

HOME from A1

The Cottage Grove project aims to serve area residents with very low incomes (under 50 percent area median income) who are currently unable to access affordable housing or are at high risk of losing their current housing. It operates as a housing cooperative run by the residents.

The village was developed by SquareOne Villages in collaboration with the Cottage Village Coalition (CVC) — a local extension and committee of SquareOne — with the goal of bringing a permanent, affordable tiny house cooperative to Cottage Grove.

The first residents were welcomed into the village last September.

Mayor Jeff Gowing praised the partnerships built with the city during the process.

“I’m really thankful that this is here in our community and all the hard work

that the people have put into it to make this happen,” he said.

Speeches from residents at the celebration were effusive about the life-changing impact the village has had on them, bringing dignity, opportunity and agency to their lives.

Resident Aislinn Blackstone expressed a deep gratitude for everyone who helped realize the village as it rescued her from a point where she felt she had lost hope in finding stability.

“I wish that there was a proper way that I could find to thank you guys because you literally saved my life with this project,” she said. “And every day, I wake up and I am inspired to do something or I am inspired by somebody around me. Whether it’s the construction workers or whether it’s my neighbors who have become family.”

Lacking foundation and a safe place makes every other struggle in life harder, she added.

“And so when you have that place to go, you have that safe place, and then you have a community around you that is supporting you. This strength that it gives you — the joy that it gives you is so much more than I could ever describe,” she said.

The conceptual seeds of the \$1.7 million project were first planted more than four years ago when a small group of Cottage Grove community members were discussing solutions to the town’s challenges with homelessness.

“The story of this project really is being in the right place at the right time and working in collaboration,” said CVC Chair Bruce Kelsh.

In a fortuitous partnership with SquareOne Villages, the community members then began the years-long job of establishing a housing cooperative in town.

Cottage Village is a leasehold co-op, meaning the co-op members lease the property from SquareOne.

The cooperative itself, however, is owned and operated by the members who act as landlords and have control over elements such as pricing and vetting applicants, essentially democratizing the tiny home community.

Once accepted, a resident becomes part of the co-op and signs an agreement to abide by certain standards such as participation in monthly meetings and volunteering a

minimum number of hours per month to the “common good” of the village.

The system allows the tiny homes to range in rent prices from \$350 to \$500.

Besides its affordability, much of the village’s appeal lies in providing agency and authorship to the lives of its residents.

“This community of beautiful tiny homes is evidence that dreams can come true. And miracles still happen,” said Kelsh.

New Models for Housing

Cottage Grove’s 2018 Housing Needs Analysis identified a deep need for more housing availability at all income levels. Creating housing affordable for lower income levels has been a particular challenge, but Cottage Grove — quite uniquely — has seen several models spring up in the last year.

Last August, nonprofit DevNW completed construction on six new affordable homes just off Arthur Avenue.

The homes were developed as a community land trust, which legally separates the land from the houses, allowing DevNW to retain stewardship over the land. Home-buyers thus acquire full ownership of the home without having to cover the cost of the land, providing opportunities for more moderate-income buyers.

As a permanent affordable housing model, it aimed to create a long-term habit of homeownership within the commu-

ity.

The two-story cottages feature both two- and three-bedroom versions targeting families earning below 80 percent of the area median income.

This put a cap on eligibility, meaning a family of two was limited to an annual income of \$41,550 and a family of five limited to \$56,100.

Average mortgage payments end up being \$1,050 a month for the three-bedroom homes and \$950 for the two-bedroom.

Then last December, Legion Cottages, a Homes for Good project, welcomed its first residents to a four-unit tiny home village behind the American Legion.

The project, which partnered with American Legion and the University of Oregon’s School of Architecture Oregon BILDS program, approved four veterans for residency, lifting them out of homelessness.

It was arranged that VASH (Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing) vouchers could pair with Section 8 housing assistance to set individuals’ rent costs based on income.

Though rent prices at Legion Cottages were estimated to be around \$654 a month at the ribbon cutting, occupants would only pay 30 percent of their income, the rest covered through the voucher program.

At Tuesday’s Cottage Village open house, Bryant spoke of plans to expand into other communities such as Albany and Rose-

burg. Though there was no mention of future SquareOne projects in Cottage Grove, the momentum created by such projects may serve to launch future housing endeavors.

Kelsh said he was interested to see what could be done about transitional short-term housing and unhoused youth in the area.

“But the care that has to be done has to be pretty sophisticated,” he said.

Resources such as the nonprofit Looking Glass and South Lane School District’s McKinney-Vento program which focus on the needs of unhoused youth could be inroads to new solutions, he suggested.

With the Cottage Village co-op effectively able to bootstrap itself from here, Kelsh said the CVC will likely dissolve later this year and new opportunities may arise.

As with any effort of this magnitude, though, a good deal of community support is integral to its success.

The Cottage Village project was completed with the help of monetary, labor and material donations from a large collection of groups and entities including Lane County, the Meyer Memorial Trust, Presbyterian Women’s Association, the King Family, Edwards Mother Earth Foundation and the City of Cottage Grove.

“It truly does take a community to build a village and we are fortunate to have such a community to help us build this one,” said Bryant.

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