



The Historian

Preserving Today for Tomorrow

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1970 - 2012 Rossmoor Towers

This article is the twelfth in a series adapted from the transcripts of the Historical Society's first archivist, Marjorie F. Jones. Additional information was taken from "The Towers Rise in Leisure World" by Malcolm Heslip published in the Fall 1980 *Historical Society Journal, Fulfilling Retirement Dreams*, a book published by the Historical Society in 1989, "The Story of Grace and Elegance which is Rossmoor Towers" by Larry Creebo in 2004 and numerous issues of the 1970-74 *Leisure World News*.

During the week of February 16, 1970, Rossmoor Corporation announced its plans for the Rossmoor Towers in Leisure World. *The Leisure World News* article said work was expected to start in a few weeks on these 14-story buildings—the first high-rise complex of its kind in unincorporated Orange County.

Rossmoor President Ross W. Cortese said this \$12 million, 376-unit residential-recreation facility would be located on a five-acre site at the southeast corner of Calle Aragon and Moulton Parkway near Gate 3.

Cortese, who conceived and built the "leisure world" concept for retired citizens, said, "Our primary objective in adding Rossmoor Towers to the Leisure World complex, is to provide as completely as possible, a nicely balanced community environment, with facilities as nearly perfect for the adult resident as we can make them."

The *News* stated that plans for the Towers had been approved by the Orange County Planning Commission.

The first written indication that the Towers would be located inside the Leisure World gates and managed by the management agent, the Leisure World Foundation, occurred three months later on May 28, 1970. An article in the *News* stated, "Preliminary conversations had taken place between representatives of Rossmoor and the Leisure World Foundation related to Cortese's desire that the Towers program be managed by the Foundation."

On August 6, Cortese announced in his "It's a Great World" column in the *News* that the California Real Estate Commissioner had granted Rossmoor permis-



The Towers depicted in a pen and ink drawing by Leavitt Dudley in 1973 will feature twin 14-story condominium towers connected by a two-story community building which grew to three stories in the final design.

Courtesy Leisure World News

sion to sell units in the planned Rossmoor Towers. He said that a new sales brochure had been released promoting the "almost unprecedented variety of services offered by Rossmoor Towers for its unit owners—adults age 52 and older."

In his column a week later, Cortese stated the Towers would be owned by those who purchased units and lived in them. Services will be group-determined by the unit owners, who would decide what services they want and at what frequency. He emphasized that Rossmoor Towers would be a resident-owned, not-for-profit operation.

The Towers floor plans range from a single room efficiency unit to a three-bedroom penthouse. The common areas are to include a lobby, reception

MUSINGS

The Society's Board of Directors approved the following programs at their Annual Meeting on June 22, 2012. These programs represent approximately \$54,000 in funding and resource commitment to preserve, protect and share local history:

Collection Management — At the heart of the Historical Society's mission is preserving thousands of documents, photographs, objects, and other items relating to the history of Laguna Woods. We do this by maintaining and caring for our collections in accordance with professional standards.

In 2008, the Historical Society embarked on an ambitious, five year, \$50,000 plan to enhance the accessibility and functionality of our historic archives. With the majority of policy and computer infrastructure improvements now in place, efforts are now focused on converting paper records into secure, electronic formats. Our work plan includes the launch of the Society's website and digital archive.

Veterans History Project — For more than a decade, the Society has been a proud partner of the United States Library of Congress' Veterans History Project. We have had the honor and privilege of collecting written service records from roughly 800 American war veterans and the home-front heroes who supported them. More than 350 of those heroes have also participated in video-recorded oral histories. The work plan includes funding for 27 additional video-recorded oral histories.

El Toro Airport Oral History Project — For a third year, the Historical Society will continue to partner with TV-6 to record full-length interviews with notable figures associated with the potential reuse of the Marine Corps Air Station – El Toro as a commercial airport. When this project is completed it will result in a documentary television program on channels 6 and 31.

50th Anniversary of Laguna Woods Village — In 2012, the board of directors approved several projects related to the upcoming 50th Anniversary of Laguna Woods Village in September 2014. A four-year fiscal work plan has been established for the development of a historical book detailing the history of Laguna Woods through the year 2010. A professional publisher and experienced author will be retained.

