

Phoenix Commons offers cohousing for seniors in Jingtletown

Gimme Shelter: Senior Living 2.0

RACHEL TRACHTEN



COURTESY ZIMMERMAN AND ASSOCIATES

In East Oakland's Jingtletown, a new twist on senior housing is in the works. The neighborhood known for its artists' lofts will soon be home to Phoenix Commons, a "cooperative lifestyle community" for older adults. The four-story complex of 41 units will be the East Bay's first senior cohousing development, according to project CEO Chris Zimmerman. Look for it on 29th Street overlooking the waterfront, just off Alameda's Park Street bridge. Move-in date: early 2015.

"I thought it would be a healthier, more vibrant way to retire," says Jeff Fearn, a retired CFO who is 67. "It's a good way to deal with the isolation that is a real possibility as you age." Fearn and his wife, Emmy, a special education professor, will move from their Crocker Highlands home to Phoenix Commons and are helping to plan and design the site.

The Fearn's appreciate the mix of privacy and community typical in cohousing. Residents of Phoenix Commons will own a fully furnished and equipped apartment. At the same time, the overall design of the facility—with its large communal kitchen, lounge, and dining area—encourages interaction. Cohousers want and expect to be a part of one another's lives, whether this means a weekly group dinner, an outing to the movies, or giving someone a ride to the doctor. Spending plenty of time with neighbors suits the Fearn's, who miss the instant community they had back in college and during child-rearing years in Crocker Highlands. "As the kids have grown and left home, we all have less to do with each other," Emmy says.

As plans progress, the Fearn's and other future residents will make choices about how the common spaces will be used. "They might want an arts and crafts room," says project developer Lauren Zimmerman Cook, "but I can't decide that for the community." (Phoenix Commons is a family affair for the Zimmermans; Cook's father, Chris Zimmerman, is the project CEO, and his brother Jeff Zimmerman is the principal architect.) Once the site is complete, it will be run by the people living there, which could mean helping with meal prep, overseeing finances, or leading a hike or singing group. "Rather than having a designed activities program, people create it based on their own interests," says Cook.

Cohousing came to the United States from Denmark in the mid-1980s, thanks to Northern California architects Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant, who got interested in the concept while studying at the University of Copenhagen. The duo wrote and published the book *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* about multigenerational cohousing in 1988. Their all-ages sites include developments in Temescal and on Doyle Street in Emeryville. According to the Cohousing Association of the United States, the country has about 210 cohousing sites completed or in progress, including 39 in California.

In 2005, Durrett wrote a volume on senior cohousing, an option that's already popular in Northern Europe and gaining traction in the United States. He and McCamant built one of the first senior cohousing sites in the country in 2012, Wolf Creek Lodge in Grass Valley. Residents there have become mentors to the group developing Phoenix Commons, offering their expertise on cohousing specifically for older adults. Suzanne Marriott, one of the first members of Wolf Creek Lodge, says that she chose senior cohousing instead of an all-ages model because she liked the idea of a place "where the emphasis and the energy went to the adults living there." The age range at Wolf Creek Lodge goes all the way from 56 to 90. At Phoenix Commons, each individual or one member of a couple, as well as 80 percent of the whole population, must be 55 or older.

Marriott says that another upside of cohousing is its smaller ecological footprint, achieved by sharing tools, appliances, laundry, and some meals. Phoenix Commons will provide similar options, and like Wolf Creek Lodge, the facility will have a guest room for overnight visitors. Claire Miller, also a Wolf Creek resident, says that as an introvert, she appreciates how much easier it is to be outgoing when people are so close by. Miller's husband, Bob, loves the convenience of cohousing too. "You need a 9-volt battery at 8 p.m.," he says, "you send out an email, and two show up on your doorstep."

Unlike assisted living, senior cohousing provides no staff, and residents can't expect ongoing nursing care. On the other hand, they can expect a lot of helping hands if they're recovering from a surgery or short-term illness. The design also allows for aging in place, according to project manager Linda Herman, with elements like wide hallways and doorways, blocking in the walls for grab bars, and turnaround space for a walker or wheelchair. In the future, Herman says, residents might even choose to convert the guest room into a space for a shared caregiver. Another plus is the proximity of Alameda Elder Communities, a nearby resource also developed by the Zimmermans, with options for rehab and skilled nursing care.

Also nearby is Jingtowntown's growing arts community. Cook says she can envision strong bonds developing between seniors at Phoenix Commons and local artists, with the possibility of hosting art shows or a speaker series at the site. The Jingtowntown Business Association, which includes artists and business owners, has thrown its support behind the project.

One- and two-bedroom apartments are available, ranging from \$360,000 to \$650,000. Residents also will pay a monthly fee of \$450 for maintenance and a reserve fund for unexpected costs. What you get for the money is a lifestyle that will keep you active and engaged. "You're not just buying real estate," says Cook. "You're buying into a community."

For more information on Phoenix Commons, visit www.phoenixcommons.com.