More affordable housing on the way for Sonoma County

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In 2008, the Carter family was facing the same struggle so many others in Sonoma County do: trying to find affordable housing in one of the least affordable counties in the state.

For Mary Carter, now 39 and an elementary school teacher, and her husband, Patrick Carter, now 37 and executive director of the Sonoma County Waste Management Agency, the odds of them being able to live in the county in which they worked seemed impossible. She was just starting her career as a teacher, he was working as a waste management specialist for the county and they were expecting baby No. 1, James.

In stepped the Housing Land Trust of Sonoma County, which aims to provide affordable homes to Sonoma County's working class.

"We got in, and we felt like it was a miracle," Mary Carter said.

Now a family of four, the Carters live in a two-story home on Petaluma's southeast side, with three bedrooms, two-and-a-half bathrooms and a garden out back that boasts baby orange and apple trees.

"We're never leaving," she said.

The Land Trust plans to build an additional 25 homes for low- and middle-income families. By the end of 2018, said Dev Goetschius, executive director for the Land Trust, she hopes to add about 80 new homes to its current stable of 52.

With Sonoma County recently ranked the fourth least-affordable county in the state for teachers — only 0.5 percent of homes are within reach, based on average salary and median home price — the Housing Land Trust's impending expansion is even more important.

Each home sold by the Land Trust is priced to be purchased by people who make up to 100 percent of the county's median income level — currently about $82,600 for a family of four.

As median income levels in Sonoma County increase, so too is the resale value of a Land Trust home allowed to increase, allowing the family who purchased it to gain equity in its investment.

For example, said Goetschius, if a family makes 80 percent of the median household income in Sonoma County it could qualify for a $250,000 home.

If the median income increases, the cost of the home would increase at a steady rate to match it, but that home would still be sold to families making 80 percent of the county's median income.

So far, 67 families have lived in those 52 homes, with six new homes coming up for sale in 2017.

According to the analysis by real estate brokerage firm Redfin, only San Mateo, Santa Clara and San Francisco counties are less affordable for teachers than Sonoma County, where the median home price has climbed by more than 80 percent from $318,000 in December 2011 to $575,000 in November 2016.

State Sen. Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, authored a bill that went into effect on Jan. 1 authorizing school districts with unused land to use federal tax credits to build affordable housing for their workforce.

As a result, Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools Steve Herrington said Santa Rosa City Schools will head into the funding stage for its long-awaited Fir Ridge Drive project, which aims to create between 36 and 40 low- to middle-income homes for teachers on the district's unused 6-acre Fountaingrove property.

In the meantime, the Sonoma County Office of Education is encouraging teachers to get involved with the Sonoma County Land Trust, especially those new to the county.

“It’s important that teachers live in the communities in which they work and become vested constituents, that they know the makeup and the demographics of their community,” Herrington said. “If a teacher has to commute a great distance, they’re not going to be engaged with after-school events and in their communities.”

SCOE is doing a presentation for new teachers in Jan. 10 about the housing available through the Housing Land Trust, he said.

“It’s to our benefit that we have such an available situation,” Herrington said. “And teachers should exercise that option.”