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28 affordable rentals just hit the market in Oakland. 4,000 people applied.

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By Michelle Robertson, SFGATE - Wednesday, May 22, 2019

Redwood Hill Townhomes sits on a 0.71-acre lot on a stretch of Calaveras Avenue near Oakland's Redwood Heights neighborhood. The apartment building is close to public transit, shops and restaurants, and includes covetable amenities like parking spaces, on-site laundry and a courtyard with a playground and gathering areas.

In other words, the recently completed project is a Bay Area renter's dream.

But if all goes as planned, 4868 Calaveras Ave. will be a haven ? a shelter from the spiraling Bay Area rental market ? for the lucky few who land spot in the affordable housing community.

Applications to live at Redwood Hill opened recently, but the waitlist is already closed. More than 4,000 people applied for the chance to rent one of the 28 units, according to Susan Friedland, the executive director of Satellite Affordable Housing Associates, which spearheaded the housing development. Tenants will be selected by lottery.

The 28 two- and three-bedroom units at Redwood Hill Townhomes are reserved for residents earning between 30% and 50% of the area median income (currently \$73,100 for a single earner), as well as formerly homeless people and survivors of domestic abuse. Rents will be set at 30% of the renter's monthly income. Currently, the average rent for an Oakland apartment is \$2,624 ? an 8.73% increase over last year, according to RentCafe.

Friedland says the ratio of applicants to available units is a symbol of the Bay Area affordable housing crisis. Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf agrees.

"Our work is far, far from complete," she tweeted after attending the opening of Redwood Hill on May 14, imploring her city to "keep at it."

This is hardly the first time the number of applicants for an affordable housing project in the Bay Area far outweighed available stock. In 2018, 6,580 people applied for 95 units at Natalie Gubb Commons in San Francisco.

The Redwood Hill project took about six years to complete, from conception to completion, Friedland said. But the use of the property had been debated for years before that.

Before designating the land for affordable housing, the property was planned as a homeownership project, Friedland said, though the idea collapsed in 2008 when the housing market crashed.

Curbed San Francisco reported notes from a city council meeting indicate the city had sought funds for an affordable housing project at the same site as early as 2003, hence Schaaf tweeting that Redwood Hill "took two decades to complete."

Friedland said it's typical for affordable housing projects to take between five to six years to complete. "But once a project is built, it becomes an asset for the community for decades and decades," she said.

SAHA's biggest challenge in erecting Redwood Hills was "cobbling together funding," Friedland said. Resources are limited, and financing must be sourced from myriad entities. The Redwood Hills project cost about \$26 million, with financial support from the City of Oakland, Alameda County, a handful of state agencies and two international banks.

Though there was some public opposition to the project, Friedland said she could hardly characterize neighborhood sentiment as a hindrance to getting the project built. If anything, she's seen public perception toward affordable housing change in the recent years ? a paradigm shift that makes sense in a region where a six-figure salary is considered "low-income."

"With the housing crisis as dramatic as it's become, you're hard-pressed to find people directly opposed to building affordable housing," Friedland said.

The elegance of Redwood Hills might help change minds, too. The design and feel of the residences are hardly what one would think of when they hear "affordable housing." Besides its position in a sought-after location with a good school district, Redwood Hills is designed to be livable and attractive. The apartments ? splayed in a U-formation around a central courtyard ? are painted a modern gray hue with white trim. Their interiors are spacious and constructed of durable materials, like granite countertops.

This, Friedland stresses, is what affordable housing can be.

"We want to build a quality that will last over time and look really good in the community so when neighbors see it, they go, 'Wow, that's affordable housing? What an asset to the neighborhood.'"

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