

# The Hanford Sentinel

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## Affordable housing near Fargo Crossing stirs debate

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By: Eric Gill



Jessica Hoff Berzac of Upholdings and Tom Collishaw of Self Help Enterprises listen to comments from the audience about proposed low-income housing project near Fargo Crossing in Hanford.

After a lively and sometimes raucous Public Comments session, representatives from firms that plan to build affordable housing rentals in Hanford spoke at a Town Hall meeting this week.

Dubbed a Special Meeting, it was called by the Hanford City Council on short notice at the request of Councilmember Amanda Saltray.

An estimated 500 to 600 people attended the meeting, held Feb. 16 at the Hanford Civic Auditorium. The vast majority of Kings County residents in attendance appeared to oppose the Northstar project.

After two hours of listening to citizens voice their opposition, representatives from the two firms developing the Northstar project introduced themselves, along with an attorney who appeared on their behalf.

Executive Tom Collishaw and Jessica Hoff Berzac, a principal with Illinois-based UPholdings, introduced themselves.

"We're passionate about our neighborhoods," said Collishaw, CEO of Self-Help Enterprises in Visalia, reportedly established in 1965.

Collishaw cited Lincoln Plaza as a company success story. The two-, three- and four-bedroom complex — opened in Hanford on Harris Street in 2007 — offers 40 units for low-income families, he said.

Berzac did most of the speaking on behalf of the affordable housing project. She also single-handedly deflected much of the criticism from the crowd.

Among the most vocal opponents, Christine Leach of Hanford spent several minutes during the public comments session systematically critiquing the Northstar project and the manner in which local government officials approved it.

"My first point of question is: 'Who came up with such a small lot to pack so many people into?'" Leach asked about the project, planned for vacant land near 11th Avenue in Hanford.

"I want to tell the Council, 'Shame on you,'" Leach said, noting she first heard about the project two weeks ago. "We have the right simply to know and ask questions."

### **Developers Respond**

After introducing herself as a native of the Central Valley, Berzac cited several similar low-income housing projects developed by UPholdings and Self-Help Enterprises.

"It's not an experiment," Berzac said of the Northstar project. "It's a critically proven best practice." With \$1 million, she pointed out Kings County is putting up a fraction of the \$31-million total cost of the project, planned for the 600 block of North Star Drive.

"The bulk of the money is from the state and from federal tax credits," Berzac said. "Part of the reason the project is so expensive is it helps offset the rents."

"This project cannot be changed," she said, after pointing out low-income housing developments like Northstar are mandated by state and federal laws.

Berzac launched a presentation to explain the development to local citizens. However, half the people left after she stated it's "a done deal."

According to an UPholdings document, income thresholds for Northstar residents are aligned with the number of bedrooms and occupants per unit. They are:

- 1-BDRM – \$787 rent – 1 household member – \$29,400 income
- 2-BDRM – \$945 rent – 2 household members – \$33,600 income
- 3-BDRM – \$1,090 rent – 3-4 household members – \$41,940 income
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"This is a proven model," Berzac said, citing low-income housing projects UPholding has developed over the past decade. "We're good at what we do."

When someone in the audience asked if seniors can live at Northstar, Berzac answered in the affirmative. However, they must meet the low-income requirements.

## **Data-driven Housing**

The need for affordable housing in Kings County is supported by vital data, according to Berzac. Noting most monthly rents in Hanford exceed \$1,300 for a single-bedroom apartment, she cited a 2.5% occupancy rate in the area. That number falls below zero when income levels are factored in.

Referring to a 0% "functional" occupancy rate, Berzac said state and local government officials identified Kings County as having a critical need for low-income housing, largely due to migrant farm workers relied upon by business owners for decades.

"We are at a critical housing crisis," the Fresno native said. "The rents are higher in Hanford than almost any other county."

Lisa Lewis, PhD., also spoke at the Town Hall meeting. She addressed rumors that the Northstar housing project is aimed at people with severe mental disorders.

Lewis, director of Kings County Behavioral Health department, is credited with helping facilitate the expansion of affordable housing projects in the area. She explained the distinctions between people with severe mental disorders and individuals who suffer from milder forms of depression and anxiety, including people identified by healthcare professionals as bipolar.

Lewis distinguished "high-functioning" individuals with emotional problems who are able to hold full-time jobs and pay rents from people who are severely emotionally disturbed.

"I believe that people who are able to live in this kind of housing are high functioning," said Lewis.

When an audience member asked if military veterans diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can qualify to live at the proposed Northstar rental project, Lewis made it clear they do.

Based on feedback, it was clear the county needed to improve mental health services, Lewis said. It was her responsibility to bring federal grant availability and state legal requirements to the attention of the Kings County Board of Supervisors.

"I'm a department head," said Lewis, who identified herself as a licensed psychologist. "One of my roles [as director of Behavioral Health] is to make presentations to supervisors. I don't regret the project at all.

"We have to build a system of care," she continued, identifying 2017 and 2018 as years when housing costs reached crisis levels in Kings County.

Lewis reported she advised supervisors at the time to pass up a million dollars in funding for Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) because it is aimed at people with serious mental illnesses.

The county needed to first focus on high-functioning individuals seeking affordable housing, like those accommodated by the Northstar project.

"They need permanent housing because they are vulnerable," Lewis said.

## **City Manager Speaks**

Prior to the developer's presentation, Hanford City Manager Mario Cifuentez addressed local residents. He displayed a projected Land Use History map of the proposed Northstar development and noted seven zoning meetings were held.

"This went through site plan review in 2021," Cifuentez said, pointing out the property was not rezoned to accommodate the project, as some people have claimed.

Cifuentez made some key points during his presentation:

1. Work began on the Northstar project in 2013.
2. Affordable housing development is part of a "long-range" plan through 2035.
3. Affordable housing needs are based on an estimated future population of 90,000 area residents.
4. A total of 16 meetings were held with the local planning commission to discuss the Northstar project.

The city manager clarified several misconceptions about the project, including a rumor that ex-cons on parole will be living at Northstar Courts.

"No parolees," Cifuentez said. "I don't know where that came from. We are not doing re-entry housing."

He made it clear, however, the city and county are mandated by California lawmakers to develop affordable housing that meets stringent location requirements.

Those requirements are intended to ensure that people on fixed and low incomes have access to nearby shopping, public transit, healthcare and other vital services.

Regarding accusations of non-transparency and secrecy, Hanford's city manager said it was false to assume government officials tried to hide the Northstar project from residents.

"There was no attempt to hide anything from anyone," Cifuentez said at the Town Hall meeting.