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# Novato school district picks workforce housing consultant



A vacant lot on San Andreas Drive in Novato is among several district-owned properties that could be considered for future workforce housing. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)



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March 16, 2024 at 6:44 p.m.



The Novato Unified School District has selected an Oakland real estate development firm as a consultant for its workforce housing program.

A district committee chose Brookwood Partners, which has completed similar projects at other Bay Area school districts, from a group of potential candidates. The committee was composed of Derek Knell, the staff housing development director; Tracy Smith, the superintendent; Joshua Braff, the chief financial officer; attorney James Traber; and Leslie Benjamin, the communications director.

“Brookwood Partners demonstrated extensive practical development experience on various projects, including the workforce housing project recently completed by Jefferson Union High School District,” Knell told trustees at a board meeting on March 5. “After careful consideration, the district staff believes Brookwood Partners would be the best fit for the district.”

Brookwood Partners’ proposed contract, including financial terms and scope of work, is pending approval by the trustees. It will be presented at a board meeting on March 19, Knell said.

Chris White, a principal of Brookwood Partners, told trustees his firm would plan to develop a feasibility study for a below-market or subsidized housing development in Novato to attract and retain teachers and other staff who could not otherwise afford to live in Marin.

White said he and his colleagues would produce the feasibility study over three months. Their work would include a site analysis of all available surplus or underutilized district-owned land, a survey of employees who might be interested in such a housing opportunity and a review of Novato’s pending housing plans.

“All those elements will give us an idea of the cost of the project and some budget projections,” White told trustees.

If the contract is approved, the company would arrange a tour of its latest project, in Daly City, for members of Novato’s workforce housing advisory committee. The 122-residence development in the Jefferson Union High School District was completed last year, White said.

“It was fully leased in three months and now has a waitlist,” he said. He said the project was “more dense” than what might be envisioned for Novato, but the goal of attracting and retaining staff was the same.

“The district had no new job openings at the beginning of the school year,” White said. “All signs point to the teachers and staff who are living there all being very happy.”

Other recent projects by the firm include a 60-residence development in Half Moon Bay for the Cabrillo Unified School District, and a 70-residence project for the Pacifica School District.

Trustees said they wanted to make sure that Brookwood Partners had access to all relevant resources in Novato, such as the Rotary Club of Novato, which runs its own affordable home program. Also, the firm needed to be steeped in the Novato culture, trustees said.

“Novato is very close-knit,” trustee Ross Millerick said. “We’re like a small town.”

The school district “depends on the support of our community,” Millerick said. “You need to be very careful to be in step with the community.”

The next meeting of the district’s workforce housing advisory committee is April 15.

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