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Sick-of-more Village: Can Orangevale Cohousing overcome NIMBY-mindedness?

By [John Motsinger](#)

With all the hullabaloo over the environment and sustainability, it would have been easy to assume that Sacramento would embrace a project like Sycamore Village with the eagerness of a high-school cheerleader, but Marty Maskall knew better.

As the visionary leader behind the 35-unit cohousing development, the 25-year Fair Oaks resident has discovered that innovative ideas aren't always the most popular.

"These infill projects are like hornets' nests," Maskall said.

Despite its impeccable transit-oriented, environmentally friendly green design, plans for Sycamore Village were rejected in January 2007 by the Orangevale Community Planning Advisory Committee following complaints from area residents. The project is scheduled to be heard by the Sacramento County Policy Planning Commission on February 26.

The 3.5-acre parcel under consideration has long been occupied by a single home surrounded by lots of open land for horses to run free, but it is now encroached upon by quarter-acre lots with swimming pools and strip malls. Like many communities in the greater Sacramento area that were once rolling countryside speckled with farms and ranches, much of Orangevale has been absorbed by the relentless advance of suburban development.

As one of only a few underdeveloped lots along the busy Greenback Lane corridor, the spot seemed ideal for a progressive housing project, said Rick Mockler, vice president of CoHousing Partners, LLC. Cohousing looks just like any other apartment complex or cluster of townhomes but has a much stronger community ethic: These developments share a large common house for cooking meals together, residents divvy up chores and maintenance responsibilities, and swaths of green space are reserved as communal property.

Cohousing is usually situated within walking distance to schools and centers of commerce, and sustainability is at the center of its design. Within a quarter mile of Sycamore Village are a school, grocery store, fire station, fitness center, medical facility, dentist, restaurant, gas station and bus stop. The houses will be built with bamboo flooring, cellulose insulation and recycled decking; the grounds will include organic garden patches, permaculture landscaping and compost heaps. In other words, this project is the very definition of smart growth with a limited carbon footprint.



All these future residents of Sycamore Village are saying is, "Give cohousing a chance!"

Photo By Marion Isaac

Yet neighbors have voiced concerns about traffic congestion, noise pollution and loss of aesthetic beauty, and are worried that this medium-density development will diminish their property values.

Some of those concerns are legitimate, Maskall said, and she has worked hard with Mockler to address them. For example, the parking area has been redesigned to minimize the nuisance of car headlights shining into neighbors' bedrooms. They also commissioned an environmental impact report from the County to assess traffic and noise impacts, both of which were found to be less than significant and required no mitigation measures.

Effects on property values are harder to ascertain, but at least one study done by Virginia Tech University found that carefully planned apartment complexes actually increased the value of surrounding detached homes. Area appraisers have corroborated that story, indicating that higher-density housing need not diminish real-estate value if soundly constructed and maintained.

With Sycamore Village units selling for between \$340,000 and \$615,000, price alone is bound to keep out the riffraff and encourage only serious inquiries. Besides, cohousing typically draws a crowd of long-term investors who want to develop a relationship with a community.

Maskall has tried to debunk other less tangible fears about cohousing as well. For instance, she emphasizes that cohousing projects are not communes—an epithet that connotes some sort of drug-addled hippie backwater imagined from failed experiments of a bygone era.

In fact, there's nothing particularly experimental about cohousing. At least, not anymore. Southside Park Cohousing in downtown Sacramento was built in 1993, and several projects in Davis started before that. All of them are thriving and successful communities with waiting lists of prospective buyers should a current resident decide to move out.

Laurie Friedman has lived at Muir Commons cohousing in west Davis since its inception in 1991 and wrote a letter encouraging the adoption of the Sycamore Village plan. "Though there may have been some trepidation at the beginning, we are looked upon as good neighbors and an asset to the community," she wrote.

Mayor Heather Fargo had similar things to say about Southside Park Cohousing in a letter she sent last March to County Supervisor Roberta MacGlashan, who represents Orangevale: "Sacramento Cohousing has added greatly to the quality, stability and value of the area by the infusion of investment dollars and homeowners."

When it comes down to it, the real problem may be an entrenched Not In My Back Yard philosophy that has little to do with rational argument. Mockler likens the NIMBY attitude of cohousing detractors to the way many people feel about mass transit—they support the idea of public transportation, so long as they can continue driving their cars. "Everyone likes the idea for someone else," Mockler said. "Most people understand that infill development is the right way to grow instead of sprawling out, but they want infill to be somewhere else."

Maskall sees that mentality pervading throughout the County when it comes to building projects. She uses a new term to describe a seemingly nonsensical planning strategy called BANANA—Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything.

That approach has led to the construction of housing developments that are far away from county infrastructure and the pesky neighbors who are likely to complain about them. And while concerned citizens and government officials continue to pay lip service to the environment and sustainability, little progress is made toward achieving anything other than the status quo.

"People want their SUVs and want to drive everywhere, but they don't want air pollution, and they don't want to pay taxes," Maskall said. "It's human nature. We want everything and we don't want to pay for it."