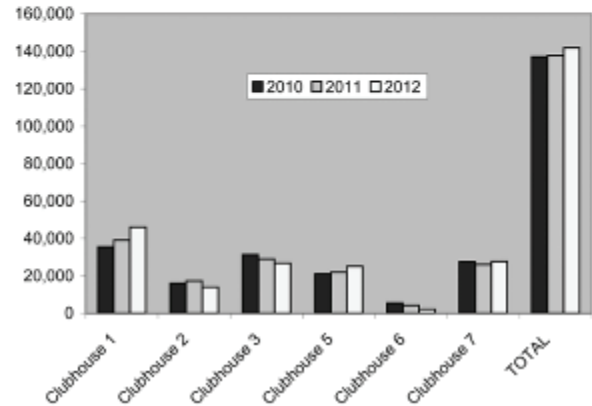
Honoree Program — This year, the Honoree Program makes its transition from a quarterly to a periodic ceremony intended to highlight the contributions of extraordinary community leaders.

Shared Costs Revisited

ROOM RENTALS - 1st QUARTER COMPARISONS

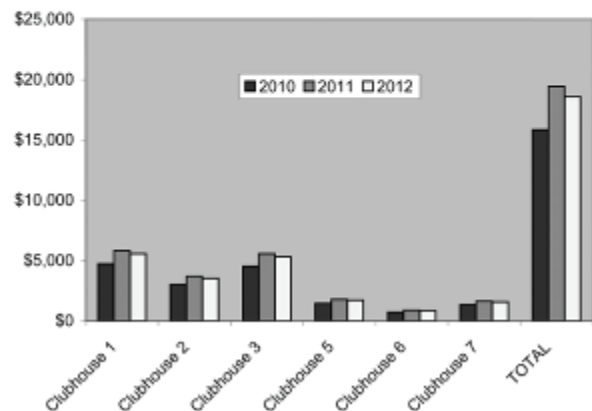
UTILIZATION

	2010	2011	2012
Clubhouse 1	35,511	39,003	45,996
Clubhouse 2	16,106	17,376	13,957
Clubhouse 3	31,355	29,119	26,811
Clubhouse 5	21,078	21,916	25,124
Clubhouse 6	5,553	4,214	2,188
Clubhouse 7	27,587	26,064	27,814
TOTAL	137,188	137,692	141,890



REVENUE

	2010	2011	2012
Clubhouse 1	\$ 4,743	\$ 5,825	\$ 5,568
Clubhouse 2	\$ 3,018	\$ 3,707	\$ 3,543
Clubhouse 3	\$ 4,536	\$ 5,570	\$ 5,325
Clubhouse 5	\$ 1,466	\$ 1,800	\$ 1,721
Clubhouse 6	\$ 724	\$ 890	\$ 850
Clubhouse 7	\$ 1,345	\$ 1,652	\$ 1,579
TOTAL	\$ 15,834	\$ 19,444	\$ 18,587



FEES — At the Friends of the Village Meeting on shared costs held on April 5, 2012, Financial Services Director Betty Parker later compared the clubhouse room rental activity for each first quarter of 2010, 2011 and 2012. The methodology for fees changed during 2011. The data for the three months showed that while fees increased, utilization also increased and total revenue was higher in 2012 than 2010. PCM staff plans to update this information at year-end to provide annual comparisons. The ratio of revenue to utilization for 2012 was \$0.13 compared to \$0.115 for 2010.

Towers from Page 1

rooms, two dining halls, an auditorium, a key club, game rooms and outdoor recreation area. In his August 20, 1970 column, Cortese confirmed that the pricing ranged from \$22,900 for the efficiency unit to \$63,800 for the penthouse. Monthly service charges of \$257.52 include three meals a day and regularly scheduled maid service. Medical services will be provided to Towers' residents under the same plan offered to other Leisure World residents.

Towers Model Sales Area

A scale-model replica of the Towers and grounds was displayed in the Towers Sales Office. The October 8, 1970 edition of the *News* pictured the groundbreaking ceremony for the built-to-actual-size Towers efficiency and the one- and two-bedroom apartments. Once again Cortese stated that the Towers would be located at Gate 3.

The models opened to visitors in January, 1971. On January 14, 1971, Cortese announced in his "It's a Great World" column that the plans were complete, bids received and a contract awarded for construction

of the Towers.

