

## Community Investments Vol 16, Issue 2 Wenden-Salome Affordable Housing Project

Author(s): Norma J. Saiter, Governing Board Secretary, WSFRC  
September 2004

The Wenden-Salome Flood Recovery Commission, Inc. (WSFRC), an Arizona nonprofit organization, was organized February 5, 2001 to care for victims of the October 2000 floods. In the course of working toward their initial goals WSFRC discovered that far more than originally imagined was needed to improve the plight of the communities of Wenden and Salome, unincorporated communities that lie five miles apart in the McMullen Valley of [La Paz County](#).



The entire county of La Paz has a population of fewer than 20,000 with only 4.5% of the county property on the tax rolls. The remainder is privately owned by the federal and state government, the city of Phoenix, and the Colorado River Indian Tribe. Forty-eight percent of La Paz residents live below the poverty level. The percentage is even higher in Wenden. Approximately 640 residents live in 214 homes, over half of which are manufactured or mobile units.

There are very few services in Wenden and Salome. Retail businesses are limited to small auto parts stores, two small grocery stores, a feed store and

convenience shopping. The nearest banks are approximately 50 miles away in the towns of Wickenburg and Parker, Arizona. One grocery store houses an ATM; both stores cash checks for farm workers.



Neither Wenden nor Salome has a wastewater treatment facility or public sewer. Water is provided by a public water system and private wells. There is no pharmacy, but there is a staffed clinic in Salome associated with La Paz Regional Hospital in Parker. Each town has an elementary school and a post office. Bicentennial Union High School, with an average enrollment of 150 students, serves both communities.



In the middle of the night on October 21, 2000 relentless rainfall funneled from surrounding mountains into Centennial Wash. This wall of water rushed through the sleeping town of Wenden flooding half of the town and completely destroying twenty homes. The water rushed on to attack residents along Centennial Wash in outlying areas of neighboring Salome. Reports of as many as eight people were carried away by the rushing water. Only one body was found.

On the following Saturday there was a repeat performance when heavy rain again caused more flooding along Centennial Wash. Residents were evacuated, but this time some homes spared by the first flood were damaged or destroyed. A bridge, a road and much repair work that had begun were washed out. The toll on this already poverty stricken area was tremendous.

These floods led to the inception of Wenden-Salome Flood Recovery Commission, Inc. when a group of local citizens banded together for the purpose of aiding victims whose needs remained unmet after the exit of Red Cross, FEMA, SBA, and other agencies. WSFRC asked Dr. George Saiter – a long time community member-- to direct its efforts.

The stated goal of WSFRC was to “promote the healthy recovery and continued development of individuals, households, and community through funding from gifts, donations, grants, loans and volunteers.” Based on a survey of needs, WSFRC began its work by:

- providing advocacy for flood victims;
- providing information and assistance to understand and complete forms, applications, and appeals;
- providing advice on repairs to homes and grounds;
- locating additional resources through grants and donations;
- facilitating the provision of relocation sites in or near Wenden;
- providing replacement homes in Wenden and Salome, and
- working to improve the welfare of the local citizens and seasonal farm workers.

The area became a beehive of activity as volunteers from various national church groups including the Christian Reformed Churches of America, Mennonites, Church of the Brethren as well as local churches came to assist

flood victims. Singles, couples, and whole families from as far away as New York and Canada donated their time and labor.

Over the next fourteen months WSFRC brought into the community a dollar value of \$430,161 in cash, volunteer labor, in-kind donations, loans and grants. These donations and volunteers accomplished the following:

- razed two flood damaged homes;
- transported, renovated, and set up ten manufactured homes in Wenden;
- built one new two-bedroom home;
- renovated and weatherized one home;
- replaced clothing and/or appliances for 25 families;
- elevated one manufactured home above flood level;
- repaired 15 flood damaged homes, and
- opened a local food bank.

Once emergency work was complete, WSFRC realized much remained to be done to improve the economy of Wenden-Salome. At the time of the flood numerous farm workers were sleeping under bridges and trees along the wash. Many were crowded into trailers with inadequate plumbing, which created sanitation problems. According to George Saiter, executive director of WSFRC, the shortage of housing is evidenced by the amount of garbage and human feces in and around Wenden and Salome each harvest season. Everything remotely resembling a dwelling is occupied or overloaded, resulting in a slum housing environment, with unsanitary living conditions and safety hazards. La Paz County is making an effort through their code enforcement officers to control the violations and overcrowding, but as of now there is no place for this large number of workers to live.

