

# BY POPULAR DEMAND: COHOUSING LIVING

By Patricia Kutza

Nine-year-olds Emma Bitner and Evan Backes enjoy a sunny afternoon with Butterscotch their dog at Southside Park, a Sacramento cohousing development.




While much attention focuses on the continued appreciation of Northern California residential

property, it's still a fact that many homeowners have issues with the quality of life in their neighborhoods. They harbor the dream of living in a community where social interaction within a sustainable environment is a consciously cultivated value.

That's why a growing, multigenerational cross section of Sacramento-area residents is opting to live in cohousing developments. Its typical small footprint (between 25 and 35 units) and private-ownership model resembles condominiums. But that's where the comparison ends. Averaging a full 2,500 square feet to 7,500 square feet, the common areas are much larger than those of a condominium, reflecting cohousing's emphasis on shared common meals, child care and teaming for everything from gardening to carpentry.

The cohousing concept has gained considerable momentum since its beginnings in Denmark in the early 1970s. There are cohousing communities in 69 cities across the United States, and Northern California continues to lead this trend, with at least 14 developments in such cities as Cotati, Pleasant Hill, Oakland, Berkeley, Emeryville and Nevada City.

Muir Commons,  [muircommons.org](http://muircommons.org), the first U.S.-based cohousing neighborhood, was built in Davis in 1991, and downtown Sacramento's Southside Park has been in operation since 1993.

## SMART-GROWTH MAGNET

Northern California has long been a magnet for advocates of smart-growth principles and intentional communities, says Kathryn McCamant, principal architect of the Nevada City-based firm

"We are finding tremendous interest in owners who want more say in a community design that balances their need for privacy and community in an environmentally sensitive way."

— Kathryn McCamant, principal architect, McCamant & Durrett Architects



**Breakfast time: Rick Mockler (left), Heather Wahanik and Dirk Wahanik serve pancakes during a weekend community breakfast at Muir Commons in Davis, the first cohousing project in the United States.**



McCamant & Durrett Architects. It's a natural progression from customizing homes to customizing neighborhoods.

She is the co-author with Chuck Durrett of "Cohousing, A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves," the seminal 1994 book on the entire movement. While many cost economies are realized by careful planning, the main driver for cohousing is not shaped by the desire to find a low-cost alternative to California's pricey housing, McCamant explains. "We are finding tremendous interest in owners who want more say in a community design that balances their need for both privacy and community, created in an environmentally sensitive way."

Two such owners are Sacramento residents Greg McAvoy-Jensen and Marty Maskall, who plan to bring more cohousing developments to this region. Like other "first movers," defined as those who take the initiative to create new cohousing communities as opposed to joining established developments, both McAvoy-Jensen and Maskall find their commitment has been tested from the get-go.

In 2000, McAvoy-Jensen and his wife co-founded the Sacramento cohousing organization on a shoestring budget after falling in love with a Cobb Hill, Vt., cohousing community they visited. They have attracted a core group of potential owners by maintaining their website and linking to similar sites. After review-

ing potential areas in West Sacramento and the Sacramento neighborhoods of Oak Park, Richards Blvd. and Tahoe Park, they decided to concentrate on Greenfair, a 30-acre redevelopment site (at Broadway and Fairgrounds Drive), due to its proximity to the downtown area and public transportation.

## BURNING SOULS

Keeping his organization's interest and enthusiasm high before any land is actually secured is a major challenge, McAvoy-Jensen admits. "We need to continually show up at these community meetings and make a persuasive case to the developers, Greenfair Village Partners, that our cohousing concept will serve the mandate they've been given," he points out.

"There's a part in 'The Cohousing Handbook' where a guy talks about the type of spirit needed to build these communities. He says they need a *burning soul*. And he's absolutely right,"

says Maskall. She has formed the Sacramento Suburban Cohousing Group and publishes site criteria on the website, as well as a survey that helps people determine their level of interest in joining her group. "You have to want this commitment very much," says Maskall, "because you will be spending enormous amounts of time and energy searching for land, attending local government meetings and learning about zoning laws."

## COHOUSING FACTOIDS



A cohousing footprint is typically no more than 35 units on from two to five acres of land. Common areas range from 2,500 square feet to 7,500 square feet.



Cohousing developments, unlike cooperatives, where all property is held in joint tenancy, are based on individual homeownership with an interest in common areas, much like the condominium model.