On September 2, 1971, the *News* announced that the Towers would be a Leisure World Mutual. Cortese said that Leisure World would benefit because each Towers unit would produce the regular Golden Rain Foundation of Laguna Hills (GRF) membership fee of \$1,725. Cortese also believed that Towers would be attractive to people who wanted "complete-service living, but did not want to give up their activities or their friends." On October 16, 1971 a full-page ad in the *News* announced, "Meet the New Leisure World Mutual - The Towers!"

Towers Becomes a Mutual

One year later on October 26, 1972, Cortese noted in the *News* that the Towers would be a Leisure World Mutual and would be located at the intersection of Santa Vittoria Drive and Santa Maria Avenue, west of Gate 8. The design now included 354 units, a reduction of 22, as a result of market demands for additional two-bedroom units.

During the following weeks the *News* announced that Cortese, president of Rossmoor, expected construc-



The view from the 14th floor of the Towers during construction in 1974 (left) and 2012 (right). In 1974 it was surrounded by a large expanse of graded land. Four years later the Towers was in the midst of a high-density Leisure World residential area.

tion of the \$16.5 million Towers would begin in December 1972, pending issuance of the necessary county building permits.

Before approving the Towers Project, the Orange County planning commissioners adopted an environmental impact statement submitted by the county planning department. The statement cautioned that residents might be affected by noise from jet aircraft at nearby Marine Corps Air Station at El Toro. The report added that the two 14-story towers would obstruct views of some surrounding properties.

At the planning hearing Marine Corps Colonel Murray Staples cautioned commissioners against approving additional high rises in the area because of the effects that high rises could have on flight and radar patterns. Commissioners unanimously approved the project with the condition that Rossmoor would have to comply with 16 recommendations made by the planning department, including the addition of a fire lane adjacent to the building.

Details of the architects drawings showed the two 14-story towers would be 150 feet high, connected by a two-story building. Each tower would include a dining room and kitchen for residents. The central building would contain a reception room, assembly hall, administrative office, barber shop, beauty salon and reading rooms. Construction was expected to be completed in 15 months.

Construction Starts

The February 21, 1973 edition of the *News* announced, "What could be described as the 'luxury of luxuries' in residential accommodations. Rossmoor Towers twin 14-story buildings is now being built in Leisure World." The Towers will overlook approximately 12 acres of man-made lakes consisting of a main channel branching into eight lagoons. The \$17-million, 311 unit condominium complex will offer a selection of seven floor plans ranging from efficiency size to three-bedroom, two-bath suites. Prices will range from \$27,100 to \$98,700.

The *News* article explained that a Mediterranean theme would be used. The exteriors of the Towers were to be constructed of adobe-like split faced masonry, capped by mission tile roof similar to the quaint resort villages which dot many Mediterranean islands. Elaborate courtyards, a waterfall, reflection pools, cobblestone paths, and exquisitely landscaped areas surrounding the Towers would create a serenely picturesque setting for its residents.

Now the twin towers will be linked by a spacious three-story community building which will house recreational facilities including card rooms, a billiard room, a 300-seat auditorium complete with stage and flexible seating arrangements. Shuffleboard courts, a whirlpool bath complex, a community kitchen and a private membership key club will also be included.

All units will be air conditioned and contain efficiency kitchens with range, oven, cabinet refrigerators and disposals. Floor-to-ceiling windows provide unlimited views of the surrounding terrain.

Food service will be offered in two private dining rooms and will lend a choice of dining atmosphere. For group entertaining, two large lounge areas will feature intimate fireside hearth rooms as well as a large reception area.

Cortese pointed out, "Especially appealing will be the broad scope of the established home health agency supervised by a physician and registered nurse through the auspices of Leisure World Medical Center located five minutes from the Towers site. The agency, licensed under state and local laws and approved for participation in the Medicare program, gives the resident the freedom to select daily activities with the full assurance of immediate assistance when necessary."

