

Is low-income housing appropriate for downtowns?

Visalia project sparks controversial debate

David Castellon - STAFF WRITER

For years, the former Copeland Lumber Yard in downtown Visalia has sat vacant.

But there are big plans for the 1.54-acre parcel, as the City of Visalia has agreed to sell the property to the non-profit Self-Help Enterprises, and last month the city's planning commission approved a conditional use permit to build a mixed-use apartment complex on the site.

Self-Help specializes in building or revamping houses and rental units for low-income tenants, and the 81-unit The Lofts at Fort Visalia apartments will house low-income and homeless families once what's left of the old lumber yard is torn down and the new three-story complex is built.

Land with history

The planned name refers to the fact that the site of the former lumber yard is believed to be where the first non-native American structure was built in the area by European settlers in the early 1850s — a small fort that later was cleared away.

As for the apartment complex planned there, it will be mixed use, with portions of the ground floor earmarked to become headquarters for the Visalia Arts Consortium, along with a gallery/community space and some artists' work lofts, according to a Visalia Planning Commission report.

That same report states that 20-30% of the one- and two-bedroom units will be "permanent supportive housing," in which homeless families will be provided both housing and on-site and off-site services that can include training in independent living skills, health maintenance and obtaining employment.

Developers missed out

After the lumber yard went out of business in the early 2000s, the city acquired the land as part of a plan to expand the Visalia Transit Center one block south, but that never happened, said Steve Nelsen, CEO and executive director of Downtown Visalians, an association of business and building owners advocating and promoting downtown commerce and activities.

Eventually, the city deemed the site surplus real estate, but by law the first opportunity to buy the land had to go to other public agencies and nonprofits, and Self-Help put in the winning bid of \$1.2 million, matching the property's assessed value.

Controversy rises

That means commercial developers never had a chance at the property, and that's unfortunate, said Brad Maaske,

a Visalia real estate broker who also is running for the supervisor's seat to represent Tulare County's third district, which includes downtown Visalia.

"That's what has frustrated a lot of downtown businesses, that it wasn't for sale," on the open market so commercial developers might have had a shot at acquiring the land and, if they were so inclined, build market-rate housing there or a mix of market-rate and low-income units, he said.

Maaske said he and downtown business operators prefer such a plan because for years city leaders and developers have been working to bring new businesses to downtown Visalia while also slowly gentrifying neighborhoods immediately east, replacing mechanical and industrial businesses with restaurants, breweries and shops that are bringing more people to the larger downtown area.

'No discretionary income'

"Here is where I am torn. I know we need affordable housing," said Maaske, adding that "I'm not against people having affordable housing subsidized by the government, but when you put 81 affordable housing units next to your downtown restaurants and businesses, the reason those people have subsidized rents is they don't have discretionary income.

"And when you don't have discretionary income, it doesn't benefit your downtown to have a lot of people [living there] with no discretionary income. They can't spend at the restaurants and so on."

Fresno's example

Such a situation wouldn't occur if the downtown apartments were leased at market rates, with tenants not so financially strapped who can afford to frequent higher-end downtown businesses, said Maaske, adding that this is a strategy that can work in other downtowns that are looking to bring in residents, including Fresno.

He noted that affordable housing that went into the Fulton Street area about the time efforts were underway to convert the outdoor mall back into a street have attracted tenants, but haven't done much to attract new, higher-end businesses "because there is no spending money, and that's the trap of building all low-income housing surrounding your downtown."

'Perfect' for affordable housing

"We believe it to be a perfect downtown site to create a mixed-use type of environment that would include affordable housing, Tom Collishaw, president and CEO of Visalia-based

Self-Help, said of the site.

As for worries the tenants wouldn't support downtown businesses, he noted that most of the people his organization serves typically spent 50% or more of their income on rent, and with assistance they typically end up paying no more than 30 percent.

