

Army airfield construction fuels housing plans

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Local cities today struggle to accommodate population increases. Vacaville, Fairfield and Suisun faced similar challenges in the later years of World War II, when construction of the new Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Field brought hundreds of new residents.

The first wave consisted mostly of temporary residents, who came to construct the base facilities.

Fairfield and Vacaville quickly responded to the housing need by erecting trailer courts and advertising rooms for rent.

By March 1943, public forums discussed the need for federal housing. With the war efforts going on, building materials for private construction were virtually impossible to obtain. The shortage added to the developing housing crunch; only federally approved housing could solve this problem.

With the opening of the base expected that summer, the call for federal housing reached to the nation's capital.

U.S. Sen. Sheridan Downey telegraphed on May 11, 1943, to Solano Republican editor, David A. Weir: "For your interest National Housing Agency has approved priorities private housing construction for war workers amounting to 75 homes for Fairfield, 50 for Vacaville. Public housing expected to be granted next few days."

The Solano Republican published the text on May 13, adding, "The above telegram indicates that the long sought project for more housing in this community has finally reached the proper authority, since Sen. Sheridan Downey loses no time when a matter of importance comes to his attention. Just what the import of the telegram entails in time element isn't known , but it is known that all barriers between Fairfield and a housing project have been hurdled - priorities and authorities - and certainly the need of more housing here, due to the prospected influx of civilian workers at the Fairfield Airdrome is well known in Washington.

"City Council, Lions Club and other agencies had earlier provided the necessary data to the National Housing Authority "showing that this city is capable of supplying land, water, sewage, roads and sidewalks for as many as 500 houses "

Two building contractors, C. W. Leekins and Zeno H. Mauvais, were ready to begin construction, "when and if the Government red tape is cleared away," continued the Solano Republican.

"These contractors have built hundreds of two- and three-bedroom homes in the East Bay, under Federal authority, and have the capital and labor to do the work here . In company with local representatives, the contractors visited the Fairfield Airdrome, and are convinced that the allotted priorities for 75 homes here is not nearly sufficient to take care of the needs incident to the opening of the new airdrome."

Officials estimated that more than 2,000 civilian workers would arrive, more than doubling Fairfield's population of roughly 1,400 residents.

"These are momentous days!" declared the Solano Republican the following week on May 20. The City Council had approved contracting with the two contractors. Realtor Arthur Garben had secured more than 40 lots within the city limits, all with access to sewer, water and "lighting facilities."

" Nothing now remains but a clearing from the War Production Board and building will start here on at least 44 homes - all of two- and three-bedroom size, each house costing \$4,500 to \$5,000. Mr. Leekins stated that all homes built by his firm have at least 1000 feet of floor space, five or six rooms, hardwood floor, tiled baths, gas floor furnace, and all modern appliances. These units, all financed by the contractors, will be for rent only ."

The impact of such rapid growth led David Weir on Jun 3, 1943, to write a reflective editorial in his typically elaborate style. The article also showed the ride citizens took in supporting the war efforts.

He titled it, "The Passing of a Quiet and Peaceful Village."

"Fairfield and Suisun will never again be the quiet, peaceful little community that citizens have known for the past 20 years and more. Like the time, a few years ago, when the great, awe-inspiring bridges first spanned the San Francisco bay and marked the end to the slow but fascination ferry boat that were want to shuttle over the placid waters between Oakland and San Francisco, this community, too, must awaken from its placed, lackadaisical demeanor and begin to stride with the changing times or, like the loose pebble on the hard highway, be brushed aside to make room for the far-seeing and up-and-doing.

Gradual growth and change makes but a small ripple in the village life - but the influx of hundreds over night, as it were, is a compellant force that demands sudden and

sometimes jarring, readjustments by all groups and individuals. The change, whether the individual welcomes it or not, is being received graciously and bravely, for it is all a part and result of that thing called war - not of our choosing, but nonetheless, our responsibility and our task.

“With the influx of hundreds of new people - soldiers and citizens - local business folk, civic groups and artisans, caterers and merchants, mechanics and clerks, churches, schools and recreation centers - all will have to forgo more of that little leisure now enjoyed, and give more and more time to maintaining businesses and service as in the quiet days, We can all do a little more - no matter what the demands have been heretofore - to make the life of the soldier and new civilian here more tolerable and pleasant - to SELL our community to those who have come to us in whatever capacity. That is a sacred trust which we must all accept gladly and heroically.”

I will continue this story in my next column.

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