

THE SUN-GAZETTE

Self-Help celebrates 60 years of building up communities

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VISALIA – To commemorate six decades of building up low-income communities across the Central Valley, Self-Help Enterprises CEO Tom Collishaw has given special attention to some noteworthy accomplishments made by the organization during its 60th year of operation.

On Dec. 6, Self-Help Enterprises marked its 60th birthday with a private celebration in which nearly 500 community partners were invited to honor the achievement. From Collishaw's perspective, this celebration was not only to celebrate the number of projects completed, it also celebrated the work from funders, staff, former employees, board members and public officials who have supported the organization's mission over the years.

"We continue to truly believe that our staff is our most important asset," Collishaw said in an interview with The Sun-Gazette. "We owe a tremendous debt to all the people that have worked and supported Self-Help Enterprises over the years, and that created a culture here of commitment, hard work and keeping our eye on the prize."

According to Collishaw, the organization's 60th year has been marked by significant milestones. This year, Self-Help opened several new projects, including its collaboration with Salt + Light on The Neighborhood Village in Goshen. The project is the first 100% permanent supportive housing project using manufactured homes.

"We continue to suffer from a true housing crisis – not just in the San Joaquin Valley, but it's really a national crisis," Collishaw said. "We lack housing, not just for people who are homeless, but also affordable housing for working people in vast slots of our communities."

The organization has also worked on various other new low-income housing developments, such as getting started on the Guardian Village in Reedley and wrapping up The Lofts at Fort Visalia. There was also the completion of the Los Arroyos Apartments in Farmersville as well as the Santa Fe Commons in Tulare.

Other notable achievements include the completion of mutual Self-Help housing projects in Orosi, Shafter and Fresno County in which families actively participated in building their homes.

In addition to building up new housing, Self-Help also focuses on preserving and rehabilitating existing housing as a critical part of addressing the housing crisis. This approach, known as housing preservation, involves repairing, modernizing and maintaining homes so that families can continue to live in safe conditions.

"We've got to be working both sides of this, and preservation is critical to solving our housing crisis," Collishaw said. "Everybody focuses on adding new units, and that's where those beautiful new projects come in, and that's important too, but on the other side, we can't be losing the housing stock that we already have."

Notably, Self-Help also reached a significant milestone in housing preservation this year with the rehabilitation of its 7,000th home, ensuring families can remain in safe and sustainable housing.

The Housing Rehabilitation Program is a key part of this effort, Collishaw said. It provides funding and assistance to homeowners who need to make essential repairs, allowing them to bring their homes up to code and improve their living conditions.

More projects on the horizon

Other ways that Self-Help has pursued housing preservation is by playing a role in water sustainability projects. In conjunction with its housing projects, this year Self-Help also completed the first well replacement project in partnership with the Greater Kaweah Groundwater Sustainability Agency, a key step in addressing groundwater challenges in the region.

Even further, Self-Help is planning on finding new ways to improve water sustainability in the Valley, according to Collishaw.

"The whole Southwest has to come to grips with the scarcity of water," Collishaw said. "It needs to continue an effort to have all stakeholders agree on a way forward that's equitable and recognizes that we have finite resources, so we're excited that the process is well underway in California; and we're pleased to be part of the stakeholder process to ensure that everybody has a say in that."

Water sustainability isn't the only way Self-Help is looking to the future. One of the projects that Collishaw believes will be significant during the organization's 61st year is its planned housing project in Goshen.

“We’re really excited about starting our new Self-Help homes in Goshen. We have 89 homes planned, and that is an opportunity for low-income families to become homeowners by participating in the construction of their own homes,” Collishaw said.

The project will not only provide homeownership opportunities, but also improve Goshen’s community which multiple service organizations have been working on for a long time. According to Collishaw, the project is going to be in between the Neighborhood Village and the Sequoia Commons, as this area has already made a significant impact on the community.

Collishaw further explained that three or four years ago, the nonprofit organization Community Services Employment Training (CSET) conducted a community survey in Goshen asking residents about their vision for the future of the community. Most respondents identified the new Self-Help Enterprises area as the focal point, noting its park, housing and overall appeal as something they aspire to.

As the low-income housing program prepares for its 61st year in action, this upcoming project is significant as it brings Self-Help Enterprises full circle, considering the first ever Self-Help housing project was started in Goshen in the 1960s with the addition of only three houses.

“It is gratifying to know that we’ve been able to make a difference – to date – in about 85,000 families’ lives since our inception,” Collishaw said. “We’re proud, on the one hand, but we’re also sobered by the fact. There’s just so much work left to be done.”