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## Carlsbad's Sun Country Builders celebrates 45 years



Photo courtesy of Sun Country Builders

Mission Heritage Plaza, a mixed-use community with 72 affordable homes in Riverside, is one of the many projects Sun Country Builders has built during its 45-year history.

**By Thor Kamban Biberman**

Sun Country Builders, a general contractor that has built or renovated more than 8,700 affordable multifamily housing units, is celebrating 45 years in business.

The Carlsbad-based builder has developed projects ranging in size from seven units to 300 throughout San Diego, Imperial, San Bernardino, Los Angeles and Riverside counties since John Ahlswede founded the company in July 1979.

Ahlswede, who is president of the company, said Sun County Builders has developed the equivalent of 114 football fields worth of affordable housing developments.

He said what's most important is helping provide safe and secure places in which to live.

While the company specializes in affordable housing, Ahlswede said there are many types of affordable units that fit the category. These include units for seniors, special needs adults, veterans, and the formerly unhoused.

Recently, units Sun Country Builders built for those who have been homeless were funded by Project HomeKey.

Homekey is an opportunity for state, regional, and local public entities to develop a broad range of housing types, including hotels, motels, hostels, single-family homes and multifamily apartments, adult residential facilities, and manufactured housing. And it also helps developers convert commercial properties and other existing buildings to permanent or interim housing for the target population.

Sun Country Builders maintains long-term relationships with many prominent developers in the affordable building space, including Urban Housing Communities, Wakeland Housing and Development Corp., MAAC, Linc Housing Coalition, Coachella Valley Housing Coalition, Abode Communities, and San Diego Interfaith Housing Foundation.

Sun Country Builders recently completed City Heights Place and Plaza Del Sol with Wakeland and Price Philanthropies. The combined project, which consists of 135 new units for low-income families in City Heights, recently received "Project of the Year" honors from the San Diego Housing Federation.

Along with many developers, Sun Country Builders has worked with an array of architects, including Smithton, Dahlin, KTG, Rodriguez and Associates, Y&M, and Studio E Architects.

Sun Country also is committed to partners' green building goals to ensure a sustainable future.

Last year, Villa Hermosa Phase III, a project built for Coachella Valley Housing Coalition, was nationally recognized with a "zero energy ready" certification from the U.S. Department of Energy.

Sun Country also built Solara, which was believed to be the first apartment project in the nation fully powered by the sun in Poway. Solara, a Community Housing Works development, was awarded an award of excellence by the Urban Land Institute.

Other projects by Sun Country Builders include:

- \* La Sabila Apartments in Vista, 85 units, new construction
- \* The Crossings in Palm Desert, 176 units, new construction
- \* North Harbor in Anaheim, 89 units, renovation
- \* San Martin de Porres in Spring Valley, 116 units, renovation
- \* Serenade on 43rd in the Mid-City area of San Diego, 45 units of new construction and 20 units of renovation
- \* Chula Vista Seniors in Chula Vista, 77 units, new construction
- \* Kimball Highlands in National City, 145 units, new construction

"About 20 percent of our projects are renovation and 80 percent are new construction," Ahlswede said.

Sun Country projects that have yet to begin include a senior citizens development in Escondido, and a project geared toward people who are currently homeless in Cathedral City.

Sun Country Builders is experiencing notable growth. In the past three years, its revenue has doubled, with completed projects totaling more than \$316.3 million.

Ahlswede and the company have been lauded as an outstanding development partner three times by the San Diego Housing Federation. Sun Country also has received nine Pacific Coast Builders Conference awards, including best affordable project, best apartment project, and best sustainable community.

Ahlswede said he got his start in construction by building structures for a nursery back in the 1970s. He recalled how the company was founded in the middle of what Ahlswede said was a "horrible recession" in 1979.

Since the early 1980s, Sun Country Builders has been dedicated to delivering affordable housing in San Diego County and beyond.

The first affordable projects Sun Country worked on were 12 USDA Rural Development agricultural housing projects in remote areas of Southern California.

Ahlswede said some municipalities can be difficult to work with. He also said developing infill properties can be difficult as well.

"Urban infill can be amazingly challenging," Ahlswede said. "You may have toxic waste, and you have to deal with utility companies who have their own timetables, and you have to deal with property lines."

Ahlswede added that supply chain issues present their own set of problems, and that labor and material issues created a market that "has been amazingly volatile over the past couple of years."

He said commodities such as lumber and copper have decreased in price recently, but plenty of issues remain.

While labor costs continue to be an issue, Ahlswede said higher wages still haven't lured enough newer workers to the building trades.

"And qualified people are cycling out of the business," he said.

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