

LA GUADALUPE STARTS UP IN BOYLE HEIGHTS

Supportive housing project will build all union

Photos by Hector Islas for Azure



Vanessa Delgado, center, managing partner of Azure Development, named the project for her Abuelita Guadalupe, seen in portrait at left. Joining Delgado are Rick Schroeder, President of Many Mansions, and State Senator Maria Elena Durazo.

At a kickoff ceremony Sept. 27 in Boyle Heights, partners behind La Guadalupe—a new 44-unit supportive housing complex that will rise opposite Mariachi Plaza—saluted a building that will change people’s lives at the same time that it will advance union construction careers.

The \$33 million La Guadalupe will be built under a Project Labor Agreement with the Los Angeles/Orange Counties

Building and Construction Trades Council.

La Guadalupe will receive \$9.5 million in funding from Measure HHH, a City of LA measure that raises money for affordable housing. The Building Trades Council has made a deal with the city requiring a PLA on any HHH project of 65 units or more. Although La Guadalupe is below that threshold, for Vanessa Delgado, managing partner of Azure Development, the

decision to enter a voluntary PLA was “the right thing to do.”

“I think it’s important. To me it’s very symbolic to make sure these are truly livable wages we’re creating with this project,” Delgado said. “That was a main motivation.”

Building Trades Representative Ernesto Medrano thanked Delgado for her leadership and foresight, and outlined the

manifold benefits of engaging union labor, including a local hire provision and goals to bring veterans into the Building Trades through Helmets to Hardhats.

“We can dispatch our local residents who live around here. Because at the end of the day, they spend their money locally, and they don’t have to drive anywhere else, so they can spend more time with their families, be good parents, do after-school activities,” Medrano said.

“Our agreements also provide for apprenticeship opportunities,” he added. “We are the other four-year degree: No tuition, no debt, we provide you a four-year apprenticeship so you can make a middle-class career with a pension and benefits.”

At the groundbreaking, Delgado struck an unusually personal tone in outlining Azure’s vision for a community-driven approach to the city’s dire homelessness crisis.

A longtime ally of the Building Trades and a native daughter of Boyle Heights, Delgado named the project after her grandmother, whose portrait looked over the ceremony from a nearby table, as mariachis played her favorite song.

It was her Abuelita, Delgado said, whose kindness and sense of community inspired the affordable housing project, a public-private initiative backed by a coalition of government, community and industry partners.

“My Abuelita Guadalupe was the kindest person I have ever met. Her home was a safe place that many stopped at on their immigration journey from Mexico to the United States. She gave them food and clean clothes, despite having so many of us to feed,” Delgado said, in an emotional recounting. La Guadalupe, she added, would mark a fulfillment of a promise she made decades ago.

“Abuelita, I promised you that I’d come back and help others in the community, and we stand here decades later on the project site that would carry her name. This project is dedicated not only to my Abuelita but to the countless women in Boyle Heights who spend their lives selflessly supporting their family and loved ones. My Abuelita never received any special awards or recognition for the work she did, or the love she gave, but she changed lives. Her name on this building will be a reminder that anyone can make a lasting impression.”

For Medrano, the ceremony was also personal. “I too am a Boyle Heights kid. I grew up right down the street, went to Eastman Ave. School, went back to Mexico, came back, and I’m also a Roosevelt Rough Rider class of ’80,” he said to cheers.

Site Held A Gas Station

“I walked along State Street and Brooklyn Ave. (now Cesar Chavez Ave.) to go to my first job when I was 15 at the McDonald’s on Marengo, so I’m pretty proud to be here, it’s extremely emotional to be home, and look at the work that’s taking place,” Medrano said.

The ceremony marked the start of an environmental remediation process to clear contamination from a gas station previ-



La Guadalupe will hold 44 homes, including many for families with students in the LA Unified School District.

ously located on the site, at the corner of Boyle Ave. and E. First Street, across the street from Metro’s Gold Line Mariachi Plaza stop.

The project will also be the first in a pilot program between the LA Housing Authority and LA Unified School District, in which the school district will subsidize rents. “We are the first to use this LAUSD partnership, where they’ve gotten so concerned for their homeless families, that they’re using 20 vouchers on this. So we’ll be the test case,” Delgado told “Building Trades News.”

LAUSD’s director of student health and human services Pia Escudero illustrated the point with some bleak statistics: “The second-largest school district in the nation, and we have nearly 19,000 students experience homelessness in our district,” Escudero said. “Not only that, more than 80 percent of our students qualify for a reduced-price federal lunch program, which

means really a poverty rate which is just unimaginable. We need to come together as a community, to lift our students, invest in their situation, and create these spaces where they get wraparound services.”

At La Guadalupe, those services will include on-site case management, financial education, life-skills training, food assistance and transportation assistance. For the 7,500 square feet of ground-floor retail space, organizers are hoping to bring in banks that will offer financial literacy programs, and healthy food providers.

State Senator and longtime labor leader Maria Elena Durazo underscored the idea of affordable housing as a human right, needed to anchor society’s most vulnerable individuals and stanch the cyclical nature of homelessness and related instabilities.

“The lack of safe and affordable housing is one of the most powerful barriers to live the life every human being deserves. As farmworkers, we were always at the bot-

tom of the list of who deserves housing. So we squatted out of our flatbed truck, we lived in the tents, we lived in the barns where all the tractors were,” she recalled of her own childhood. “When this basic need is not met, people cycle in and out of homelessness, shelters, hospitals, even jails. Having a safe place to live provides stability not only for the family but for the whole community. And our whole community deserves it.”

Boyle Heights Leads the Way

As a mischievous coda, Durazo nodded to Assemblymember Miguel Santiago and said, “If you don’t get those last approvals that you need, Miguel and I will go do a sit-in somewhere.”

City Councilmember Jose Huizar, whose office provided money toward the remediation and shepherded the process leading up to Azure’s winning bid, also pointed to years of effort.

“Today marks a big milestone, because we actually had to fight to make this happen,” he said, noting his office worked with the mayor’s office to ensure the city-owned property wouldn’t be sold off to the highest bidder after the Community Redevelopment Agency was dissolved in 2012. La Guadalupe, he said, answers the community’s desire for community-based retail space and supportive housing options.

“Too many families are on the edge of homelessness or have already been pushed over the edge, due to the rising cost of rent in LA,” Huizar said. He noted that Boyle Heights has built more affordable housing than any other neighborhood. “And that’s something we should be proud of, leading the way in one of the most pressing needs of this time.”