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To Work, Town Needs Jobs

Mountain House tries to lure employers so residents can cut commutes

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MOUNTAIN HOUSE, Calif. — Isabela Putzlacher doesn't think of herself as a pioneer. She's too busy building a dental practice from scratch, in a town that itself is being pulled from thin air, to waste much time on her place in local history.

When Mountain House Dental opened its doors in January — with one dentist, one assistant and an office manager — it brought the first private-sector jobs to this new town, where the San Francisco Bay Area meets the Central Valley.

Three jobs down, 21,997 to go.

Named for a settlement that served Gold Rush wanderers, Mountain House is being built today only because its developers promised to create a potent mix that would elude much of California: housing and jobs.

Planned as a self-sustaining community, Mountain House hopes to become an antidote to the state's far-flung subdivisions, where weary commuters shuttle between the houses they desperately want and the work they desperately need.

Nine hundred homes have been built so far. But someday, it will have more than 16,000 residences — apartments, townhouses and single-family homes with in-law units for affluent multigenerational families.

Someday, if all goes as planned, it will have 11 schools, a community college, a town center and those 22,000 jobs. It would be the kind of sought-after employment that pays workers enough to actually live here, beside the windmills and cows of Altamont Pass.

Someday. Today, Mountain House residents still put thousands of miles on their cars each year and wonder when a grocery store will come to town. Putzlacher dreams of getting a new neighbor.

And San Joaquin County supervisors ask tough questions of Mountain House's developers as they vote to allow the new town to continue moving forward.

"This project was brought to us as a self-sustaining community, with enough jobs to sustain the

community," Supervisor Dario L. Marengo said as the board voted last month to approve the project's second phase. "So how do we enforce that?... Would we hold up future development of homes until we got some understanding of where these people could work?"

The Legislature has begun addressing one half of an intractable California problem: how to build more houses in cities where the jobs are. Mountain House is struggling with the other half of the equation: how to bring jobs out to the houses cropping up in California's fast-growing exurbs.

Neither task is easy, but some planning experts believe the Legislature faces the less daunting challenge. A first raft of bills was introduced in February to encourage home building within California's cities and to spur affordable housing, in part through easing environmental regulations.

Eighteen years after it was proposed, more than 18 months after its first families unpacked, Mountain House awaits its first big employer. Admittedly still in its early years, the project shows just how hard it is to harness human nature, political will and the vagaries of the economy to steer jobs where they are needed most.

"We're planning Utopia here," said a steadfast Eric J. Teed-Bose, Mountain House's director of community development. "Utopia needs a variety of jobs and a variety of housing.... It's a great experiment, and now we have to go build it."

'Hope' Is the Word

Isabela Putzlacher was drawn to Mountain House for its newness and its promise, for the homes that beam with Arts and Crafts-style charm, though she can't afford to live in one yet. Today, she is conversant in the local language — one with "hope" as the verb of choice.

"I hope other business comes," she said during a tour of her pristine new office with its high-tech dental equipment.

"I hope I have a neighbor next door.

"I hope all the people will move here, and [the developers] do what they plan on their Web page."

That's a lot to hope for. What developer Trimark Communities envisions on these former corn and alfalfa fields 60 miles east of San Francisco is the kind of development that goes beyond a simple subdivision.

If built out as planned over the next decade or two, its nearly 5,000 acres are to be divided among 12 "villages," with about 2,500 acres of housing, 750 acres of parks and conservation areas and 700 acres of commercial and industrial development.

That's the kind of self-sustaining mix — along with being built in the middle of nowhere — that it generally takes to qualify as a "new town," a classification that's as much a term of art as it is of architecture.

Because they require so much land, money and planning up front and take so long to come to fruition, new towns don't get built often. Irvine and Valencia, both begun in the 1960s, are among the best-known new towns in California. Reston, Va., begun in the same era, went bankrupt and

changed developers several times before completion.

Orange County's Rancho Santa Margarita, which broke ground in 1985, is one of California's most recent examples and a new town that many planners hold up as a resounding success. But at its 10th anniversary, the city had created just 5,000 jobs, not the 26,000 promised at its inception.

"In the last 30 years, it's been very difficult to site new towns in California," said John Landis, chairman of the department of city and regional planning at UC Berkeley. "The hard part is making them fully realized towns, not just subdivisions attached to business parks.... The people who don't want suburban growth see new towns as sprawl.... Done well, they're much better than sprawl."

