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Affordable, green, urban infill

By Ken Sauder and Jennifer LeSar

In the throes of what are arguably the toughest economic times since the 1930s, cities around the country are grappling with strained budgets and stretched resources. While hunkering down is one obvious strategy, another is looking for creative solutions that do more with less and meet community needs despite the economic challenges.

One ongoing community need is for affordable homes for our residents. Downtown's current population is estimated at 30,000 and is expected to reach 90,000 by 2030. The San Diego City Council had this in mind when it adopted its Downtown Community Plan in 2006. The plan is essentially a blueprint for growth, designed to ensure downtown is a vibrant and livable community with new housing opportunities, amenities and services for citizens of all income levels. Providing these opportunities, however, in a time of limited resources is very challenging. Downtown encompasses just 1,445 acres, and very little vacant land remains.

One solution that has met with great success in downtown San Diego is "infill development," focusing on the reuse of underutilized buildings and sites in urban areas. Urban infill development is sustainability at its most basic – putting our existing sites to better use rather than consuming limited vacant land. This type of development takes advantage of existing infrastructure and public resources, and generates reinvestment in our urban cores.

A prime example of infill development is the construction of Parkside, a 77-unit affordable housing community opening this month in downtown's East Village. Parkside, created through a unique, public-private partnership between the city of San Diego and Wakeland Housing and Development Corp. provides much needed affordable housing for downtown's lower-income residents, and does so in a sustainable

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way by reusing underutilized land and maximizing limited resources. Creating housing near transit and employment is also critical to alleviating congestion on the region's roadways and helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from vehicle trips.

Wakeland purchased the land for Parkside from the East Village Community Church, which owned the entire parcel but was able to utilize only a small portion of it. With the proceeds, the church built a new worship center on the site – one far better suited to meet the needs of its growing congregation, with the capacity to bring more people into downtown to frequent local businesses.

Meanwhile, on the remaining property that Wakeland purchased from the church, the Centre City Development Corporation (CCDC), working on behalf of the city's Redevelopment Agency, helped to fund Parkside, fulfilling one of its missions – to provide more affordable housing units downtown – while also leveraging additional public and private financing and creating new construction jobs.

In keeping with the sustainability theme, Parkside is highly sustainable in its construction. It is CCDC's first affordable-housing project expected to gain Leadership in Energy & Environ-

mental Design certification from the U.S. Green Building Council. It includes green features such as a photovoltaic-panel roof that will provide electricity to the common areas, water submetering to promote conservation and higher levels of insulation for more efficient heating and cooling.

And, Parkside uses the land to provide family-size affordable rental units – a scarcity in downtown San Diego. Currently, only 10 percent of total downtown affordable housing units are available in two- and three-bedroom layouts. As downtown evolves into a more family-oriented environment, the need for all types of units will continue to grow. The presence of families stimulates both the public and private sectors, which will come in to meet the need for family-oriented retail, recreation and education.

The development of Parkside is not the first time Wakeland and the city have come together to create new housing opportunities for low-income San Diegans. The San Diego City Council and CCDC also showed great support and encouragement for Lillian Place, an affordable housing community located just a few blocks from Parkside that opened in 2007. This project also revitalized an underutilized site, creating homes for lower-income families in an area where they are in very short supply.

Parkside and Lillian Place are the types of projects envisioned by the San Diego City Council when it adopted the Downtown Community Plan. As the need to accommodate more downtown residents grows and land and public funding become scarcer, maximizing the resources we have through creative partnerships and land reuses needs to become the "new normal" as we enter this decade. Now is the time to replicate the innovative spirit shown in the development of Parkside.

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