

## Farmerworkers gain housing option in Forest Grove

by Angela Webber

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Karen Shawcross is executive director of Bienestar, a Hillsboro organization looking to build a 24-unit apartment complex in Forest Grove. (Sam Tenney/DJC)

In Washington County, people in approximately 750 farmworker families are employed by agricultural businesses, nurseries and wineries. But these workers are paid low wages, and their housing options are limited.

The Hillsboro-based **Bienestar** organization, which owns and manages housing for farmworker families in Washington County, is seeking to expand that range of options. It's planning its first new project since 2006 – a 24-unit apartment complex in Forest Grove.

"There's not much affordable rental housing in Washington County," Bienestar Executive Director **Karen Shawcross** said. "Most of the families who come to us as new residents are coming from situations of homelessness."

Bienestar, formerly Housing Development Corp., owns seven housing developments in Washington County, many in partnership with **CASA of Oregon**. The Forest Grove complex,

called **Juniper Gardens**, will be built on a property the organization found unused and in foreclosure.

"It was planned for single-family (use), and the guy went broke," Shawcross said.

Bienestar used a grant of \$750,000 through the **Washington County Community Development** office to purchase the land last year, according to county program manager Jennie Proctor. Most of the \$5 million project's remaining costs will be covered by a combined loan and grant through the United States Department of Agriculture-Rural Development.

"The only funding (for farmworker housing) in the past few years has been through USDA," Shawcross said, noting that other sources – including commercial banks – are no longer feasible.

The USDA program is competitive: The Juniper Gardens project was one of just 11 to be awarded a grant last year. Also, to land the award, Bienestar had to guarantee the housing units would be used for affordable housing for 33 years.

The team expects to start construction on the project in December, and will soon announce the general contractor awarded the contract.

The architect for the project is **Scott | Edwards Architecture**. Project architect **Lisa McClellan**, who specializes in affordable housing design, said that farmworker housing specifically needs to accommodate families by offering units with two, three or four bedrooms.

"Because it's a family community we try to focus on providing interior play areas, both playgrounds and open lawns, that are separate from parking lots and roads," McClellan said.

The building design also takes into account the farmworkers' occupation. Space is set aside in the parking lot for boots to be washed, and each unit will have an exterior closet for storing overalls and boots that may have residue from harmful pesticides.

Services also are being built into Juniper Gardens. In addition to six residential buildings, the campus will include a community building. It will feature a computer lab, and accommodate English as a Second Language classes and a homework club for school-age students.

McClellan said she recognizes that because of rental subsidies and limited selection, Juniper Gardens may be the only housing option for some farmworkers.

"If you can afford a market-rate apartment, you can decide where you want to rent. These people have no choice, and so are often left with substandard housing," McClellan said. "These people are providing a really important service – and a lot of people don't think of where their food comes from."