"You are basically giving that family more spending power to be able to spend on other things," and those people generally want to get a cup of coffee at Starbucks or go out to dinner and a movie, said Collishaw, adding that living in affordable housing puts them in better positions to afford to do these things downtown.

Needed repairs

Another concern raised by Maaske, "the vast majority of these [low-income] housing projects become projects," needing constant repairs and becoming the focal point of frequent police calls.

"Over time, when you have a lot of folks who are struggling to make ends meet, over time you can try to keep up the exteriors of the properties, but they deteriorate," he added.

"And Self-Help tries hard to be a good steward. But I really, really have concerns that your downtown, if you want to gentrify it, you don't build your first residential project down there as subsidized housing. I don't see that as being a long-term benefit."

Not that Maaske believes his comments now will change the plans for the old lumber yard, as the Self-Help project checks off most every box to

qualify to be an affordable housing project as well as to qualify for the public funding and tax breaks available for such housing, including being a high-density project with one-block proximity to the Visalia Transit Center, Tulare County's primary bus hub, as well proximity to health services by having Family HealthCare Center's main clinic across the street.

No NIMBY

This isn't a case of having a "not in my backyard" attitude toward low-income residences, said Maaske, indicating he favors new downtown housing with a mix of market-rate and low-income apartments, while entirely low-income housing projects should be located in areas with businesses offering more affordable goods and services that tenants are more likely to frequent.

Nelsen, who also is a former Visalia mayor and city councilman, said he never heard from downtown business people irate over the apartment development, though there were concerns about who would qualify for the subsidized living spaces and whether vagrants might end up hanging out at the new complex, though that concern appears to be meritless.

He also has learned that Self-Help will have an on-site manager, and he's not worried about the property deteriorating because "They do a good job of managing their properties."

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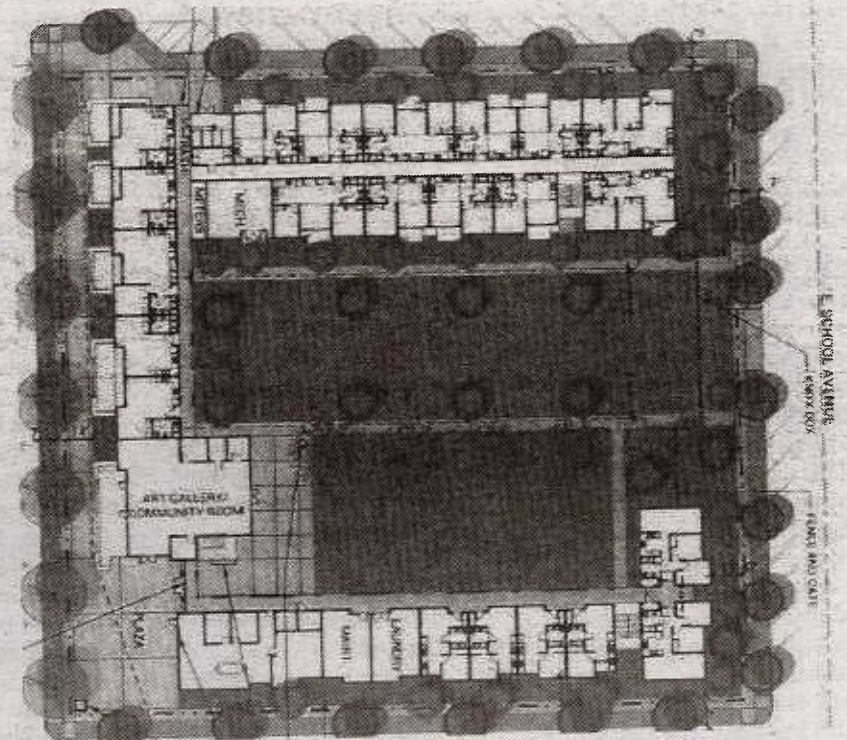


PHOTO VIA CITY OF VISALIA | A site plan shows how the 81-unit The Lofts at Fort Visalia project will be situated at the site of a former lumberyard.