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School-house project comes to fruition Affordable apartments, campus are combined

By Susan Abram, Staff Writer



Enrique Dorado, left, follows his nephews, Julian Castro, 3, and his brother, Sergio, around the Tierra del Sol apartments (John Lazar / LA Daily News)

CANOGA PARK - A first-of-its-kind, \$53 million apartment complex that combines homes with a charter elementary school officially opened Thursday as "the Club Med of Affordable Housing."

Built on a 5-acre block abandoned by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, the Tierra del Sol apartments and school marks a first in the San Fernando Valley and in California: it blends affordable, five-bedroom apartments with a charter school for grades K-5.

A 10,000-square-foot community center is still awaiting construction.

"It's never been done before," said a beaming Bea Stotzer, co-founder and president of New Economics For Women. The nonprofit organization was formed 20 years ago by a group of Latinas who wanted to work with single-parent families in need of affordable housing.

Tierra del Sol is its first project in the Valley, with 119 families and a waiting list for 800 more.

"We had to break the bureaucracy down to make change, to create something that's safe for the community," she said.

Officials who toured the playgrounds, classrooms and already-occupied units touted the project as historic, not only for its utopian ideals, but also for the way it came together - a

combination of funds from the Los Angeles Unified School District, the city and the state.

At a time when the battle between housing and school needs continues in California, land-use experts have said joint use and master planning is inevitable in Los Angeles.

That Tierra del Sol combines both needs makes it a rare gem, Los Angeles Councilman Dennis Zine said during the grand-opening ceremony.

"This is a jewel in the San Fernando Valley because it brings so many components together," Zine said. "It's a village in the city. If we had the space, it would be a wonderful idea to replicate, but it's built on a city block, and you're not going to find that quantity of land in any part of Los Angeles."

Similar projects are in the works across Los Angeles, though on a smaller scale, said LAUSD board member Jon Lauritzen, who said he would like to continue working with New Economics for Women.

During the grand opening, resident Graciela Martinez greeted each visitor into her five-bedroom unit with smiles.

Before coming to Tierra del Sol, Martinez lived in a single-bedroom home nearby in Canoga Park. She shared that room with her two children, her mother and grandmother.

She was one of 2,000 people who applied to live in the new housing complex. After a grueling interview process that included her 10-year-old daughter, and 9-year-old son, Martinez was accepted.

Now each member of her multigenerational family has a room of his or her own. Martinez pays \$950 a month.

"It was like a miracle," she said. "I just smiled and my face stayed smiling for weeks."