

Novato housing project: Green and affordable

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Rob Hart, president of HartMarin, stands in front of the Virginia Grove affordable single-family home project his company developed on Virginia Avenue near downtown Novato. (11 photo/Alan Den)

Developer Rob Hart has been involved in lots of high-end projects, but he takes pride in the work he has done recently - homes that conserve water, energy and other resources.

His company, HartMarin of Novato, most recently developed Virginia Grove, an eight-unit project near downtown at 1845 Virginia Ave. in Novato. Three of the homes were available for buyers who qualified under state requirements as lower-income households. The three-bedroom, two-bath homes were priced at \$400,000.

The other five three-bedroom, two-and-a-half bath homes were priced at \$589,000 and fetched multiple offers above the asking price.

The homes are about half the price a similar home would go for in Novato, Hart said. While they are not in the "affordable" class, they are homes that buyers can afford.

"There's a spiral in Marin that each year homes are bigger in size and price," Hart said. "I wanted to do my part to show you could stop that spiral."

He did it without government subsidies, tax credits or grants.

"Virginia Grove was the first project and it was successful," Hart said. "It's trying to build simple housing in an old-fashioned way."

Green features include water filtration systems that purify rain water, passive solar heating and cooling, and the use of recycled materials on an infill property. Residents can walk to schools, downtown and transit.

It took 11 months to get the project approved but city officials are now proud of it.

"I was on the City Council when he first came before us and it was a long, long hearing," said Supervisor Judy Arnold.

Neighbors came out in droves with concerns about traffic, crime and high density, but the council finally gave it a thumbs-up.

"The development is lovely," Arnold said. "Any time we can bring in affordable housing, and especially affordable housing that is privately funded, we need to do that."

She said Hart's contribution and selflessness should be saluted.

Gene Laico, an agent with Bradley Real

Estate, said buyers liked a combination of the features of the homes, including the price, the green building aspects and the proximity to downtown.



Rob Hart walks through one of the homes in the Virginia Grove development. He says the project is trying to build simple housing in an old-fashioned way. (IJ photo/Alan Den)

"I think it's amazing that we sold an entire subdivision in two to three months in a slow market at the slowest time of the year," Laico said.

Hart, whose development career spans 30 years, has done his share of high-end resorts, condominiums and residences around the country but he now prefers the niche he has placed himself in more recently.

"We make a living, but we're not going to make a killing," said Hart, 53.

He recently got approval for 10 single-family houses at 1112 Fourth St. in Novato, and will again mix affordable single-family homes with houses that are accessible to buyers of moderate means. Construction could be a year off.

In Mill Valley, he is building a mixed-use project at

505 Miller Ave. in what was the Hillcrest Convalescent Hospital.

The project will include retail, restaurant and office use with live-work condominium housing, single-family townhouses and affordable units. It will be finished in about a year.

Hart has been a consultant with the Spirit Rock Center in Woodacre since 1996 as part of a long-range master plan to expand the center with large-scale assembly space, hospitality facilities, septic systems and major soil stability construction. Spirit Rock planted trees 10 years ago that will help hide new buildings so they are not visible from Sir Francis Drake Boulevard.

The project will be "carbon neutral" with 100 percent of the power self-generated. It will include a village for workers to live in with a common living room and kitchen and private bedrooms in a separate building.

The planners of the project currently are meeting with neighbors about their concerns and what they would like to be included.

"People in the construction industry take advantage of deep pockets in Marin," Hart said. "We bring the systems that we know from really big projects and apply them to smaller projects."

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