On March 15, 1973, more than 9,000 guests attended a day-long, open house Mediterranean festival, complete with strolling musicians, tables laden with giant wheels of cheese, colorful baskets of fresh fruit, golden baked breads and assorted wines to usher in the



The remains of an old agricultural reservoir formerly used by the Moulton Ranch Company fell within the site of the future lake to be situated at the southeast corner of the Towers site. At the time the water occupied about 1.5 acres. When reconstructed, the lake would cover approximately 12 acres and would consist of one main channel with eight fingers. The picture, taken from a hill near Alta Vista, shows the Rossmoor Towers site at the far left, where a trailer is partially visible. Courtesy Leisure World News



A 4,000-pound carob tree was lifted to the roof by helicopter April 20, 1974 at the "topping out" ceremony celebrating completion of the frame of twin 14-story condominiums at Rossmoor Leisure World in Laguna Hills. San Francisco Mayor Joseph Alioto spoke at the event, attended by some 3,000 people. The Rossmoor Towers flag was also hoisted to the top of the building and blue and white balloons and white doves were released at the end of the ceremony.

Courtesy Daily Pilot

debut of the Rossmoor Towers and its new model sales complex.

Towers Accept New Residents

The Towers began accepting new residents on November 15, 1974. The Towers was a full-service facility for those who wished to be unburdened by menial household chores, the bane of housewives' and bachelors' existence. There are two elegant dining rooms where three meals were offered daily plus room service, if so desired.

All of the units were owned by the residents and all utility and other services, with the exception of the telephone, are included in the monthly assessment. The units feature floor-to-ceiling windows with excellent views.

On April 15, 1975, the members of Mutual 50 held their first meeting. At this meeting they elected Frank "Dutch" Lortscher as president of the board of directors of the Towers, and he served from 1975 through 1981. He was the right man for the job and later the Great Hall was renamed Lortscher Hall in his honor. Tom Tandle was the administrator from 1974 to 1978.

The first anniversary of the Towers was celebrated on November 14, 1975 and featured two, four-tiered, 120 pound cakes. One cake was served to the public at the new model sales center. The other cake was presented to the 266 families living in the Towers at an anniversary party held in the Towers Great Hall.

Eighteen months later about 65 of the 311 units were still unsold. By January, 1978 the last unit was sold.

Problems

Many things could and did go wrong in the Towers during the formative years. A first obstacle faced by everyone preparing to move into the Towers was that there were four passenger elevators and no freight elevator in either building.

Immediately after the first move-ins, the winter storms arrived and there were complaints of roof and balcony leaks. The repairs became burdensome and in April, 1977, Mutual 50 filed a complaint in Superior Court against Rossmoor Corporation, Oaklawn Homes and Ross Cortese charging negligence, fraud, misrepresentation and breach of warranties. The claim was for compensation and for punitive damages of more than \$3 million.

A month later the weekend storm of May 7, 1977, emphasized the prior complaints by adding more damage when many of the roof tiles were blown from the roof and crashed in the areas surrounding the building. More than 20 occupants of newly-decorated apartments sustained extensive damage from water leaks.

In 1978, after no agreement could be reached on the defective roof and other failures, the board and members of Mutual 50 brought a class-action suit against Rossmoor for selling them deficient structures. The first hearing for a proposed settlement agreement was held October 27, 1978 in the Superior Court of Orange County.

Not unexpectedly, the judge ruled in favor of the Towers and its residents on the weather-tight integri-

ty of the building. A settlement agreement was reached on August 11, 1978, and final amendments and special findings of the arbitrator on November 9, 1979, brought the case to a close.

After three years of contentious arbitration, the awards exceeded \$1 million. Damages for construction defects were set at \$373,000, and additional costs of waterproofing brought the total to approximately \$2 million. A new roof was completed before the rainy season began in 1979.

Competition and Upgrades

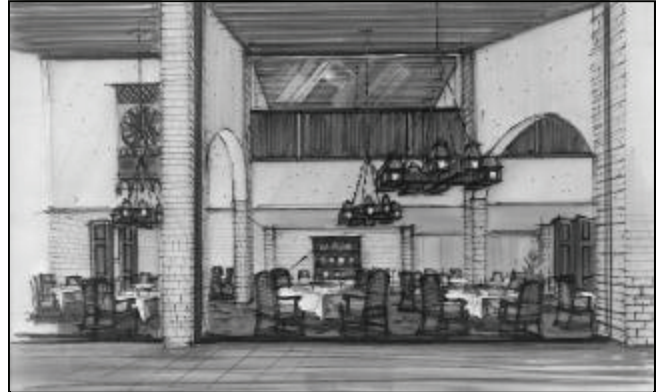
Tom Kendall was administrator from 1978 to 1986. He was a self-contained man who believed that if anything was going to be done right you had to do it yourself. Many of the finishing touches that needed to be done to make existing conditions more livable were taken care of during this period. As time passed, somewhat similar establishments opened and provided competition, which to this point, the Towers had not experienced. With high profile advertising they were enticing people away from Leisure World and from the Towers.

