Collaboration moves Great Northern home project forward

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Great Northern Services has launched a real estate development project intended to make home ownership affordable for working families in the Weed area.

"After the Boles Fire, our entire board and staff made a commitment to stay in Weed and help rebuild the city," executive director Bonnie Kubowitz explained. "This project is part of that commitment."

A seven lot subdivision will be designed on the South Davis Avenue acreage currently owned by GNS, the site of the organization’s offices and the Weed Community Center before both were destroyed in the Boles Fire.

Kubowitz said single family three-bedroom, two-bath homes will be designed for the remaining two lots.

"We’ll start with one home construction. When that home sells, we’ll use the proceeds to build a second home, and so on, until the subdivision is built out,” Kubowitz said.

And when all seven lots are filled and sold?

“We’ll buy more land, and continue the project,” she explained.

To open the project up to the California Polytechnic State University through the City of Weed, the subdivision is being designed by the students participating in the university’s Integrated Project Delivery Studio course.

IPD students in their final year of study in the fields of Construction Management and Architectural Engineering are collaborating with Great Northern Services to design the subdivision and begin construction of the first building, working at their campus in San Luis Obispo.

Kubowitz said her organization is working with College of the Siskiyous to see what’s possible in terms of local student participation on the construction side of the project.

"Overall, such a program would provide high school graduating seniors an opportunity to gain vocation skills they could use in their own community,” he commented.

According to instructor Maggie Kirk of the School of Architecture, Cal Poly’s work on the Weed housing project through the IPD Studio signals a “special type of interdisciplinary project."

"The goal is to get students in the various disciplines working collaboratively in a professional setting of the first building, so as they will be expected to do when they enter the workforce in their respective fields, she said.

What that meant for Weed was a change in the way Cal Poly students who surveyed, sketched, and otherwise studied the parcel of land for which they are designing homes.

Fourth year School of Architecture student Bryan Lee paused his sketching to explain that the students were analyzing the site so they could generate what he described as “site-responsive architecture.”

"It’s a very natural site,” he said. “Mount Shasta is right there, there are trees, open space… It’s very important to remember that so we don’t design and build something that isn’t suited to this environment.”

The sketching, he added, was for brainstorming when the students got back to Cal Poly.

"Everyone has a slightly different perspective at this point, so this work gives us a range of design possibilities," Lee said.

Klever, a Cal Poly alum, is excited about the relatively new interdisciplinary approach to housing design and construction.

"Historically, contractors and architects often have not worked together on projects such as this. That produces challenges when it comes to actually building something out,” he said.

Kirk emphasized that a key part of Cal Poly’s IPD Studio process in the current GNS project is involvement with the client throughout design and construction. While each of the interdisciplinary student teams will develop competitive proposals for the South Davis site, the proposal that best suits the values of Great Northern Services ultimately will be the one implemented in construction.

Videoconferencing with Kubowitz, Klever, and Great Northern’s Director of Real Estate Development Rod Merys, who is managing the project, will ensure the students stay in contact as they hone their designs, according to Kirk. “GNS is the client, and is involved throughout the process. We are extremely grateful to this organization for their interaction with the students.”

Klever hailed Cal Poly’s interdisciplinary approach as “the best learning that can occur – a real world experience for the students.”

Kubowitz reiterated her hope that local participation will be possible.

"This South Davis subdivision is the first in a series of property development projects GNS will pursue to help create affordable housing opportunities for Weed’s working families. We’re hoping to be able to partner with COS not only for this initial build, but throughout the projects that follow,” she said.