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Living in the future

Is a Folsom co-housing project a blueprint for sustainable communities in the 21st century?

By [Seth Sandronsky](#)

Solar panels save energy, sure, but making a home truly eco-friendly depends a lot on location. Just ask Marty Maskall, project manager and future resident of Folsom EcoHousing (FEH), a 38-family, green-friendly community being planned 20 miles outside of Sacramento.

“If you’re spending all your time driving to and from your home,” she argued, “it doesn’t matter how eco it is. Your [carbon] footprint is huge.” This is why FEH, which is the first phase of Leidesdorff Village at 1108 Sutter Street in Folsom, is one block away from Regional Transit light rail. Residents also will live two blocks from historic downtown Folsom and the American River Parkway bike trail. A neighborhood park is also next door.



Marty Maskall (left), holding a model of Folsom EcoHousing, with Lamaia Coleman and daughter Melia, two future residents.

Photo By Kody James

The idea for FEH, a project that hopes to be approved this summer, sprouted when Maskall visited a friend living at Sacramento’s Southside Park Cohousing, at 434 T Street, in 2003. One look at this place was all it took.

“I saw the interior courtyard, single-family homes and common house,” Maskall said, “and fell in love with it. I asked all kind of questions and decided that I wanted to live in cohousing.”

This is easy to say, but not as easy to do, though. Next, Maskall searched for the best place to build a green cohousing project, which began in 2005. She met Steve Lebastchi, of D&S Development, at a Unitarian Universalist forum, and eventually they found an ideal site for FEH.

Now, FEH, a real-estate investment group, has 13 families. At full build-out, a total of 38 single-family homes are on tap. Each home will be clustered in two three-story buildings, according to Maskall. The homes feature shared walls, which allows residents to use less energy compared to detached residences.

“On top of that, we are going to have about an acre of organic garden and orchard to grow fruits and vegetables,” Maskall said. “We will grow our own food, harvest and eat it together.”

Along with eating healthy, residents will reduce the ecological and financial costs of bringing food from the farm to the fork. In a wet spring, for example, water oftentimes is wasted. But not at FEH: It will have vegetated drainage swales to minimize storm runoff. The community’s design allows neighbors to interact in everyday living, much of which will occur in the 3,870-square-foot common house. There, residents will cook, dine, read and exercise. Kids will play in an activity room.

“I want to both live in and raise my daughter, Melia, in a ‘village,’” said FEH member Lamaia Coleman of East Sacramento, “where she can run out the front door and join a pack of kids that I know and go climb trees or play tag.”

Maskall says it’s been a learning process that involves keeping many moving parts on track for future residents and current neighbors of FEH. “You have to do neighborhood outreach and make a budget work for people to afford [to buy homes], while covering all the building and development costs,” said Maskall.

According to FEH’s planning application to the city of Folsom last August, California is home to 10 percent of the active cohousing communities across the nation over the past 20 years. Davis boasts Muir Commons and N Street Cohousing. Nevada City Cohousing opened in 2006, and Nevada County Rural Cohousing is seeking a site now. In Grass Valley, the building of two cohousing projects, Wolf Creek Commons and Wolf Creek Lodge, is underway.

The city of Folsom’s approval of FEH could come this August, with a breaking of ground projected for summer 2012, and an estimated residents’ move-in date of late 2013, according to Maskall.