Kirk Watilo was the administrator from 1986 to 1988. Through a period of slow real estate sales, not only in Leisure World but countywide, various programs were initiated to increase interest in the Towers. Ten thousand dollars was spent on an attractive brochure extolling the advantages of living in the Towers. Several open houses were held. Slowly the sales of units increased, but they did not meet expectations.

Refurbishing the dining room chairs in 1987 cost \$45,000. The Rendezvous Room was redecorated and the interior of the Towers was made more attractive. The stage in Lortscher Hall was remodeled into a multi-functional stage.



Formal Dining Room (Towers brochure circa 1974) – There are two elegant dining rooms where three meals were offered daily. During the early years, many residents dressed quite formally for the evening meal.



Informal Dining Room (Towers brochure circa 1974) – Over the years the desires of the residents and the meal plan were gradually modified arriving at the present plan, where just dinner is included in the monthly assessment.

H. R. “Skip” Stone became the fourth administrator in 1988 and continued in that role through the Towers 25th Anniversary celebration in 2001. Keeping step with the times and regulations, a fire sprinkler system was installed in the Towers in 1993 at a cost of \$634,000 that was prorated to each unit by a special assessment of approximately \$2,100. Later, movers damaged one of the sensors for the system which caused flooding from the 9th floor to the first-floor in Tower II. All of the sprinklers installed were replaced at no cost to the residents. The elevators were completely overhauled inside and out and computerized to deliver more efficient service.

An interior decorator was hired in 1994 to coordinate the upgrading of all the common areas and included new carpeting, repainted hallways and new furniture.

Meal Service

When the Towers opened residents were served three meals daily, and the monthly assessment charges were levied on that basis. In keeping with competition and the desires of the residents, this was gradually modified until arriving at the present plan, where only dinner is included in the monthly assessment.

The CC&R’s were amended to give the Information Committee a formal procedure to ensure that the information which was given to each prospective new resident regarding different aspects of the Towers would be uniformly applied, such as move-in limitations imposed by the size of the elevators, the use of the common areas as well as crisis evacuation procedures.

The Do Drop Inn in Hearth Room I was created to encourage residents to drop by on weekdays for a cup of coffee or tea and cookies. It provides a way to



Remains of the rope crane used to hoist furniture into units until it was declared a safety hazard in the 1980s.

meet new friends and share a period of socialability.

Into every life a drop of rain must fall and it did in buckets when El Nino visited the Towers in the winter of 1998 and flooded the atrium. The result was a new decorating plan approved for the common areas. Starting with new carpet in the dining rooms and progressing throughout Tower I and II, this plan was to be completed within three-years. A new Sosiega Avenue entrance and improved signage was also included in this project. In 2000 a program was initiated to install the beautiful exterior perimeter lighting.

Judie Zoerhof became the fifth administrator and has guided a new era of technology at the Towers. The first technological issue facing the mutual was the antiquated cooling and heating system. Two chillers, one large and one small struggled to maintain cool temperatures in summer and warm the living units in winter. The board authorized a design that uses two new energy efficient chillers working in tandem. The result was significantly improved living conditions and lower utility costs.

Once again in 2005, a rain storm flooded the atrium and damaged the lobby carpet. To facilitate replacement of the carpet, an interior designer assisted the board in maintaining the Mediterranean influence in the Towers with updated colors and fabrics. The new lobby carpet became the focus for the entire color scheme.

Once the interior was upgraded, it was time for refurbishment of the thirty-year-old units. Utilizing in-house staff, individual units received paint, carpet, and in some cases new appliances in the kitchenettes.

