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It Takes a Village

Efficient homes are only the start of a sustainable community

By Dana Perrigan

Grand-scale recycling: Coddling Enterprises hopes to turn this abandoned office complex into a thriving neighborhood.

NO GREEN HOME IS AN ISLAND. Building sustainably is about building community too. Homes and towns that are connected to one another and to the surrounding landscape foster a lifestyle that has a lighter impact on the planet.

An ambitious example is Sonoma Mountain Village, a planned community of some 2,000 homes and businesses in Rohnert Park, California. Developed by Coddling Enterprises, a former shopping-mall builder, the project incorporates the latest principles of environmentally responsible design, starting literally from the ground up.

Rather than carving up open space, Coddling is reusing the 200-acre site of a vacant high-tech office park. Four large buildings will be converted into condominiums, retail stores, and office space. Asphalt from the parking lots will be ground up and used to pave streets; concrete and structural steel will be recycled as well. "Part of sustainability for us is not creating a lot of landfill," says Geof Syphers, chief sustainability officer at Coddling. "Anything that leaves the site is a lost opportunity."

And anything that arrives on the site--including sunlight and rain--is an opportunity gained. Coddling has already spent \$7.5 million to build one of the largest privately owned solar power installations in Northern California: 90,000 square feet of solar panels capable of generating 1.3 megawatts. A network of caches will collect rainwater to flush toilets. Buildings will be laid out to take advantage of passive solar heating in the winter and the cooling effects of prevailing winds during the summer. And Coddling is converting a power plant left behind by the previous owner to solar and biomass to provide carbon-neutral central cooling and heating within five years.



Sonoma Mountain Village, a planned development in Rohnert Park, California, will include shops and apartments (below right) and single-family houses with large front porches (above). The village is designed around a central square (below left) bordered by offices, stores, restaurants, a theater, and a fitness center.



But laudable energy design alone does not make a green society. Sonoma Mountain Village champions new urbanism--an architectural movement that seeks to create a sense of community by using many of the elements favored by city designers in the 19th century. Homes--ranging in size from 600-square-foot condominiums to 3,500-square-foot single-family residences--will be built facing narrow streets within an easy walk of the town square, where residents can dine, buy groceries, get a haircut, or lounge with a latte. An elementary school is located a block north of the site. Coding envisions 500,000 square feet of commercial-retail space, estimated to create 2,500 on-site jobs, and more than 15 percent of the homes will be affordably priced. Small urban parks and bike and walking paths are planned throughout the development, with 25 acres reserved as open space and a riparian corridor along one side of the property. "We're creating a little village here," says Syphers.

If voters approve the Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit project, a rail stop will be a ten-minute walk away. The hoped-for train would run 40 miles north through Sonoma County and about 30 miles south to Marin County, where commuters could link up with other public transportation to San Francisco.

To cement its green credentials, Sonoma Mountain Village is one of 371 projects vying for 120 slots in a pilot program of the U.S. Green Building Council. Launched in February, the LEED for Neighborhood Development Rating System aims to apply the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification process to entire neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the Rohnert Park Planning Commission has already approved preliminary plans for the \$1 billion project. "We're very excited about this proposal," says Vice Mayor Jake Mackenzie. "It's an innovative approach. There's no political resistance to sustainable building, but there will be reality checks." Syphers estimates that the first homes will be ready for occupancy in a couple of years and hopes to complete the project in 12 years.

Syphers believes the success of Sonoma Mountain Village ultimately depends on those who live there. He envisions active community groups working to encourage a healthy lifestyle. "Being sustainable isn't a goal," Syphers says. "It's a process."

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