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## Oakland: Grand reopening of Altheim senior home

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Break out the beer and spaetzle - the Altheim hums once more.

The 114-year-old German country retirement estate in the Oakland foothills officially reopened Thursday after lying vacant for nearly eight years. But now, instead of wealthy older Germans, the elegant 6-acre compound will house low-income seniors of all nationalities.

"This is the nicest place I have ever lived," said retired hospital kitchen worker Heather Dunlop, 56, one of the first residents to move into the new Altheim. "When I first saw it, I was amazed. This place has literally changed my whole life."

Officials and residents celebrated the reopening Thursday with speeches, tours, balloons and cookies. Attendees had lots to celebrate: The grand old home underwent a \$53 million renovation and is once again fulfilling its founders' original mission - to promote German culture and provide a haven for seniors.

"We are thrilled to see this renovation complete," said Michael Willis, an Oakland architect who's president of the Excelsior German Center, which owns the Altheim. "But we're not going to stop here. We're looking forward now to the next phase."

The Excelsior German Center, which has owned the Altheim since it opened in 1896, is offering German classes, films, lectures, concerts and parties at its facility on the Altheim grounds. Seniors of any nationality can live at the Altheim, and they'll have access to a wealth of Teutonic culture.

So far, more than 450 names are on the waiting list.

### Upscale beginnings

The Altheim was founded by San Francisco's most prominent German American families, the Sutros, Fleischhackers, Rosenbaums and others, as an upscale home for older German speakers to live out their days.



The home resembles a grand Bavarian estate, with columns and porticos, high ceilings and rotundas. At the center is a sweeping, lodgelike dining hall, adorned with original woodwork and hanging lights. The grounds include nearly 3 acres of gardens and views of San Francisco.

The Altheim operated until 2002, when the Excelsior Center could no longer compete with cheaper senior homes nearby and was forced to close the home for financial reasons. At that time, the number of German-speaking residents at the Altheim had dropped to 35 percent, Willis said.

Excelsior officials considered several uses for the building, including selling it to a local private school, but ultimately decided they wanted to stick with the founders' mission to house seniors. So they negotiated with the city and affordable housing developers Citizens Housing and later Eden Housing to transform the stately old home into 174 apartments for seniors who earn 20 to 55 percent of the Bay Area median income.

### **Named to historic register**

In the process, they completed a state-of-the-art historic renovation of the home, which was recently named to the National Register of Historic Places. Historic preservation is not usually the sort of project undertaken by nonprofit housing groups, but the effort was well worth it, said Eden Housing Director Linda Mandolini.

"In our business, you don't usually get the cream of the crop," she said. "You usually get the properties that commercial developers pass over. For us, this project was a real honor to work on, the kind of development that doesn't come along very often."

The home is in Oakland's Dimond District, in the hills just west of Fruitvale Avenue. It's a short walk to cafes, grocery stores and an express bus to San Francisco.

Before she moved into the Altheim, Dunlop rented a room in a house in West Oakland. She saw a flyer for the Altheim, applied, and within a month the El Cerrito native was packing her bags to move.

"Everything and everyone is so nice here," she said. "I couldn't ask for anything more. I still can't believe how lucky I am."

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