Unlike traditional-neighborhood development, such as Davis-based Aggie Village/Davis Commons, cohousing promotes community with its physical as well as social design.



## BRINGING IT HOME

Don Knutson knows something about not putting all your eggs in one basket.


In the '90s, Knutson was a stakeholder in a group dead set on securing a parcel of land for a new cohousing development in downtown Sacramento. "We focused exclusively on procuring this site without lining up a backup site. When a neighbor refused to sell property needed to complete our community design, our group fell apart," he says.

In 2000, Knutson paid \$120,000 for his present 1,000-sq.-ft. two-bedroom/two-bath house in the mature Southside Park community, a cohousing complex built in 1993 and located close to the area where Knutson first hoped to live.

Southside Park structures its monthly homeowner fees similar to those of a conventional condominium complex. Knutson pays \$225; owners of larger units pay about \$50 more per month. He also facilitates monthly meetings, a role that carries a lot of weight due to the premium placed on consensus building.

Knutson relishes the fact that he personally knows all 24 homeowners and can rely on them for support. He wouldn't mind extending their interaction. "I'd like to see folks co-own cars. The only limits to cooperation are the ones we set for ourselves."

"In our case, that means understanding the complexities of our three target locations: the unincorporated cities of Orangevale and Fair Oaks, and the incorporated city of Citrus Heights. It's also critical that you learn the concerns of existing residents in the community, which often means educating them about cohousing, so that you can get their buy-in early on. You don't want your carefully nurtured initiative to be

 [sacsuburbancehousing.org](http://sacsuburbancehousing.org) blind-sided at the last minute by irate, uninformed neighbors."

### THE HYDRA-HEADED CLIENT

Cohousing developments are the poster children for all the forward-thinking concepts fostered in architecture schools: Energy-efficient solutions abound and there's a big emphasis on environmentally friendly design. But it's doubtful, says Rick Mockler, vice president of Nevada City-based CoHousing Partners, that others with his job duties, which include coordinating new site acquisition, group-formation activities and political entitlements, will be

 [cohousingpartners.com](http://cohousingpartners.com) flooding the marketplace anytime soon.

"Traditional developers working within the conventional-housing market are really afraid of working with the hydra-headed client, because in the cohousing life cycle they have to deal directly with as many as 35

prospective homeowners," Mockler says. "The whole process adds layers of complexity to the normal process of securing land and building on it." Currently managing a Grass Valley-based development in its nascent stage, what motivates Mockler to embark on these complicated projects is his belief in the power of both environment sustainability and community living.

"I have a real passion for building strong neighborhoods," he says. "I draw on my past experience working in nonprofit community development for Catholic Charities in the East Bay and Sacramento areas." Like all key

 [cohousingco.com](http://cohousingco.com) staff members at his firm, Mockler

 [cohousing.hopto.org](http://cohousing.hopto.org) wears many hats and relies

heavily on his project management skills to solve financial and political challenges as he shepherds the project through a maze of consultants.


"Each day of the week can present a unique challenge," says Mockler. "One day I can be negotiating a solution centering on traffic flow. The next day I am working through a city's arcane political process."

