

Friendship Manor Looking for New Place to Call Home

The independent-living facility says its current location doesn't fit the needs of its elderly residents



Resident Shirley Bagwell welcomes Friendship Manor's move to a new location, saying the current facility "was built for kids," with small showers and stair steps that aren't deep enough to use with a cane or a walker. (Friendship Manor courtesy photo)

By [Sonia Fernandez, Noozhawk Staff Writer](#) | Published on 03.08.2010

They've done the best they could with what they've had. They've even flourished. But now it's time for these seniors to get a place of their own.

Patricia Fabing, marketing director for [Friendship Manor](#), an independent senior living facility on El Colegio Road in Isla Vista, says it's time to look into the future and step out of the current digs into a more "purpose-built" home.

"We'd like to be more current, and maybe cutting-edge," Fabing said.

Built in the 1960s, the complex of buildings that houses the 200 seniors who live in Friendship Manor was originally the College Inn, built for student housing. A student-population drop in the early 1970s, after the riots that resulted in the burning of the [Bank of America](#) in Isla Vista in 1970, prompted the owners of the complex to offer it up for sale. The purchasers turned the complex into an independent-living facility, which it remains today.

As well as the buildings and the grounds have been used to create and maintain a thriving senior community for nearly 40 years, there's only so much one can do to a building meant for younger, more able-bodied people to make it useful for the more elderly crowd — for whom mobility, accessibility and safety are big issues.

“This place was built for kids,” resident Shirley Bagwell said.

For instance, she said, the showers are small, and adding grab bars makes them even smaller. The stair steps aren't deep enough to use with a cane or a walker, and there's only one elevator in the whole complex.

Fabing said there are too many cost-prohibitive obstacles to performing needed retrofits. That, coupled with a desire to create greener standards of living for the senior residents, led to the decision to search for a place to build the ideal facility.

What will remain the same, however, are the activities and the amenities.

The organization has been looking at Goleta, but it's also considering a broader search for a four- to five-acre site on which to build new senior housing. It would have a larger footprint than the current site, about three acres, to accommodate what Fabing calls the oncoming “senior tsunami,” the wave of seniors who may have to move out of their homes and into an independent-living situation.

Fabing said what makes Friendship Manor unique is that it's virtually the only independent-living facility in town that incorporates a diversity of seniors from various economic situations. Other facilities are too pricey for some retirees, or seniors may not fit the requirements.

“It brings a vitality,” resident Sue Lipsky said of the social diversity of the seniors who come to Friendship Manor. “And I've always been excited about that.”

The move won't be an easy feat for Friendship Manor. Aside from the normal travails of finding, acquiring and developing land on the South Coast, preferably with access to shops and hospitals, the nonprofit organization's tax-exempt status may not make its project as attractive to local jurisdictions as one that would be required to pay local property taxes.

"Our tax-exempt status is critical for us to maintain our affordability," Skip Szymanski, board president of Friendship Manor, said in a recent statement. "Having a broad overview of the affordable housing needs in our area, Friendship Manor is a critical piece in the senior housing market. This allows us to offer incredible value to our senior residents and also sends out an important message about how we operate in the community."

Friendship Manor is looking to partner with other organizations with similar goals to collaborate on ways to provide care and services to seniors — potentially easing up on the need for those services from local jurisdictions.

Fabing said there are other benefits to the move. The current building is located in the middle of prime student housing, and can be reconverted to its original purpose, helping alleviate the congestion and parking crunch of Isla Vista when [UCSB](#) is in session.

Also, according to the organization, local retailers would benefit from having a population of 200 or so seniors in the area.

The construction and move — if and when they happen — will be a major expense to the organization, which will use the money from the sale of its current building to cover the cost. However, Fabing, who would not speculate on the total cost of the project at this time, provided assurance that the organization would search for other ways to fund the project before considering any price raise to the seniors — and that there would be "no senior left behind" during the relocation.

That comes as good news for senior residents such as Frank Hazen, who came to Friendship Manor with his wife just a few years ago.

"It's wonderful here," said Hazen, whose wife died recently. "It's the easiest living we've ever had in our lives."

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