Staff gave the Reception Desk a completely new look and brought the Towers up to date with monitors of the tunnel entrances, computerized maintenance work orders, first floor access control and a comprehensive disaster response plan.

Armed with the new look and ambiance, the board of directors authorized a marketing strategy and brand change. Rossmoor Towers became, "The Towers" and has its own website. With professional marketing assistance, the board launched a four-year marketing campaign that provides information about the Towers lifestyle and focuses on the area of southern California between Los Angeles and San Diego.

There is no longer a sauna or shuffle board court at the Towers, but the Zen Garden is the site of many parties and events. Computerized bowling is the new Towers hobby. The calendar is full and the lifestyle would delight the farsighted Ross Cortese.

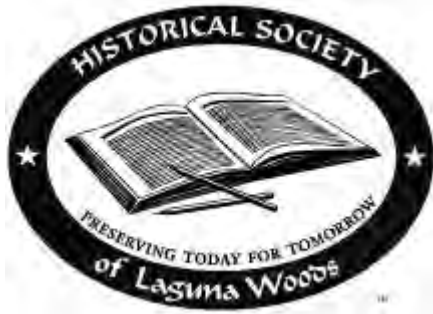
The current Towers Mission Statement was adopted by the board of directors in March 2003.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Towers is pledged to offer gracious independent living, maximizing quality of life through stimulating activities for mind and body in a hotel style environment.



The Zen Garden, pictured in 2008, was funded by a gift from Mac Rosen and was named the Doris E. Rosen Zen Garden. The Laguna Woods City Council and many other dignitaries were on hand for the ribbon cutting ceremony. A band concert in this area confirmed that the Zen Garden was a vast improvement from the shuffleboard court it replaced.



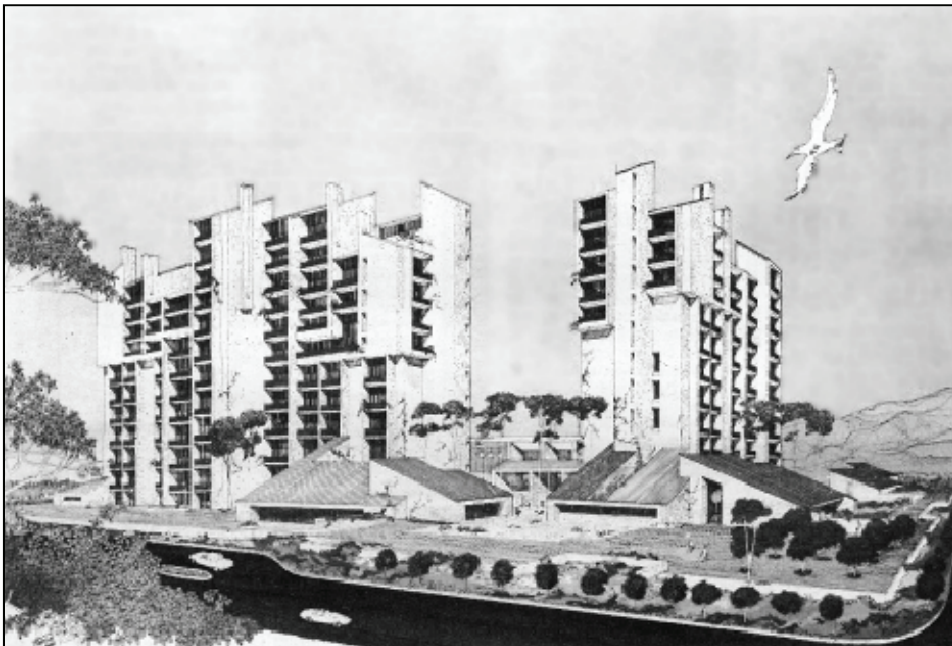
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Rossmoor Towers groundbreaking was expected to start in March 1970 on the 14-story Rossmoor Towers high-rise complex to be located on the southeast corner Moulton Parkway and Calle Aragon. This was a rendering of the Towers which was to be ready for occupancy by mid-1971. The cost would be more than \$12 million, according to Rossmoor President Ross Cortese. He explained that the architecture will continue the community's Spanish theme. Courtesy Leisure World News

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Editor — Bob Ring

Opinions expressed by authors in *The Historian* do not necessarily reflect those of the Historical Society of Laguna Woods.