

Renovation gives complex a needed face-lift

Fontana Housing Authority helps improve Laurel Woods

By Josh Dulaney
Staff Writer

FONTANA — The placid pool skirted by palm trees, little emerald lawns and flower gardens blooming with varied hues would say one thing, if it could speak: This place used to be awful.

As recently as 2006, Laurel Woods Apartments was infested with gangbangers, addled with drugs and enfolded by graffiti-scribbled walls.

Then it became one of nine complexes purchased by the Fontana Housing Authority, renovated and managed through a partnership between the city and private businesses. Purchased for \$7.1 million, the 88-unit community underwent

a recently completed \$2.7 million interior and exterior makeover and added a new learning-services building.

"I thought he wanted me to quit," Community Manager Deneice Morton said Monday of her boss's motives, when he assigned her to Laurel Woods in 2006. Morton works for a private management company that specializes in turning blighted complexes around.

Her first action as manager, on her first day, was to run off gangsters smoking marijuana in front of children in the community playground. Then, it was a tour of the units — some occupied by criminal tenants, others by squatters; still others, vacated but trashed.

She evicted about 15 renters. As a thank-you, her office door was kicked in.

"It was horrific," she said. Morton lived off-site in Diamond Bar for about six months.

Now she lives there and works in an office within a community center that could've been cut from the set of some home-design TV show.

The city targets complexes such as Laurel Woods that have high police service calls, then buys the property and conducts a full rehabilitation from the ground up, according to Brent Mickey, the Housing Development manager.

Tenants must earn 50 percent or less than the average income in San Bernardino County, have good credit and pass a criminal background check.

Officials said one of the keys to successful redevelopment of places like Laurel Woods is strong, on-site management. The city contracted with Upland-based Quality

Management Group, and its president, Josh LaBarge, for its services.

Both LaBarge and Morton said heavy patrolling by the Police Department eradicated the criminal element from the property.

Thomas Seymour agrees. The 61-year-old has lived at Laurel Woods since 2004. When he moved in with his wife and three kids, he saw the apartment community deteriorate rapidly from bad to worse.

The man who used to walk straight from his car to his apartment and rein in his kids before sundown now knows his neighbors and doesn't mind if his children hang out with friends a little after dark.

"I enjoy it here now," Seymour said. "It's night and day. There's more of a neighborly feel when you live in apartments like this."

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Courtesy photo

Formerly blighted, crime-infested Laurel Woods Apartments in Fontana got a boost from the city of Fontana, which bought the complex, renovated it and contracted with a private management company to keep the place safe. The \$2.7 million renovation includes the addition of a new learning-services center.