

Homes Do Double Duty

Proceeds help youths, seniors

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REDLANDS - Most kids learning, playing and laughing inside Boys & Girls Club's strikingly colorful computer labs and classrooms on Friday could tell you little or nothing about a neighborhood program that fixes up and sells foreclosed homes.

Yet it was the San Bernardino County Neighborhood Initiative program that helped fund the 8-month-old, 9,600-square-foot Dennis Hansberger Clubhouse where those kids gather most days.

The same neighborhood program will help fund the Vista Del Sol senior housing center a few blocks away. A \$1.2 million grant from the program was used to purchase property for the center.



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Jennifer Gutierrez, 8, of Redlands, does her part during a bubble-gum blowing contest at the Boys & Girls Club of Redlands. The 8-month-old clubhouse was funded in part by the San Bernardino County Neighborhood Initiative Program.

On Friday, the Neighborhood Initiative program was the focus of a contingent from Washington, D.C. Officials touted it as an effective way to meld federal, state and local funds for much-needed facilities.

"It's so important for kids to have a place," said Steve Preston, U.S. secretary of housing and urban development and a father of five.

The Neighborhood Initiative is a partnership between San Bernardino County, HUD, Fannie Mae and the cities of Redlands, San Bernardino and Highland. The program generates funds by purchasing foreclosed homes, renovating them, then selling to first-time, low-income buyers.

On average, repossessed houses cost about \$38,000 to renovate, officials said. The county can then sell the houses at a moderate price and return proceeds for neighborhood improvements.

Preston joined former Redlands Councilwoman Susan Pepler and Rep. Jerry Lewis, R-Redlands, on Friday to tour the Boys & Girls Club on Clay Street.



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Children can play a soccer game at the Boys & Girls Club in Redlands. The Clubhouse includes a teen center, computer lab, music center, art room, classrooms and kitchen.

Pepler, sworn in last month as HUD's assistant secretary for community planning and development, helped plan the tour in Redlands. The group also broke ground on the 71-unit Vista Del Sol project for low-income seniors slated for Webster Street in north Redlands.

It took nearly three years to build the clubhouse, not to mention all the years and effort it took to raise more than \$5 million to get the job done, said P.T. McEwen, chief professional officer for the Boys & Girls Club of Redlands.

McEwen credited Lewis with securing a \$500,000 appropriation that was the impetus for a Boys & Girls Club of Redlands "Let's Build a Clubhouse" capital campaign.

When construction costs skyrocketed, Dennis Hansberger, a native of Redlands who has served two decades on the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors, successfully pushed to get San Bernardino County Neighborhood Initiative program funds for the clubhouse, McEwen said.

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Youth development specialist Aleah Coleson receives a giant hug from Jennifer Gutierrez, left, Jaela Hemmingway and Melissa Arreola while playing at the Boys & Girls Club in Redlands.

Sarah Benson, a Redlands High School senior and three-year Boys & Girls Club member, donned a blue T-shirt that read "The Positive Place For Kids" and joined other club members to welcome the entourage.

Benson heads a group that wants to develop leadership skills, one of the four-decade-old club's programs aimed at building character, enhancing education and teaching kids about fitness, health, sports and the arts.

Although it costs Boys & Girls Club members \$12 a year to join, the club estimates it spends about \$1,600 per member, said Diego Contreras, local program director.

The club annually serves nearly 1,300 girls and boys from five communities.

The Neighborhood Initiative program was created as a result of legislation sponsored by Lewis in 1997. Initially, it was funded with \$15 million from HUD. Among the goals was to breathe new life into boarded-up homes and distressed neighborhoods, officials said.

Money for bricks and mortar is critical but it's the interaction of kids, staff and volunteers that is the essence of the club's success, McEwen said.

"There is nothing more important than having that feeling of connectiveness," Preston said.

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