

## Commentary

# Redevelopment is not an either-or proposition

The Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency can serve three masters, but to do so it must be allowed to dance the two-step, not the five-step.

According to a recently completed independent audit, the CRA's three masters each demand different priorities: the mayor wants economic development, the City Council wants riot and earthquake recovery, and the CRA itself is focusing on generating affordable housing. These competing priorities and the corresponding confusion and inefficiency are fed by the unwieldy five-step oversight process imposed by the City Council in 1991.

To obtain approval for any CRA project or change in a project, a request now must be reviewed and approved by the CRA, then the City Administrative Officer, City Council staff, the City Council's Housing and Community Redevelopment Committee, and the full City Council. What the City Council did, perhaps inadvertently, was to create substantial duplication of efforts and corresponding increases in time and money spent. Approvals that used to take a couple of weeks now take several months.

My experience, and that of my colleagues, as community-based developers tells us that pursuing the goals of recovery, economic development and affordable housing is not an "either-or" proposition. All three goals are interdependent: building affordable housing simultaneously enhances recovery and economic development.

Historically, the CRA has included affordable housing programs in redevelopment projects as job-generators and neighborhood improvement vehicles. In fact, California redevelopment law mandates this connection

### Guest Opinion

Ann Sewill



between redevelopment and affordable housing. If we return to a more streamlined decision-making process, we can accomplish all three goals on a regular basis.

Los Angeles is recognized as having the nation's worst affordable housing crisis, a crisis which was seriously deepened by the Northridge earthquake. More than 200,000 low-income households in L.A. County pay over half of their incomes just to keep a roof over their heads, leaving too little to adequately pay for food, medical care and other necessities.

The surest way to give these families a fighting chance to become economically self-sufficient is to provide stable, affordable housing situations, combined with services such as day care, which allow them to pursue work, educational and job training opportunities.

Two recent projects of the Los Angeles Community Design Center, both aided by significant CRA financial participation, exemplify the interdependence of recovery, affordable housing and economic development. In January, LACDC and the Esperanza Community Housing Corp. opened Villa Esperanza, providing affordable units for 33 families. This is the second housing project by LACDC and ECHC in the near-USC neighborhood. These projects are responding to the neighborhood's needs and building a

sense of community by offering previously unavailable services. Villa Esperanza will offer an on-site day care/Head Start program, an adult education center, ESL classes and computer training.

Recently, we dedicated the reopening of the historic Mary Andrews Clark Residence in Westlake, near downtown Los Angeles. The renovation of this Los Angeles architectural landmark, seriously damaged in the 1987 Whittier quake, provides 152 single rooms for low-income working people — including hotel, restaurant, garment and domestic workers, retail clerks and janitors. For some, living at these projects also provides an affordable opportunity to "stay on their feet" while training for better job opportunities.

Developing each of these projects would have been considerably more difficult, if not impossible, without the help of the CRA.

Los Angeles is blessed with a number of innovative affordable housing developers who have worked successfully with the CRA. If the CRA and L.A. city officials are really interested in fostering affordable housing, riot and earthquake recovery and economic development, the recently completed independent audit illuminates a clear path to accomplishing them all — eliminate unnecessary layers of bureaucracy so the CRA and these independent developers can best use their expertise.

*Sewill is executive director of the Los Angeles Community Design Center, a non-profit architecture, planning and housing development firm based in downtown Los Angeles*