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Real Estate Deals of the Year

Infrastructure public-private deal finalist: Marin Commons

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Vanessa Richardson

Sometimes old is better than new — and costs a lot less — when deciding where to set up an emergency operations center.

Marin County needed a new one of those back in 2011, and it had originally intended to build it next to the [Frank Lloyd Wright](#)-designed Civic Center. But then it discovered that the 100,000 square feet it needed would cost \$100 million to build, twice the county's budget.

[Jeff Birdwell](#) saw a perfect opportunity, and a match made in heaven. As president of the commercial division for the Sares Regional Group of Northern California, he was working with CIGNA, who had foreclosed on Marin Commons, a two-building office complex totaling 465,000 square feet. He was trying to recoup that investment during a market slump. He approached county officials about buying the larger of Marin Commons' two buildings and renovating the 315,000-square-foot site for \$50 million.

"The building was built like a battleship into a hillside and at a very high seismic standard, so it was a spectacular asset that could easily be retooled for serving the community," said Birdwell.

Marin County bought the building in 2011 for \$28.4 million, and Sares oversaw renovations for the LEED-gold certified building, including installation of 911 call center equipment, data centers, an interior stairway and more than 1,000 rooftop solar panels.

Because the County was going over its original budget with the purchase, Sares convinced them to lease 152,000 square feet of its building to outside tenants for additional revenue. Birdwell said more municipalities are trying to figure out how to be more efficient when it comes to building or renovating government offices.

"Marin County was on the cutting edge of a public- and private-entity mix with the Marin Commons purchase," he said. "It saved them tens of millions compared to using a standard government methodology. It's a neat win-win for the public and private sector."

Location: 1600 Los Gamos Drive, San Rafael

Size: 315,000 square feet

Cost: \$80 million

Agency: Marin County

Landlord: CORAC LLC

Developer: Sares Regis Group of Northern California

Contractor: DPR Construction and NOVA Partners Inc.

Architects: HMC Architects

Lead law firm: Allen Matkins