

FARLEY PLACE: AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN BELVEDERE

By Susan Cluff

"Belvedere affordable? Low-income housing supported. If it can be done in Belvedere, it can be done anywhere," ran the headlines in October 1989. The event was indeed newsworthy. Tiny Belvedere, a town of 2,100 people, perched on two islands with a lagoon, and almost completely built out, had achieved the unachievable – opening an 11-unit apartment complex for low-income seniors and the disabled called Farley Place.

The three-story building at 515 San Rafael Avenue featured ten new apartment homes and one fully wheelchair accessible, an elevator, laundry, and covered parking. Close to the community center and park, it was in easy walking distance to shops and services. Best of all, rents were pegged to household incomes for qualified applicants with priority given to local residents, just \$415 to \$550 a month.

"I can't believe how lucky I am," said Kathy Sanders, one of the first tenants to move in. A longtime resident who'd retired from Crocker Bank in Tiburon, she'd found the high cost of housing was pricing her out of the community. "On my little pension and social security, I was afraid I would have to move out of the area."

As you might expect, building affordable housing in high-cost Belvedere had unique challenges, requiring stubborn persistence on the part of a few committed people who mobilized and inspired others to join them. Their leader was Erwin Farley (1913-2003), an affordable housing advocate who'd moved to Belvedere in 1952. Retiring in 1979 after a career in housing and redevelopment, he served

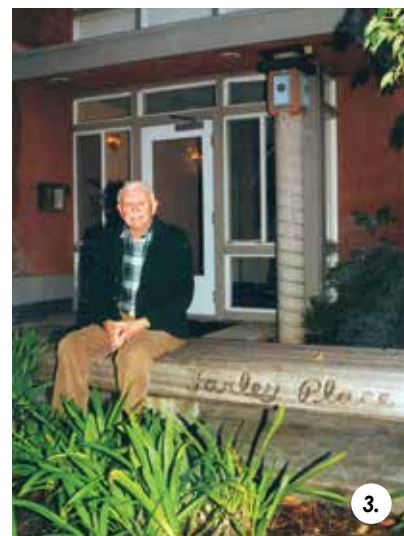
as a volunteer fireman, school trustee, City Council member, and Belvedere Mayor in 1982-83, and had a deep personal interest in seeing this through. "After the war," Farley said, "(Hilarita Housing) was the only place we could afford. So... having lived in publicly-supported housing, I have a sense of owing a debt to the community – one that I want to pay back."

Support came from unexpected places. In 1983, 78 percent of Belvedere's voters approved a referendum authorizing low-cost housing on the Peninsula. In 1986, the group formed the Belvedere Tiburon Housing Authority (BTHA) with Ecumenical Association for Housing to develop and manage the project. Belvedere Land Company sold BTHA the last vacant multifamily-zoned site in Belvedere at half its appraised market value. The architects reduced their design fees. The City waived its building fees. And the community contributed too.

More than half of the \$1.25 million cost of the development came from contributions and grants from over 200 local foundations, agencies, churches, businesses, and individuals. The remainder was funded by a loan from the California Housing Foundation and financed by tax-exempt bonds.

"We're almost there," read a colorful mailer that spring of 1989. "As we enter the season of recognizing mother's and father's days, please consider a gift to help our local seniors."

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1. Celebrating the October 29, 1989 dedication of Farley Place.

BTHA President Erwin Farley and Mayor Loni Valentine cut the ribbon. (Diane Smith Collection))

2. Rendering for the new apartment building for low-income seniors and disabled by Callister, Gately & Bischoff.

3. Belvedere resident and volunteer Erwin Farley in 1999 outside the affordable housing complex he helped develop. (Diane Smith Collection)

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