Due to the severe shortage of housing and sub-standard existing housing, WSFRC chose as its first goal short-stay rental units. WSFRC purchased ten

acres of land and obtained an option to purchase an additional 54 acres from the city of Phoenix for a subdivision development. Plans for this subdivision, Amigos del Valle, (Friends of the Valley), include self-help built homes, owner-occupied pre-built homes, rental homes, and short-stay units for farm workers.

A safe and dependable source of drinking water is needed for Amigos del Valle. WSFRC entered into an agreement with Wenden Domestic Water Improvement District to seek sources of revenue needed to mitigate excessive fluoride and arsenic content of the water. A \$33,000 grant was obtained to prepare a pre-engineering study that is now completed. Saiter is working with USDA Rural Development to fund construction to complete the recommendations.

The vision for the next 10-15 years is to fully develop all 64 acres with homes, apartments, and short-term rental units. The road has been uphill for this low-income community and for WSFRC. The will is there but the funds are not. Money is badly needed to move ahead with necessary housing for these deserving workers that are vital to agriculture--the mainstay of McMullen Valley. Funds are also need for staff to assist Saiter in moving ahead with this project.

*To learn more about the work of Wenden-Salome Flood Recovery Commission, contact George Saiter, executive director, by phone at 928/859-3858 or via [email](#)*

### **Box 1: Farmworker Housing in Wenden-Salome**

Following is a summary of information collected by Jay Howe, La Paz County Supervisor, which describes current housing conditions of seasonal farm workers in the Wenden - Salome area of La Paz County, Arizona.

Contract laborers work full time 40-49 hours per week for \$6.00 to \$8.25 per hour. Piece work wages are estimated to be at the higher end of the “wage scale.”

### **Intensity by Season**

The need for farm labor is most intense during the harvest season for all crops. In La Paz County the greatest demand each year is from May 20 through July 20 and again from September 25 to November 15.

### **Number of Workers**

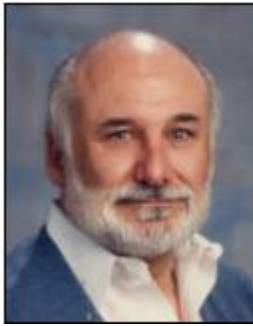
There is no comprehensive source or database that can be used to document the number of contracted migrant and seasonal workers in La Paz County. Information comes from labor contractors. The four major labor contractors providing service to the Wenden-Salome area are California Packing Inc., Sierra Packaging, S & H Farm Labor, and Ralph Collazo.

The following table lists the number of workers supplied by each contractor to the area, the time period they’re employed, and the number who live in the area during the planting and harvest seasons. The number of workers living in the area is a conservative representation of the number of reported workers who need housing for an average of 140 days per year. Saiter counted 1800 workers in the fields, including truck drivers, on six different days in 2003.

<b>Contractor</b>	<b>total # of workers (Spring)</b>	<b># living in area</b>	<b>total # of workers (Fall)</b>	<b># living in area</b>
California Packing	350	290	350	290
Sierra Packing	200	200	200	200
S & H Farm Labor	150	110	150	110
Collazo Farm Labor	320	320	320	320
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1020</b>	<b>920</b>	<b>1020</b>	<b>920</b>

The occupancy rate of the area’s existing migrant labor housing during harvests is 100 percent. There are two US Department of Labor approved housing facilities in the area that house fewer than 50. There are two small motels that house between 100 and 130 workers during both seasons.

<b>Survey of Housing (all are mobile homes most in poor repair)</b>				
	# of housing units	Total # of bedrooms	# of workers housed	Weekly rental income
Totals	54 plus 2 sheds	75	317	\$185.00/wk.



**Dr. George Saiter** has been CEO and the only employee of Wenden-Salome Flood Recovery Commission, Inc. since its origin February 2001. He has worked most of this time as a volunteer. He has been married to Norma for 28 years. They have three sons, four grandchildren and two great grandchildren. He received a doctorate of psychology from the University of Northern Colorado and spent his professional career in Colorado Springs, Colorado. After retiring in 1991, he and Norma moved to Salome where he has been very active in the community. George served four years on the Salome High School governing board. He currently sits on the La Paz County Community Advisory Board, and the Western Arizona Council of Government Community Action Board. He serves as area director of the Salvation Army and director of the Wenden-Salome Food Pantry.