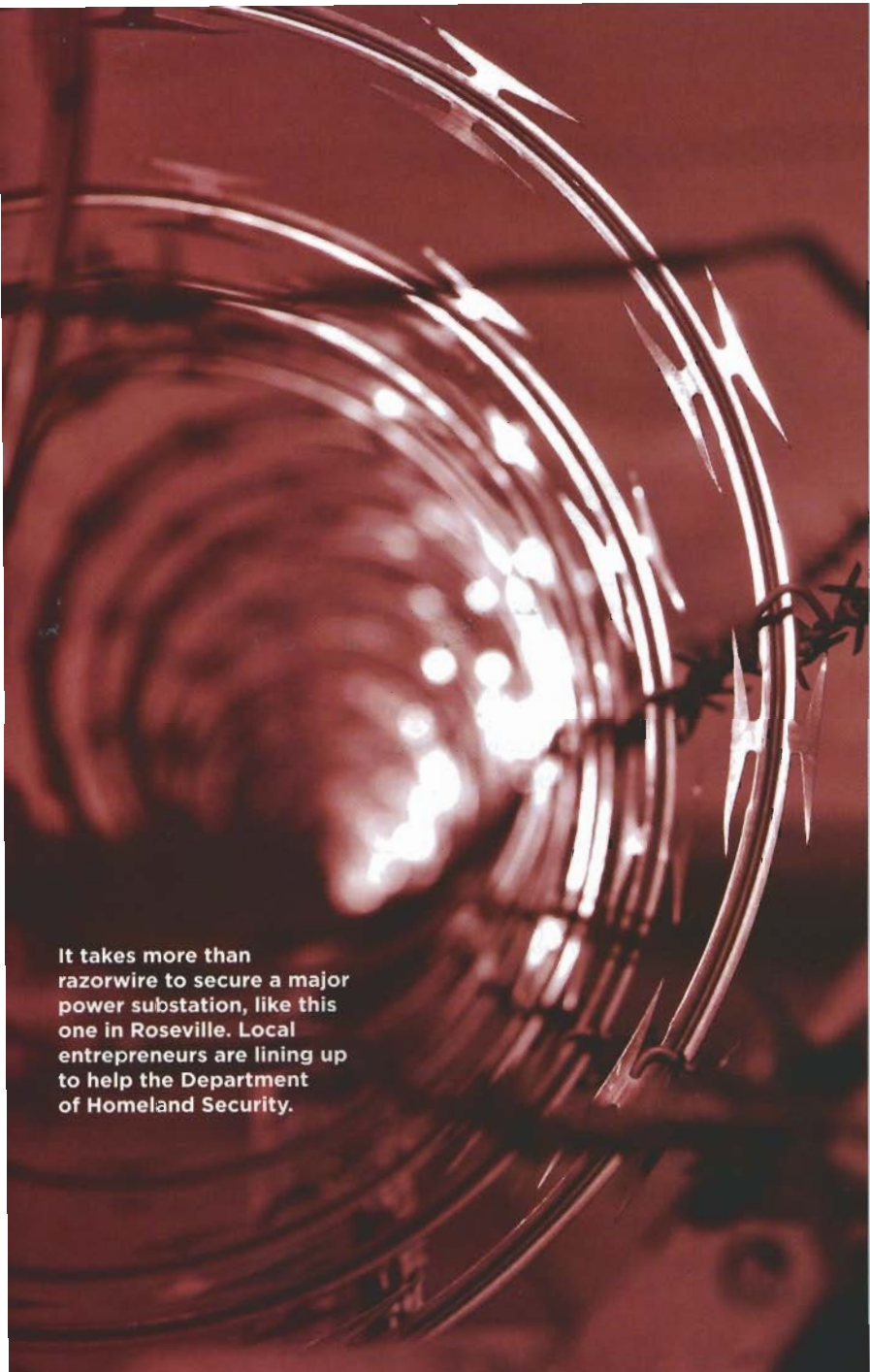
Mockler's been able to make great use of his master's degree in organizational development. He says that his team is able to avoid the hydra-headed syndrome by creating a system that encourages prospective-owner input without slowing down the design process. "Once a site is acquired, a typical cohousing project life cycle extends

over a period of two to three years. Initially, prospective owners are asked to pay a percentage of their anticipated home buying price (typically about 5 percent).

"Their financial and time expenditure represents a serious commitment during the design and building phases of the project. By assigning owners to various committees such as finance or design, we accomplish two important goals: They discover the strength of their commitment that helps us, in turn, manage their expectations. Those folks who survive this process become pretty tightly knotted. By move-in time, they have learned how to live together."

At the end of his workday, Mockler returns to his Muir Commons home, a cohousing complex in Davis. Mockler and his wife have raised their two daughters there since 1996. The typical Muir property is sized at 1,100 square feet and has three bedrooms and one bath. Mockler says these homes cost around \$115,000 in 1991 and sold as recently as April 2006 for \$410,000.

Apart from home appreciation, Mockler says owning cohousing property has been a valuable proposition. "It's been a very rich experience for us. You rely on your neighbors more, and we self-manage by using teamwork for maintenance of the common-house facilities. It's an outgoing, friendly life, and it feels easier. We don't get into the typical homeowner-association problems because we are used to working out ways to deal with conflict." 



It takes more than razorwire to secure a major power substation, like this one in Roseville. Local entrepreneurs are lining up to help the Department of Homeland Security.

