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Co-Housing Offers Quality-of-Life Benefits



Sycamore Village Co-Housing Community members, **Norma Eugenio, Subhash Chand, Marty Maskall**, back row, **Greg Kelly, Isabelle Kelly** and **Bobbi Montross**, front. —Photo by *Maxton Isaac*

Co-Housing Senior Communities, a Popular Alternative to Assisted Living

By Michael A. Piekarz
Staff Writer

The first time she visited Southside Park Co-Housing in downtown Sacramento, 62-year-old Marty Maskall knew she was in love.

"I saw the beautiful central courtyard surrounded by beautiful homes and a gorgeous, central green," said Maskall. "I knew that day that I wanted to start a community just like that."

And that's precisely what she's doing now. Maskall, founding member of the Sycamore Village Co-Housing Community and several other members are currently in the process of

getting county approval to start a co-housing community in Orangevale near the intersection of Greenback Lane and Illinois Avenue.

Co-housing is a form of collaboratively-planned housing. Co-housing communities consist of privately-owned, fully-equipped homes plus extensive common areas. They are designed and managed by residents who have chosen to live in a close-knit neighborhood with a healthy blend of privacy and community.

From its origins in Denmark, co-housing is quickly becoming a popular trend in the United States. There are now over 90 co-housing communities in 37 states. Another 100 co-housing communities are under construction or in the planning phase.

Co-housing communities have sprung up in Sacramento, Davis, Nevada City, Chico, Pleasant Hill, Berkeley, Emeryville and Santa Rosa. Maskall's proposed site in Orangevale is waiting for county approval, but there is some resistance to the project by neighboring residents. A Davis co-housing community, Muir Commons, was the first such community in the United States.

Architect Charles Durrett and his wife, Kathryn McCamant, brought co-housing to the United States in the 1980s. Durrett is also a proponent of independent living and believes that co-housing is an ideal fit.

"These communities are often started by older people who don't want to end up in an institution," he said. "It happens when you know your neighbors and everyone cares."

Part of Maskall's attraction to co-housing was the common sense of active neighborhood participation and an opportunity to share common experiences. "The biggest problems for seniors are fear, isolation and loneliness," she said. "Co-housing communities solve all that by making older adults an active part of a community of 30 or more families."

While the term co-housing sometimes creates an image of 60s era communes, co-housing homes are similar to any other single-family, owner-occupied home. The major differences are that the houses tend to be smaller, closer together and more energy efficient. Each family has a private household, and the common areas are managed through a homeowners association.

Co-housing communities tend to be more space conscious than their conventional counterparts, and they maximize opportunities for neighbors to cross paths throughout the day. Most communities have some sort of central hub. In co-housing the central hub is usually the common house.

Designed to include a large kitchen, dining area, lounge, guest room, laundry, mailroom and other activity rooms, the common house is the center point of most co-housing communities. Co-housing community members often eat supper together in the common house several times a week.

In addition, the common house is a place for residents to organize and host community events. "It's an excellent community resource for large gatherings," said Maskall. "Sometimes the common house will contain a play area for children, an office, additional laundry facilities, a workshop and guest rooms."

Because of the efficiency-centered design and a tendency towards energy efficiency, co-housing is often less expensive than its conventional counterparts. Individual homeowners may also save money by sharing tools rather than having a set for each household.

Residents of co-housing communities usually represent a diverse cross-section of the population. Members range from children to seniors, singles, couples, workers and retirees. Many times they did not know each other before joining the community, and most residents report developing a sense of greater self.

"I experience the rewards of living communally," said cohousing member Karen Hester. "It feels like an extended family. You have people you can turn to and depend on for fun as well as people that can help you face the challenges of life."

While co-housing has many advantages, there are some difficulties associated with establishing and living in a co-housing development. "We had to fight hard just to get our co-housing projects built," said Durrett.

In many cases, outside resistance to co-housing is based upon fear of increased crime, increased traffic or lowered property values in surrounding homes. Studies have shown that these fears are unfounded in nearly all cases.

Internal challenges to the co-housing community are those faced in any setting where people gather. Sometimes there is more noise and clutter than in a conventional home. Some neighbors are easier to get along with than others. Occasionally the governing principle by which co-housing communities operate – consensus – operates too slowly for residents.

The benefits seem to outweigh the drawbacks, though. The biggest new development in the movement is a sudden increase in the creation of senior co-housing communities. It is attractive because it can be an alternative to assisted living. By taking care of one another, seniors can maintain their independence longer and avoid isolation.

"Quality of life comes from sharing," said Maskall. "Co-housing allows us to do that."

Further information on cohousing in the United States may be found at www.Cohousing.org. Information about senior cohousing can be found at www.ElderCohousing.org. For information about the latest local cohousing project, contact www.OrangevaleCohousing.org.