More than a dozen new towns were proposed in San Joaquin County in the 1990s, but only Mountain House is under construction. It is believed to be the first in Northern California in more than 30 years.

Other factors set Mountain House apart. Its development agreements prohibit any of the 700 acres zoned for business from being turned into housing if commercial tenants can't be found — a common tactic that often turns proposed new towns into sprawling subdivisions.

In addition, Trimark has agreed to a series of reviews every time 2,000 homes are completed. At each milestone, the county will analyze the project to ensure that it is living up to its promises of affordability and job creation.

The county could raise development fees if Trimark fails to build sufficient affordable housing. And though San Joaquin County Community Development Director Kerry Sullivan is reluctant to say the county will halt housing construction if jobs don't materialize, such a "draconian" measure may be a possibility.

Lots of Empty Space

Mountain House Dental takes up the middle office in the new town's only commercial strip, which was built by Trimark. To the west is a small convenience store, which also is owned and operated by Trimark.

To the east of Putzlacher's office is empty commercial space, ready for a tenant. A little farther down is the Mountain House Information Center, where prospective buyers can sip cappuccino and relax on tasteful Mission-style furniture while reading about the town's aspirations.

"A stroll down any one of the village's well-planned streets transports buyers to a simpler time," reads one display, "when neighbors took the time to become friends and small-town charm is an everyday reality."

The center is also where San Joaquin County Supervisor Leroy Ornellas planned a business mixer this month in hopes that enterprises one town over would open an outlet here, maybe a yogurt store or a coffee shop.

"This is not big business," Ornellas says, "but it's business that a community needs."

Ornellas is a dairy farmer whose supervisorial district includes Mountain House and Tracy — a city whose residents have the dubious distinction of enduring some of the longest commute times in the state.

A third-generation county resident who has watched subdivisions sprout and rush hours lengthen, Ornellas ticked off Mountain House's toughest competition in the race to bring job-creating businesses to town: several large developments nearby that hope to lure the same kinds of jobs Mountain House promises.

"I don't want to be pessimistic and say it's not going to happen," he said. But "there is a tremendous amount of competition out there."

Trimark has already begun improving its 700 commercial acres, putting in infrastructure and foundations that are required before full-bore construction begins. The next step is finding tenants and then building office parks, retail centers and light-industrial buildings.

This is where luck and timing come in. Several years ago, as companies were being priced out of the greater Bay Area, Teed-Bose said he was contacted weekly by call centers and electronics companies aching for more affordable venues.

But by the time Trimark had readied its first 70 acres of office and industrial property, the tech boom had gone bust.

The developer has hired C.B. Richard Ellis as its main commercial broker to attract businesses. Though the region is heavy with warehouse and distribution companies, First Vice President Kevin Dal Porto said his firm was shying away from tenants with "excessive truck traffic, low employee wages and other concerns such as noise and odor."

Trimark doesn't expect the high-tech firms it had hoped for. Instead, the developer is focusing on financial and real estate services companies, engineering firms and light manufacturers. But Trimark has its work cut out for it.

Trimark is also a member of the San Joaquin Partnership, a public-private economic development coalition that markets San Joaquin County to employers nationwide. Michael Locke, the partnership's chief executive, said other cities in the region are almost as close to the Bay Area as Mountain House and their land costs are lower.

But the houses are coming fast and furious. Nine thousand more were approved by the county last month. The streets — with names such as Legacy and Heritage, Prosperidad and Invitar — bustle with concrete trucks and construction workers. Trash bins and portable toilets line the streets.

Most of the residents here are "real estate refugees" drawn to Mountain House for homes that are affordable only by painful Bay Area standards. Models that brought \$380,000 when Mountain House opened now cost more than \$500,000. Demand has been so high that all new homes were sold originally by lottery. Lucky owners trade long commutes for mortgages.

But with businesses still wary of a sluggish economy, the near future looks slow for Teed-Bose's "great experiment."

After the economy improves, Teed-Bose insists, Mountain House will be "a very attractive place. That's the feedback we hear from employers."

For now? "Mountain House is going to look more like a subdivision with grocery stores and schools for anywhere from two to eight years," he said.

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