because of its low rents and proximity to the fields. But it also was plagued by decay and neglect, an encampment where raw sewage flowed from broken pipes and rats and cockroaches had the run of the place.

Ferreira and seven other farmworker tenants sued over the slum conditions. After a

three-year legal battle, they won a settlement in which each received \$10,000 and the property was sold at a cut rate to Cabrillo Economic Development Corp., the county's leading builder of low-income housing.

Out of that has emerged the plan to build a new community of single-family homes and apartments exclusively for farmworkers and dedicated to the late labor leader Cesar Chavez. The project is expected to be completed by June 2005.

Federal rental assistance will ensure that no family pays more than 30% of its income to live in the apartments. The single-family homes will be sold to farmworkers, including Ferreira and three others who brought the lawsuit. Prices for the three- and four-bedroom homes have not been set, but it's likely that Habitat for Humanity will help build the houses, meaning applicants will be required to supply some of their own muscle to realize the dream of homeownership.

Ferreira is ready to do what-

ever it takes to move into his new residence on Salvador Drive.

The units are certain to fill immediately, given the desperate need, Ferreira said. But they also will serve as a model for future efforts, while paying tribute to the struggle involved in securing farmworker housing, he said.

Other streets will be named Gutierrez Lane, Mary Herrera Lane and Elias Drive after plaintiffs in lawsuits that have made farmworker housing a reality in Ventura County.

"I think we've shown that nothing is impossible," said Ferreira, walking last week on the Hueneme Road property where the new development will be built.

"What will grow here will be precious," he said. "And it will demonstrate what people can accomplish when they work together."

The summit, which is open to the public, starts at 8 a.m. at the Santa Paula Community Center.

For details, call (805) 659-3791.