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Where have all the Bonita farmworkers gone?

By **KATE SPINNER**, kspinner@naplesnews.com

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Carlos Lizano doesn't need a survey to tell him agricultural work is on the decline in the area.

But a recent study that hones in on shrinking agricultural employment in Bonita Springs may help Lizano convince the Florida Housing Finance Corporation that there's a dwindling need for low-income homes that cater to farmerworkers.

Lizano manages Pueblo Bonito, a low-income rental community that provides about 80 homes for low-income farmworkers and 20 homes for other low-income workers. The community, which was originally financed to provide housing for farmworkers, will need approval from financiers if it wants to rent to workers who are not involved in agriculture.

As farmlands in the area are transformed into fields of fenced mansions and work shifts to agricultural centers such as Immokalee, Lizano said Pueblo Bonito will be nearly vacant in a few years unless more homes there can be rented to non-farmworkers.

Recognizing the need for change at Pueblo Bonito, the Bonita Springs City Council appropriated \$6,000 last year to commission the 2005 Farmworker Study that The Forester Group will finalize this week. A draft of the study was recently sent to the city for review.

"It clearly points out that the amount of farmworkers in Bonita Springs is pretty slim compared to what it was when it (Pueblo Bonito) was built," said Mayor Jay Arend.

Debrah Forester of The Forester Group said the conclusions made in her study were not surprising.

"I wasn't so surprised at the finding because there was a lot of change in land use in Bonita Springs," said Forester.

Acknowledging the difficulty in tracking farmworkers, the study extrapolated conclusions by drawing on a variety of data, from annual citrus acreage and production surveys to enrollment of migrant children in schools.

The study also drew upon a 1994 report prepared for the Lee County Affordable Housing Committee and data from a 2000 study that profiled migrant and seasonal farmworkers for the Florida Department of Health and Human Services.

The study concluded that decreasing agricultural lands in Bonita Springs and the surrounding area had led to a drop in agricultural employment, but the study did not compare 2004 land uses in the city to land uses in previous years.

The study also estimated that, in 2004, that there were 1,010 farmworkers and farm families in Bonita Springs and the surrounding area — compared with an estimated 1,503 living spaces for farmworkers. The report concluded that there was a surplus in housing for farmworkers in and around the city.

Farmworker housing demands were estimated for 2004 only.

The report also showed higher numbers of farmworkers going to jobs outside the city limits, than farmworkers reporting to jobs within the city.

As agricultural jobs move away from the city limits, Forester and Lizano said, farmworkers start looking for different jobs that pay better wages.

"You need to allow farmworkers as they move to another profession to have decent, affordable housing to move into" said Forester.

Lizano, who said he has not seen the study, said he hopes it will help Pueblo Bonito's financiers understand the area's changing demographics and its broad affordable housing needs.

Citing his own statistics, Lizano said the waiting list for farm housing at Pueblo Bonito was 320 families long when the community opened in June 1999. Now the waiting list for the community's farm homes is eight families long.

In contrast, Lizano said 218 families are on a waiting list now for Pueblo Bonito's low-income rentals that are not designated for farmworkers.

Lizano said he'd like to see the farmworker apartments reduced by half, so that people in the community could change jobs without losing

their homes.

"We have a growing community here and in the last 12 months I had to make a way for 26 families to leave the property, because they were not farmworkers anymore," said Lizano.

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