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Constraints and Creativity Shape Affordable Housing for Seniors in Oakland, California

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Urban Land: The Magazine of the Urban Land Institute

By David Baker and Daniel Simons, October 2, 2015

In the first two weeks after Lakeside Senior Apartments in Oakland opened its application

process for residency last year, more than 2,400 applications poured in. Constructed to house very-low-income and formerly homeless seniors, the building had just 91 units to offer.

Rental rates across the Bay Area have shot up in recent years, as many people who are priced out of San Francisco seek to live across the bay. Lakeside Senior Apartments, which opened in June and is now fully occupied, faced a series of development challenges made more pressing by the increased need for housing.

“We expected there to be considerable interest in the property, but we did not anticipate such a large demand,” says Aubra Levine, associate director of housing development for Satellite Affordable Housing Associates (SAHA) of Berkeley, California, which developed the project. “Real estate prices are soaring, forcing more and more people into the rental market, reducing the supply and increasing the cost of existing units. Seniors, many of whom are on fixed budgets, have a particularly difficult time competing for these units.”

Land Constraints The first hurdle was assembling the land. The site is in a prime location one block from the recently revived Lake Merritt waterfront, within walking distance of multiple public transit lines, parks, playgrounds, restaurants, and shops. The original parcel was an Oakland Housing Authority (OHA) parking lot in use—or rather, underused—by the adjacent Rose of Sharon apartments for seniors. The development team proposed incorporating Rose of Sharon’s surface parking into the new housing’s secure, below-grade parking, accommodating 35 replacement spaces and 22 new spaces for Lakeside Senior Apartments. The surface parking lot included a disused trolley right-of-way that created an awkward “panhandle” jutting from one side of the site. The housing authority acquired the two irregular parcels on either side of the right-of-way, which were occupied by blighted buildings, ultimately creating a rational 0.66-acre (0.27 ha) site.

While the need for more affordable housing in Oakland is great, there are advantages to taking time with the process. “Land is such a precious resource that when a developable parcel is obtained, it is easy to allow the euphoria of having that valuable resource secured catapult you immediately into the next stages of development,” says Deni Adaniya, senior development program manager for the OHA. “In the case of the Lakeside site, although the first parcel secured was the largest, and developable on its own, the development team took advantage of opportunities that arose to buy adjacent land, compelling everyone involved in the project to slow down and take more calculated risks. Ultimately, by allowing the project to develop at a slightly slower pace, the team was able to secure adjacent parcels at a reasonable price, which created a better development parcel that supported more affordable housing.”

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