

This is a story of a caring and determined little town and a gutsy visionary nonprofit that, with scant land and no water to be found, still figured out a way to build affordable homes for low-income seniors—and with Pacific Ocean views, to boot.

## Monterey Bay's New Affordable Senior Housing, with John Steinbeck's Ocean View

*By Jack Foley*

In the seaside town of Pacific Grove, California—population 16,000 and known as “Butterfly Town USA”—houses go for more than \$900,000, even small fixer-uppers. With Monterey Bay in the front yard, Pebble Beach just up the road, and a charming, pedestrian-friendly downtown, it's a coastal paradise punctuated by one of the most photographed spots on the California shore—Lovers' Point.

But along with the beauty of Monterey Bay, and its legendary Cannery Row scenery once penned by Pulitzer Prize winner John Steinbeck, comes another extraordinary tale of the fight to bring affordable housing to area seniors. After 10 years of development and a \$10 million investment, a three-story, 49-unit senior apartment complex was built against great odds. Many have called it a classic tale of the Little Engine that Could, the “little engine” being South County Housing.

The setting for the story is one of the highest priced housing markets in the country. Pacific Grove's seniors—20 percent of the population—were finding it increasingly difficult to pay rising rents in order to stay in the community some had called home since childhood. Moreover, many of the city's senior population are low income and long-time renters. Many “old-timers” already had left for less expensive communities.

In 1996, the Pacific Grove City Council decided to do something about its elder-flight problem and the dearth of affordable rental housing for older citizens. A senior housing advisory committee was formed

and charged with finding a development partner to build the city's first affordable housing project.

From an applicant pool of eight, the city chose South County Housing Corporation, a NeighborWorks® member and a veteran of 25 years of building affordable housing in the area. This partnership between the city and the nonprofit developer became an odyssey, winding through the perilous development approval process, which included a lengthy search for land with a coastal view, a commodity so scarce the wait for allocations is measured in years.

A small parcel of land was purchased and combined with a tiny, adjoining city park for a total project site of 1.6 acres—right across the street from the city's senior center and a block from Monterey Bay and Lovers' Point.

In Pacific Grove the amount of water available to the city is scarce, therefore only a limited amount of water service for new housing is allowed, including remodeling when bathrooms are involved. Development projects have to be put on hold until water allocations become available. At one point it appeared the project would be canceled, until generous citizens—some of them senior citizens—donated a portion of their water allocation for the project. When the late Wallace Getz, a long-time local businessman and CPA who owned a lot of property in Pacific Grove, donated his water allocation for the project, the water issues were at last resolved.



Next came an extensive and lengthy entitlement process that included approvals from the city council and planning commission, and, because of the site's sensitive location near Monterey Bay, approvals from the California Coastal Commission, the Monterey Regional Water Pollution Control Agency and the Monterey Peninsula Water Management District.

With an innovative financing package and a lot of handholding by South County Housing staff, the project was ready to go.

Twenty-three months after the October 27, 2004 groundbreaking, and nearly \$10 million and 10 years after it all began the partners and the community celebrated a joyous grand opening on September 6, 2006 with tours of the new complex.

What they saw was a stunning, three-story apartment complex, now named Vista Point at Pacific Grove, overlooking Monterey Bay. In addition to its 48 apartments for seniors—and one for an on-site manager—the complex boasts an expansive community room and kitchen, a computer lab, a reception and mail area, a centrally located elevator, and plenty of parking. On the north side, a deck opens onto tiny, verdant Chase Park and its meandering walkways through towering trees. Apartment sizes range from 453 square-foot studios that rent for \$452 per month for seniors earning up to 45 percent of the AMI to 836 square-foot, 2-bedroom apartments that rent for \$790 per month for seniors earning up to 60 percent of the AMI.

“NeighborWorks® America is proud of our role in providing important capital funds to South County Housing and the Vista Point Pacific Grove project,” said Margaret Frisbee, Pacific district director of NeighborWork's® America in California. “The

greatest return of our investment is the significance of this senior housing project for the residents living there today and those coming behind them. They will remain appreciative of the tremendous effort put forth by everyone involved in this project.”

Julie Uretsky of the Pacific Grove Community Development Department says the city made the right choice when it picked a development partner.

“There was an unbelievable amount of patience and effort on South County's part in meeting some of our concerns,” Uretsky says. “They were unbelievably good.”

“With all of the challenges we faced, it was an extraordinary accomplishment to achieve what we did,” said Dennis Lalor, executive director of South County Housing. Lalor credits the advisory committee with never wavering in its support of the project. “That's who made it a success,” Lalor explained. “If that committee did not want it as bad as they did, it would not have happened.”

Carmelita Freeman, 76, lives in a third floor apartment with a commanding view of Monterey Bay. The former hospital psychiatric technician is a long-time resident of Pacific Grove who had to move away when rents went up. But Vista Point, she said, has allowed her to return and to enjoy the peace of mind of knowing she is back home and in a place she can afford. “It's the most beautiful thing that has ever happened to me, except for the births of my children,” she said. I just can't believe I have this apartment. It's a miracle. They'll have to carry me out in a box.” ■

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