

It's Shangri-La in S.F. for low-income seniors

Mission Bay subsidized housing 'a blessing' for 180 older residents

Heather Boerner, Special to The Chronicle
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In San Francisco's most up-and-coming neighborhood - high-tech, high-rent Mission Bay - 180 senior citizens with very low incomes have found paradise.

"I tell you - it's not only a dream come true, but a blessing and a prayer answered," said Sondra Roland, 64. "To ever have a one-bedroom apartment in this city, for an amount I could afford - it's amazing. I have a deck! Who would have thought I could have that without paying \$1,700 a month?"

Indeed, Roland, whose graying afro frames her heart-shaped face, pays nowhere near \$1,700 a month - and neither do any of the others who live in Mission Creek Senior Community. The building, which fronts Mission Creek Estuary, is a subsidized housing complex run by Mercy Housing California.

Residents have an average annual income of about \$10,000. In a city with a median income of more than \$60,000 for one person and where rents regularly top \$2,000 a month, Roland is right; finding this apartment was an answer to her prayers.

"There is an enormous need for senior housing for very-low-income seniors," said Sharon Christen, housing developer for Mercy Housing California. "According to the San Francisco 2000 Consolidated Plan, senior services advocates in San Francisco have identified affordable rental housing as the highest priority for San Francisco's low-income elderly population." She said that Mercy typically has a waiting list in the hundreds and that it can take five to seven years to turn around.

Mission Creek opened in 2006 after years of planning by Mercy and the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency. When the city approved a redevelopment plan for Mission Bay - a 303-acre former rail yard - the goal was lofty: Create a new San Francisco community with a new feeling.

There are no painted ladies here. This is a neighborhood of mid-rises and high rents. New developments such as the Beacon, 200 Townsend and 188 King all attract high-income couples, mostly in their 30s or 40s and mostly without children.

The stores here are big - sprawling Borders Books and Music and a Safeway take up thousands of square feet on the ground floor of the Beacon condos. The city is planning a 2.65 million-square-foot research campus for UCSF and another 6 million square feet of biotech and office space.

So how do seniors fit into this tech-friendly neighborhood? The same way they fit into every neighborhood, said Amy Neches, the redevelopment agency's project manager for Mission Bay.

"Mission Bay has high-tech and biotech aspects to it, but it's also a community - and seniors are part of that community," she said. "Are there people in their 20s, 30s and 40s who live there and work in the tech industries? Of course. It's San Francisco. (High tech) is, in part, what the industry is here."

The Mission Creek community was part of the plan from the beginning. When the redevelopment agency started work, Neches said, planners were mindful of meeting the city's affordable housing obligations citywide as well as for the neighborhood. To that end, the agency opened Rich Sorro Commons, a low-income rental complex for families, and is breaking ground on first-time home-buyer units in the same area.

The project, which includes solar panels and was constructed using some recycled materials, has won a number of awards, including a Golden Nugget from the building industry's Builder Magazine for best mixed-use project and a Boston Society of Architects' award for socially responsible housing.

On the ground floor of Mission Creek, there's a new branch of the San Francisco Public Library and a coffee shop. An adult day health program is on Mission Creek's second floor, featuring socialization and other programs, including tai chi and other forms of exercise. Social workers help unsnarl red tape from medical and government bureaucracies.

Every week, said building manager Jose Vega, the community supplies residents with produce and dairy products, and there's a monthly birthday party for the residents.

Because the residents of Mission Creek span nationalities from Korean to Chinese to Macau to Iranian to Pakistani to Ukrainian, Vega makes sure the building has a library with titles in Mandarin, Cantonese and Russian, among other languages. The residents celebrate every holiday, from gay pride to International Women's Day to Mexican Independence Day.

Last year on the Fourth of July, Mission Creek staff honored residents by putting up flags representing every nationality of seniors living and working in the building. Now, the dining room has a slight flavor of the United Nations, with all the flags encircling the room.

Vega has worked for Mercy since 1992. He started as a janitor at a building on Jones and Golden Gate. Over the years, he's worked his way up to building manager. An immigrant from Cuba, Vega said his homesickness for his parents, who are in their 80s, led him to want to manage a seniors building.

"The way I think of it is this: Someone is in Cuba holding my mother's hand," he said. "So I'm here holding someone else's mother's hand."

Mission Creek residents are low-income senior citizens, 62 and older. Some of them pay their rent through the federal housing assistance program Section 8, which allows residents to pay a third of their income on rent. Another portion of residents come to Mission Creek through the Americans with Disabilities Act's program to house people with HIV and AIDS.

Another portion come to the program through the San Francisco Housing Authority or the Department of Public Health. Many of these people have been homeless, Vega said.

Sondra Roland is one of them.

After she lost her job as a receptionist and her apartment on Haight Street, Roland lived in a Salvation Army shelter for 20 months. After that, home was a 12-by-12 room in a single-room-occupancy building at Sixth and Mission streets. Today, Roland says, she gets up most every morning and goes for a walk along the water. "I never walked when I lived at Sixth and Mission," Roland said. "I ran from my place to the bus stop and that was it."

Living in Mission Creek has created a sense of safety and wellness for other residents, too. When David Sandow, 65, parked his van in the garage of the housing complex in April 2006, it marked the first time in six years that he wouldn't be returning to sleep in it.

After a varied career as a dialysis nurse, ski instructor and book binder, a combination of depression, heart problems, family crisis and loss of his home led to him living on the streets of San Francisco. In that van, he created marbled-paper boxes and sold them on the street.

After a time, living this life started to weary him. "There's a certain tension that comes with living on the street," he said. "On the street, you're in a protective mode, and you curtail your spontaneous activity. I found that I was laying in my van most of the day. The idea of getting out and doing things was less and less interesting."

Not only did his lethargy contribute to his depression, but also it aggravated his arthritis, creating a spiral of pain and inactivity that fed one another.

When Sandow moved into his one-bedroom apartment with a garden terrace, he said, he started to relax, and, for the first time in years he felt safe. The first thing he did was take a shower. Then he took a bath. Then he took another bath. He spent the first week living in Mission Creek

just enjoying the apartment.

Like Roland, Sandow walks regularly. Often, he sets up his paper-marbling work outside the public library located on the building's bottom floor and socializes with his neighbors. Some days, he holds cooking classes for his neighbors on how to make veggies like Brussels sprouts, tasty. When he lived on the street, he said, he didn't care about eating well.

Sandow's arthritis no longer bothers him. "Housing equals health," he said. "I used to walk with a cane. I used to use my cart as a walker, pushing it in front of me. I was an 80-year-old man. Now I walk with no pain whatsoever. I'm definitely on the road to recovery."

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Go

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