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Maintaining a Diverse Venice is an Uphill Battle

Reeve T. Schley
Mirror staff writer

In 1988, a band of Venice community activists concerned about homelessness and a burgeoning housing crisis formed the Venice Community Housing Corporation (VCHC).

Its mission was and is to preserve, maintain and expand affordable housing in the neighborhood, while providing jobs and support for at-risk young people and struggling families.

Over the last 14 years, VCHC has acquired and constructed 129 units of affordable housing in Venice and Mar Vista, while simultaneously running six programs that help local youths learn skills and get jobs.

"The vision of the VCHC is to contribute positively to the growth and heart of the community that is integrated economically, socially and culturally. We think that Venice is one of the few neighborhoods in Los Angeles that really is an existing reality of diversity, and that is what we are trying to preserve," Executive Director Steve Clare said.

Yet, with a number of affordable units set to be demolished in Venice and housing prices escalating, the group is finding that the battle to maintain diversity is intensifying.

In November, the Los Angeles City Council approved a plan to demolish Lincoln Place and replace it with high-priced condominiums, only 25 percent of which will be designated affordable housing.

The 795-unit housing development, constructed after World War II to house GIs and their families and notable for remaining intact and attractive for half a century in a volatile era, is nestled

between Lake Street and Palms Boulevard in Venice and has been the focal point of a contentious 15-year fight between residents (some of whom having been there since 1947) and the property's owner, Robert Bisno.

There is hope, however, that the wrecking ball can be stalled at least for a little while. In mid-December the Lincoln Place Tenants Association (LPTA) filled a lawsuit in Superior Court against the City of Los Angeles, claiming the City erred by using an Environmental Impact Report that dates back to 1994.

If nothing more, the suit will buy time as Lincoln Place is currently under consideration for listing in the National Heritage of Historical Places, a distinction that would ultimately give Bisno the option of restoring the buildings with low-interest loans.

Even though the possible demolition of Lincoln Place is a huge set back, said Clare, it will not end the VCHC's fight for affordable housing.

Currently, VCHC owns 11 developments in Mar Vista and Venice, and has just gone into escrow on another property in Mar Vista with 32 units of affordable housing.

Unfortunately, Clare said buying more property on the Westside is not an option as prices have skyrocketed in recent years. According to DataQuick Information Systems the price of the median house in Venice is now \$538,000.

"It is very difficult for us to acquire smaller apartment buildings on the Westside at this time. We need substantial equity investors and government subsidies to make it work. The market is over inflated; the prices are too high," Clare said. "I hope that they will come down eventually and we will

be able to compete again — but probably not this year."

The VCHC also offers a variety of programs to young people in Mar Vista and the Oakwood section of Venice where poverty and crime are high.

Recent statistics indicate a poverty rate (households making under \$18,100 a year) as high as 42 percent in the Oakwood area. And in 1998, the Los Angeles Police Department reported that 90 percent of the crime in the

24-square-mile Pacific Division occurred within two square miles of Oakwood and Mar Vista.

One of VCHC's programs, Clayworks for Kids, teaches low-income children how to use ceramic tile in construction. In the HandyWorker Program, youths make minor home repairs for elderly and disabled homeowners under a contract with the Los Angeles Housing Department.

VCHC has been able to buy its current properties with funds generated from a variety of grants, donations, and money accumulated through rent and programs. This year, Clare estimates the VCHC will generate \$3 million.

VCHC is located at 720 Rose Avenue in Venice. Contact it at (310) 399-4100, or through its website, www.vchc.org.