

Co-housing building's opening celebrated

By J.M. Brown

jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com
@jmbrownreports on Twitter

SANTA CRUZ » Dick and Diane Klein had about 15 acres in Aptos where, she jokes, they were "failed apple farmers," but where they made a wonderful life for decades and hosted 17 weddings.

But as the social activists reached their 80s, the couple, who are great collectors of art and friends alike, decided they needed to "downsize" and sought a more urban lifestyle, one that afforded them the opportunity to walk to restaurants and shops — a "new adventure," Diane called it.

The couple joined several other would-be buyers several years ago in forging a new neighborhood in Santa Cruz with the help of developer Barry Swenson Builder, who also secured financing, and project manager John Majors. The Walnut Commons co-housing project containing 19 units at the corner of Walnut Avenue and Center Street was completed last year, is full and

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opened Friday with a ribbon-cutting and tour.

"None of us knew each other before we came together, and we've worked everything out by consensus," Diane said. "We feel like a family."

Residents of the three-story, green-constructed building designed by leading co-housing visionary Charles Durrett and Swenson architect Bob Hightower often share meals in a common space and terrace on the ground floor and tend to a community garden. Each unit — there are one- and two-bedroom floor plans — also contains a kitchen and some have



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Barry Swenson, from left, joins Santa Cruz mayor Don Lane and Walnut Commons resident Dick Klein in cutting the ribbon outside of the new co-housing building in Santa Cruz on Friday.

balconies or patios, and there is parking and storage underground.

The city, in need of more high-density housing that provide for a greater in-

come range to own property, would like to support other co-housing projects.

"The future of this community is not in more single-family homes," Mayor

Don Lane said to a crowd gathered outside the building's steps on Walnut Avenue. "This is such a beacon of community building."

Swenson, who was critical to rebuilding downtown after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, was a bit skeptical at the idea of people co-owning a condo community purposely planned so they spend time together.

"I didn't think it would happen, but it did," Swenson said with his characteristically big laugh.

Shirlee Byrd, an arts educator, was one of the last residents to move in. She found her airy and light-filled apartment on the second floor a perfect home for her African art and wax painting of a cross.

She was only living a block away in a house but

after her husband died, she just needed a more manageable living space. Now, she shares meals with friends down stairs but can also enjoy a quiet glass of wine on her balcony overlooking

the Civic Auditorium and a large palm tree near the Greek Orthodox Church.

"I took a leap of faith," she said. "And the nicest people in the world live here."