

CITY-BACKED HOUSING OPENS IN BEACH FLATS



Elizabeth Vogel in one of the apartments at Nueva Vista that boasts ocean Boardwalk views.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Families start moving into Nueva Vista apartments

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SANTA CRUZ — At least a dozen families have one more reason to be grateful this Thanksgiving: They have new homes.

The long-awaited Nueva Vista apartment complex, rising from the ruins of two famously run-down buildings and hailed as the new benchmark for housing in the Beach Flats neighborhood, began opening its doors to new residents this week.

'The place is beautiful. I'm happy to be here.'

IRMA FLORES, NEW RESIDENT AT NUEVA VISTA

"The place is beautiful," said resident Irma Flores, who spent Tuesday moving boxes into her apartment and taking in views of the neatly manicured lawns and the chic, 48-unit complex she now calls home. "I'm happy to be here."

Fifteen months ago, Flores, like more than half of the incoming res-

idents to Nueva Vista, was living at the same site, but in the since-demolished Dolphin Apartments or Lee Apartments. Like many of the former tenants, she describes the old apartments as slums.

"The heaters didn't work, the drains plugged up frequently, and there were lots of rodents and cock-

roaches," Flores, a Spanish-speaker, said through an interpreter. "It didn't feel safe for kids."

City leaders, who were worried about living conditions in the historically poor Beach Flats getting worse, intervened. The nearly 1-acre site at Leibbrandt Avenue and Beach Street, just feet from the Boardwalk, was chosen as ground zero for housing reform.

Partnering with low-income housing developer Mercy Housing,

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the city's Redevelopment Agency sank \$8 million into the purchase and overhaul of the blighted properties. Now, two bright red and yellow buildings, one at four-stories tall and the other with a handsome courtyard, tower above the neighborhood's modest cottages and motel-style apartments.

"It such a clean, pleasant environment for families with children," said Ceil Cirillo, city Redevelopment Agency director.

Mercy Housing, which retains primary ownership of the complex, will manage the property and charge below-market rates to the tenants living there. The nonprofit provides similar housing services in dozens of cities across the nation, including the Neary Lagoon housing complex in Santa Cruz.

Flores, who works at a deli downtown, will benefit, paying only \$398 for the two-bedroom apartment she'll share with her 15-year-old son.

Rental rates at Nueva Vista will run from what Flores pays and up to \$1,113 a month, depending on a tenant's income and the size of the apartment. All of the units are spoken for, and the complex is expected to be full by Christmas.

In addition to subsidized rents, Nueva Vista offers on-site child care and will soon house the city-run Beach Flats Community Center, which has been operating in a nearby mobile facility since its inception 11 years ago.

"My sons will be participating in the programs there," said Norma Luis, who was moving in Tuesday and quick to applaud the holistic design of the new complex.

The city's investment, however, has not been without critics.

"This (project) uses up all our (housing) money," said Councilman Mark Primack earlier this fall. He voted against the project.

Supporters of Nueva Vista, however, say the project will have a snowball effect.

Property values will rise, as a result of the revitalized corner of the community, and nearby landlords will be inspired to develop or upgrade properties, supporters say.

"There's a hope that this redevelopment will be a catalyst for

bigger changes," said Elizabeth Vogel of Mercy Housing.

Today, Beach Flats remains the poorest neighborhood in Santa Cruz and has experienced the city's highest crime rates. Efforts to make improvements have included extensive city- and non-profit-backed social programs, public funding for housing and parks, and increases in law enforcement and community policing.

There is little concrete evidence of long-term improvement in the neighborhood, though.

Many city leaders hope Nueva Vista will change that.

In another effort to revitalize the seaside neighborhood, city leaders have begun negotiating with the owner of the nearby Coast Santa Cruz Hotel, formerly the Dream Inn, about razing the 35-year-old building and putting a hotel and conference center in its place.

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TOP: Norma Luis moves into her apartment at the Nueva Vista housing development in Beach Flats on Tuesday.

ABOVE: Housing advocate Elizabeth Vogel enjoys the newly completed complex after nearly 20 years of work on it.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos