

MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL OPINION

Marin Voice: Lead the way with racial equity, reimagine Golden Gate Village plan



Golden Gate Village in Marin City. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)

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With Marin City’s Golden Gate Village, Marin officials have a prime opportunity to show how to achieve racial equity in 21st century America. Unfortunately, our government is squandering it so badly that more and more residents are growing ashamed of our complicity with systemic racism.

At the most recent Marin Housing Authority meeting, speaker after speaker implored the commissioners to adopt the residents’ plan. It included “deep green” renovation of existing buildings, no new buildings and the establishment of a community land trust for home ownership.

For seven years, the residents have patiently pitched this plan, but have been ignored. Their homes are in severe disrepair due to decades of deferred maintenance by the same entity that now wants to sell the project off to a private developer.

I recently met a 48-year-old woman who's lived there all her life. Redlining in the past meant her parents and grandparents were prohibited by law from buying property and now she lives in lifelong tenancy. She has fond memories of her childhood, but has struggled for decades with rodent infestations, broken heating, plumbing and more. The county is her landlord and is responsible for maintenance, which has been notoriously lacking.

Marin chose Michaels Development Co. of New Jersey. It proposes, first, to construct 50% more units in what is already the most densely populated area of Marin. Not only would this ignore Golden Gate Village's designation on the National Registration of Historic Places, it would delay repairs to existing units by five years. Michaels' track record is not reassuring. In 2017, the Tampa Bay Times reported that courts ruled Michaels was responsible for toxic drywall on a Florida project.

So now residents are doubly confounded. Especially when they imagine something better.

By adopting the GGV Resident Plan, Marin could show the world how to make amends for past discrimination, how to stop government entities from acting like slumlords and how to vastly improve the quality of life for impoverished minority communities.

How is that last one achievable? First, the residents' plan includes an apprenticeship program for Marin City young people, providing training particularly in green and renewable technologies — one of the fastest growing job sectors in the country. And home ownership improves morale. As a realtor, I know it creates pride and a long overdue sense of sovereignty.

As one speaker mentioned, imagine if Marin treated the residents of other towns this way. What if the county tried to sell off any other community's land to a private out-of-state developer, then increase density by 50%?

Doesn't every community deserve to have its own community plan?

The objection is always about money. But Marin has ample resources. The \$150 million repairs could be paid with a relatively tiny sliver of the Marin Community Foundation's Buck Fund (at more than \$2.6 billion) set aside exclusively for the people of Marin. Supervisors should petition MCF to release the necessary funds in order to compensate the people of Golden Gate Village for decades of neglect. MCF could also help set up a land trust to convey ownership and management control to the residents.

Active support for this plan is already in place with lawyers, accountants, developers and other professionals providing pro-bono services to the Resident Council.

The people of Marin are behind the residents. In all the meetings, nobody has spoken in support of the county's plan.

Marin is rarely this united. We are educated enough to understand that a more just and sustainable world is possible. We know this work begins here at home, by dismantling the hidden systemic racism under our noses.

Let's hope Stephanie Moulton-Peters, new on the Board of Supervisors, proves to be the strong, compassionate and courageous leader she seems to be. At least she was actively listening during her first meeting, unlike some of the others, who fiddled while our collective patience burned.

The people of Marin deserve a county government that lives up to our values. We must insist that it set an example for what could be, and should be, at this critical time for our country and for our local communities. To help, please visit ggvrc.org.

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