

Mixed-use project wins accolades

By Cortney Fielding Staff Writer
Pasadena Star-News

SOUTH PASADENA - Michael Dieden knew that garnering support for the transit-oriented, mixed-use Mission Meridian Village in the center of development-shy South Pasadena would be an uphill battle when he proposed it nine years ago.

Forging ahead with the complex - slated to run along the Metropolitan Transit Authority's yet-to-be-built Gold Line in the heart of downtown - would require a tireless campaign to assuage residents' concerns.

"We had to prove to the neighborhood we wouldn't destroy it," Dieden said.

Walking door-to-door, he promised residents the new development would not only uphold the area's historical integrity, but also enhance it.

He vowed to keep chain retailers out of village retail space, seeking out small businesses owned by women instead.

Dieden and his Los Angeles-based agency, Creative Housing Associates, even led residents on field trips to San Diego to visit other similar projects.

After years of planning and compromise, the early 1900s-style brick-clad structure, complete with 63 housing units, four retail spaces and an underground parking garage, opened in 2003.

Now the complex Dieden once said had "almost no chance of success" is winning accolades across the country for everything from its accessibility to public transportation and pedestrian-friendly feel to its ability to blend into a historic environment.

This month, Meridian Village received its largest honor to date when it was named one of 17 projects worldwide to win the Charter Award. Given by the Congress of New Urbanism, a group that promotes creation and restoration of compact, walkable, mixed-use cities with easy access to light rail, the annual award is considered the most prestigious of the new urban development industry.

"We are deeply honored to receive this award," Dieden said.

Crediting South Pasadena for the chance to build the project, he said, "You can't be successful unless the neighbors are for you."

Mixed-use projects have become increasingly popular throughout the Southland in recent years as cities look to revitalize downtown areas and reduce automotive dependence. As more commuters discover the benefits of public transportation, projects along transit lines - like Meridian Village - are popping up as fast as they can be built.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of these units are going up, said MTA spokesman Dave Sotero.

"It's a build-it-and-they-will-

come thing," he said. "It's giving options to a new generation of people in L.A. County who want to avoid the suburbs."

Sitting atop 1.6 acres, Mission Meridian Village is among the smaller mix-used communities in the county. The housing units include live/work lofts, flats and large townhomes.

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