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San Francisco Schools To Build Housing for Teachers

By Jeff Archer

Anyone familiar with the Bay Area's exorbitant rental rates would think the listing was pure fantasy: brand-new apartments in one of San Francisco's most desirable neighborhoods—all with garage parking, and some with ocean views—for as little as \$700 a month.

That's the deal the San Francisco school system plans to offer at a 43-unit apartment complex the district is set to build on one of its school sites. The new low-cost-housing project for teachers is being made possible by a first-of-its-kind arrangement between the district and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The local school board last month unanimously approved the plan, part of a larger effort to keep teachers from being driven away by the steep housing costs in the city, where a one-bedroom apartment typically goes for more than \$1,600 a month.

"The district has no control over

what is unfortunately an out-of-control housing market," board President Mary Hernandez said. "So we have to take the initiative and come up with some creative, innovative solutions for our staff."

Stabilization Sought

District leaders say ground will be broken next fall on the \$15 million apartment complex, which will be located next to a new elementary school. The cost of the units will be kept down because they'll be built on land the school system already owns and because HUD's Federal Housing Authority has agreed to guarantee the loans needed to pay for the construction.

Sealing the deal also meant securing approval from HUD lawyers, who agreed that a project reserved solely for educators would not violate federal rules.

"The critical thing is that teachers are an important part of the community," said Larry Bush, a HUD spokesman in the department's San Francisco office. "When we lose them, we lose

something that stabilizes and builds communities."

The apartments will likely be completed by fall 2002. All district teachers—not just those who work in the adjacent school—will be eligible to live there. Although pledging that the units will be open to veteran and new teachers alike, officials of the 65,000-student district said they're still working out the details of how to decide who gets one. They expect the complex to generate interest from far more teachers than it can accommodate.

Just a 'Crumb'?

Some local educators complain that the project doesn't address what they say is the real problem: inadequate teacher salaries. The city's teachers did not get a raise this year, though talks are set to begin later this month to open their current contract for a possible raise next year.

"It's a crumb in the bigger picture," said Steven Herraiz, a kindergarten teacher at John

Muir Elementary School. "And I find that it seals the fate of teachers. They're saying we're going to have to give teachers discounted housing because they're always going to be the lowest-paid professionals out there."

But the housing project drew praise from the leadership of the United Educators of San Francisco, the merged local affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association.

"The realities are that a two-bedroom apartment in San Francisco can cost \$2,000 a month, and a house can cost \$400,000 or more," said union President Kent Mitchell. "So no matter how much of an increase there is in teachers' salaries, unless we can address the housing issue, we won't be able to attract or retain teachers."

The apartment complex will be able to serve only a tiny fraction of the system's 4,300 teachers, but Ms. Hernandez said the district would continue to work with the union to explore new solutions to the housing crunch.

6/07, 2000

Education Week.