

EXAMINER/JOHN STOREY

Some of the neighborhood residents near Parkview Commons were fearful that the development would be
checked with kids who would disrupt the community's peace and quiet — but that hasn't been the case.

LIVING IN

Parkview Commons

Where 'housing advocates stood strong and won'

Editor's note: This is the second of three articles examining the myths and realities of high-density housing.

By Bradley Inman
 SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

PARKVIEW COMMONS is the official name for the 2-year-old, 114-unit housing development across from Kezar Stadium at the entrance to Golden Gate Park.

It's also the name on the development's commemorative plaque,

and it's the name used in the legal documents, on the marketing brochures and in the newspaper clips when the units sold two years ago.

People who live in the development also refer to it as Parkview Commons, and the Haight-Ashbury neighbors who own property near the development call it by the same name.

But not too long ago, this award-winning development went by another and more controversial moniker: the Poly High Project. And for the neighbors who opposed the affordable housing development, the emphasis was on the word "project."

It's a term some people involved in both sides of the fight to get the project approved and built would like to forget. The words "Poly High Project" conjure up memories of one of the most controversial and divisive land-use battles that ever occurred in San Francisco.

"It divided neighbors and really

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'Housing advocates stood strong, won'

burnt some of us out," said local resident Larry Burgheimer, who was one of the neighborhood leaders who had opposed the project.

Turning point

Today, this small housing development may seem innocent enough with its Victorian-style design, bay windows and decks. But it carries as much political history as landmark developments such as Mission Bay, the Transamerica

Pyramid and the downtown Marriott Hotel.

Poly High represented a turning point in The City's choppy history on housing issues. Up until that time, people had figured out that high shelter costs were eating away at the fabric of The City and that something needed to be done. But until Poly High was approved there was more rhetoric than action.

Poly High was a break from tradition: It was a dense affordable housing project next to an established residential neighborhood. Moreover, it was approved over the objections of an ear-splitting and

well-financed group of neighbors and property owners who were upset by the level of density being proposed in their back yard.

"Housing advocates stood strong and won — that was a major achievement in San Francisco," said Ben Golvin of BRIDGE Housing, the nonprofit group that built Parkview Commons in a joint venture with San Francisco developer Thomas Callinan.

It took 10 years for the abandoned Polytechnic High School site at Frederick and Arguello to be demolished and replaced with 114 attractive flats that are scattered across the 2.5 acre site.

During that period, there were four lawsuits, two criminal investigations, accusations of blackmail, four city-wide ballot measures, nearly 100 public hearings and scads of community meetings that often dragged into the wee hours of the morning. While a host of community groups dug in their heels and supported the development, others were formed to fight it.

The life of the approval process spanned the mayoral terms of both Dianne Feinstein and Art Agnos, both of whom supported the development. Even Marin County Supervisor Al Aramburu got involved when he served as an arbitrator between the development team and a disgruntled Mill Valley resident who owned property near the Poly High site.

"Density was the issue in this debate," said Burgheimer.

When Parkview Commons was first proposed, the zoning called for 170 units. Through the stormy approval process, the neighbors who opposed it pushed the developer to lower the number of units to 114, which is 44 units to the acre. The average density in San Francisco is 30 units to the acre.

"We didn't want to kill the project. We just wanted to lower the density," said Bill Redican, who was active in the fight to oppose Poly High and has since moved from the neighborhood. Today, he argues that reducing the density and persuading the developer to



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Larry Burgheimer, a neighbor, said the project "divided neighbors and really burnt some of us out. . . . Most of our fears never materialized."

increase the amount of parking improved the project.

Some hopes dashed

Shrinking the density, however, had consequences, counters Don-

ald Turner, president of BRIDGE.

"We had 3,200 families sign up for a lottery to get a chance at buying one of the units," said Turner. "Every single unit counts when the hopes and dreams of one of those families were dashed because we lost density during the approval process."

position to the housing plan.

"The idea behind many of their obstructionist tactics was to bleed the project to death," he said. "They didn't succeed but they sure tried to wear us down."

One reason BRIDGE could afford the delays was \$300,000 in pro bono legal fees that were donated from San Francisco law firm Morrison & Foerster. Plus, hundreds of hours of grass-roots volunteer time from residents who supported the project provided political muscle in city hall.

Today, Burgheimer said that "most of our fears never materialized."

For example, people were concerned about parking, which was already a problem in the neighborhood. But no one is complaining now because the development provided ample parking stalls on site.

Some of the neighborhood residents were fearful that the development would be packed with kids who would disrupt the community's peace and quiet. That hasn't been the case, according to Burgheimer. There aren't as many children as expected and they don't create a nuisance, he said.

Unfounded fear

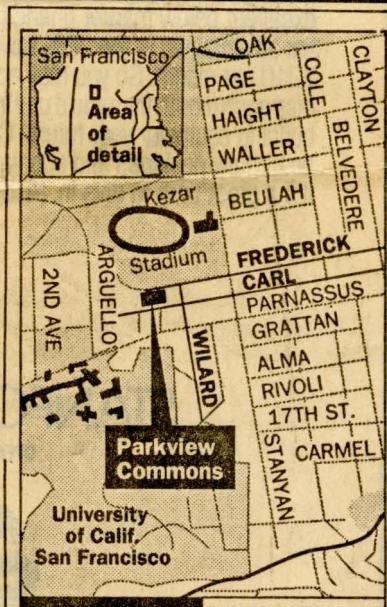
Property values were also an issue, but that, too, was an unfounded fear.

"I don't think that home values went down out at all because of the development," said local real estate agent and resident Stanis Hall who initially opposed the development because she wanted the school refurbished instead of demolished.

Hall also feels the neighborhood is safer. She said she knows of one

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PARKVIEW COMMONS



► **SALES:** The units in Parkview sold for \$99,000 to \$149,000.

► **BUYERS:** All of those who purchased homes at Parkview were first-time buyers with median income or less. In exchange for a below-market price, buyers have a second trust deed loan with San Francisco. But buyers aren't required to make payments on this loan until the home is transferred or sold. There are limitations on how much profit can be earned when the units are sold.

► **LEASE:** The homes are leasehold condominiums because The City leased the land from the San Francisco Unified School District for 75 years.

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person who was mugged near the school when it was vacant and occupied by squatters.

Some of the complaints during the approval process bordered on the ridiculous.

For example, residents blasted the corner tower bays that accent each building by referring to them as the "San Quentin guard towers."

Today, the design is praised. The project was designed by San Francisco architect David Baker who won an award for Parkview Commons and was featured in Architectural Record. Mayor Agnostouts Parkview Commons as an

example of how attractive high-density housing can be.

Still, not everyone is convinced of the project's worth. Redican is still concerned that the project is too dense. "There are a lot of people over there jammed onto one another," he said.

Nevertheless, Parkview Commons is a vast improvement over the empty and dilapidated Polytechnic High School that was there before. And for the people who got a shot at affordable home ownership and for a city that has so little of it, the victory at Poly High will not be forgotten.

On My Sensible and Livable Scale:

High-density housing often seems threatening when first proposed. But give a well-intended and

HIGH DENSITY HOUSING

Do you know of an example of Bay Area high-density housing that "works"?

Send us the name and a brief description of high-density developments that you think are examples of good design, affordability and livability. Bradley Inman will check them out and write about the more interesting ones in the future. Write: Bradley Inman, c/o Real Estate Desk, San Francisco Examiner, 110 Fifth St., San Francisco, CA 94103.

well-designed project a chance and it can work very well. Check out Parkview Commons.