## **38** ON THE COVER Entrepreneurial First Responders

As the fifth Day of Remembrance of the 9/11 terrorist attacks looms, government may have finally put in place the steps needed to find answers to potential threats. Next year's proposed Department of Homeland Security budget is set at \$42.7 billion, but how much of Uncle Sam's money ends up with the region's entrepreneurial first responders is anybody's guess.

*By Jess Sullivan*

## **34** BY POPULAR DEMAND: COHOUSING LIVING

While much attention focuses on the continued appreciation of Northern California residential property, it's still a fact that many homeowners have issues with the quality of life in their neighborhoods. They harbor the dream of living in a community where social interaction within a sustainable environment is a consciously cultivated value. That's why a growing, multigenerational cross section of Sacramento-area residents is opting to live in cohousing developments.

*By Patricia Kutza*

## **46** SARTA'S TECH TREE, PART 1

Today, a growing innovation culture is visible in the Sacramento region, particularly at the grassroots level, where tech spinoffs are offering unprecedented opportunities for professionals, employers and investors. In this three-part series, *Prosper* looks at how Sacramento Area Regional Technology Alliance's "genealogy map" of mother companies and their progeny works to connect the dots.

*By Clifton B. Parker*



**Finding Prosper's Elizabeth Babbitt on the contributor's page is quite the understatement. The top reason? Babbitt's role as every department's right hand. In fact, a "Liz-I-need-your-help" crescendo echoes throughout the Prosper "bunker" every few minutes.**

**But Babbitt's alacrity to create Prosper Picks (See page 76) and then select the cultural currents for the page each month, has landed her solidly in editorial. She is now associate editor of Prosper and prospermag.com. Alas, the Liz War is over.**



# Contributors

## Jess Sullivan

(COVER: Entrepreneurial First Responders, page 38)

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you." Yes, a lame cliché, but it comes to mind when researching homeland security. Folks fighting the war on terror do not respond to media inquiries. What's the upside for them? So calls go unreturned or get deflected to media flacks who are often unresponsive. It can be tough to come by specifics in a 'need-to-know-only' arena.

"Among the politicos, when the news is available, comment and information are available. When the political winds are uncertain, as they appear to be in the Sacramento region, the well of insights and observation runs a bit dry."

"Frustrations aside, as with most business success, the harder you work at learning about homeland-security opportunities, the luckier you'll be in unlocking the right door."

*A Sacramento resident for 25 years, Jess Sullivan has received five California Newspaper Publishers' Association awards.*

## Clifton B. Parker

(SARTA Tech Tree, Part One, page 46)

"Tech spinoffs are a fascinating historical footprint — the 1960s Apollo moon-exploration program gave us the lunar roving vehicle (OK, so we do not need many of these), scratch-resistant lenses for sunglasses, cordless tools such as drills and dust vacuums, and thousands of other items. It was surprising to find that despite widespread belief, Tang and Velcro were not part of the NASA program.

"Anyhow, right here in Sacramento, tech spinoffs are shaping our fast-growing technological 'family tree.' It is an organic, evolutionary dynamic, where brilliant ideas and people beget other brilliant ideas and people."

*Clifton B. Parker is a copywriter and author in Woodland. He has worked as a UC Davis editor, Congressional press secretary, newspaper reporter and copy-writing consultant.*

## Patricia Kutza

(Cohousing Update, page 34)

"Having survived, however grudgingly, many time-wasting business meetings over the years, I was especially curious to know how cohousing aficionados ward off meeting fatigue. First movers, those folks who are involved in designing cohousing developments versus those who move into pre-existing communities, invest countless hours in planning meetings before they even step over the threshold of their properties.

"No wonder great meeting facilitators are held in such high esteem in these communities. Consensus rules when it comes to decision-making. And anyone who has spent any appreciable time building meaningful consensus knows that accomplishing it is no mean trick."

*Patricia Kutza writes frequently for Prosper. "No More Fence Sitting," her October 2005 article, focused on the precarious state of immigration policies and procedures.*

## Marti Childs and Jeff March

(Baby Blue Chips: JiWire Inc., page 29)

"JiWire has built a following by helping people find (hotspot) locations. But, no, we didn't file this story using a wireless

notebook computer. There's something to be said for turning off your desktop computer and closing your office door behind you at the end of the day."

*Marti Childs and Jeff March are partners in EditPros, which performs writing and editing services for print and electronic publications.*

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