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Housing coalition proposes farm labor camp makeover



MARILYN CHUNG THE DESERT SUN

Fred Young Farm Labor Camp resident Paula Gonzalez talks Wednesday about living at the Indio camp since 1963 with her husband, Claudio Gonzalez.

Plan for Indio camp would quadruple number of units, add new facilities

BY XOCHITL PEÑA
The Desert Sun

For more than 60 years the old, worn-out apartments at the Fred C. Young Farm Labor Camp in Indio have housed thousands of east valley workers integral to the Coachella Valley's agriculture industry.

Now, the 60-acre complex, which houses close to 1,000 people in about 250 units, is on the brink of a long-awaited and much-needed makeover.

The Indio Planning Commission will vote next month on a proposal from the Coachella Valley Housing Coalition, which purchased the camp in 2007, to build up to 950 apartments — nearly quadruple the existing amount of units — along with two community center facilities and commercial buildings on the site at Van Buren Street and Dr. Carreon Boulevard.

An exact cost for the project, which would be broken down into four phases, has yet to be finalized.

However, the beginning portion of Phase 1 — about 85 units of the 250 planned for the first phase — is expected to cost about \$19 million, according to the coalition.

While most of the proposed housing would be reserved for low-income

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laborers farmworkers, some of it could eventually be opened to low-income residents in general, officials said.

On Wednesday, the Indio Planning Commission discussed the project with the housing coalition but held off on any approvals until the commission has more time to review the plan's objectives.

A commission vote is expected next month. If approved the plan would then go before City Council for final action.

"What you're planning definitely meets the standards of what the city of Indio would like to have and definitely would update the housing in that area," said Planning Commissioner Jacquie Bethel.

Most of the \$19 million needed for the first portion of the project would come from state and federal tax credits, grants and U.S. Department of Agriculture financing, said John Aguilar, multi-family director with the housing coalition.

The agency also plans to request assistance from the city's redevelopment agency.

Residents living in the camp have already been informed of the potential renovations and look forward to any changes.

"I'd like to move over there," said Armando Barradas, 42, who lives with his wife and four daughters in a two-bedroom apartment inside the camp.

Current apartments range in price and size from \$476 for an 800-square-foot, two-bedroom unit to \$571 for a 1,200-square-foot, four-bedroom model.

The housing coalition is proposing options that include up to four-bedroom units.

The housing coalition hopes to start construction on the first 85 apartments and a new community center with day care and other tenant services within the next 18 to 24 months.

Aguilar said that as new apartments come online, residents would be moved into them, while their old apartments would be demolished.

Though the Planning Commission generally appreciated the idea of renovations, one commissioner was concerned about the number of units that could eventually become home to as many as 5,000 people.

"I like the project, I like the concept. I'm struggling with the scale," said Vice Chair Patrick O'Dowd.

The 950 units would be built over time, not all at once, Aguilar said. Once that happens — in 10 to 15 years — the project would become the largest developed by the coalition, he said.

The labor camp has seen controversy over the years.

In 2004, the camp almost lost out on \$1 million in federal funds after allegations of mismanagement by its then-operating board president first surfaced.

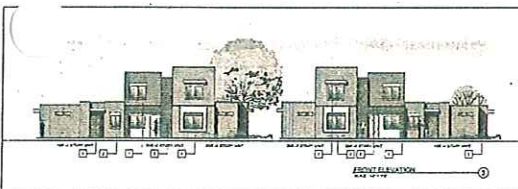
The camp also used to be home to gang members and rampant crime.

The Indio Police Department has worked closely with camp officials throughout the years though to clean it up and keep residents safe said department spokesperson Ben Guitron.

What is the Coachella Valley Housing Coalition?

This Indio-based agency provides housing and programs for "low- and very low-income" residents.

A nonprofit, it has constructed nearly 3,000 homes and apartments in Riverside County and Imperial County.



This illustration shows improvements to the Fred C. Young Farm Labor Camp.