

ORANGE COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL

The Community of Business™

THINK TOGETHER CONVERTING HQ TO 270 UNITS

By Kim Stemper

March 10, 2025



AO partner Paolo Leon, right, with his family. He is lead architect on Think Together's housing project Think Together, Orange County's largest non-profit organization, is taking a bold step to ensure its long-term financial stability by redeveloping its Santa Ana headquarters into a \$150 million workforce housing project.

The move aims to generate a steady revenue stream that will sustain its mission of providing educational support to underserved students.

"We've been exploring ways to redevelop or reposition our real estate assets for years," Randy Barth, founder and CEO, told the Business Journal. "But this idea really started to crystallize over the last year and a half."

The proposed project will transform Think Together's three-acre campus on Fourth Street, located less than a mile from the Santa Ana Zoo, into a seven-story, multi-family residential complex featuring 270 units. The workforce housing project will cater to middle-class professionals such as teachers, police officers, firefighters and office workers. It will feature two- and three-bedroom apartments, offering ample space for families in a city with rising housing demand.

The development will include 3,700 square feet of amenity space, 17,709 square feet of private open space, 13,504 square feet of public open space, 6,760 square feet of live-work units and ground-floor retail space aligning with the city's master plan.

"We're incorporating first-rate amenities," Paolo Leon, lead architect on the project and a partner at [AO](#), told the Business Journal. "A fitness center, a resident lounge and a sky deck will make this an attractive, vibrant community."

Scouting for a New HQ

Transitioning its HQ into housing is a rare move for an OC nonprofit.

Others such as Families Forward, Illumination Foundation and Wiseplace have built apartments or single-family homes to provide housing for their clients. Those projects also were developed on property they already owned or were donated to them – and it didn't involve the conversion of headquarters. Think Together's housing project will also be available to the public.

In 2012, Think Together bought the Fourth Street building for \$5 million, funds allocated to the nonprofit by the state-funded commission, First 5 of Orange County.

Barth said Think Together is looking for a new place to call home once the project is complete. Since so many of their staff work remotely on school sites, he said the non-profit will likely be able to find a new OC headquarters that's half the size of the current one.

Think Together also plans to look for a separate facility in Orange County to house their warehouse and print shop.

Former Student Now Shaping its Future

Leon grew up in the Shalimar neighborhood of Costa Mesa, a working-class community where his parents often juggled multiple jobs to secure the American dream.

While hardworking families built their futures, neighborhood children needed a safe, enriching place to go after school.

Local mothers advocated for such a space, leading to the creation of the Shalimar Learning Center, Think Together's first community center – founded in 1994 when Leon was a pre-teen.

Funded by St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church and supported by volunteers, Think Together welcomed more than 100 children on its first day, including Leon.

Leon, now a board member of Think Together, said he credits the organization with changing his life. As the lead architect for its Santa Ana headquarters redevelopment, he said he is helping secure Think Together's future as the project will provide a steady income stream that can be poured back into programs to reach even more children.

"I'm honored to be involved in the project and give back to this organization in a way that aligns with my professional training and my experience," Leon told the Business Journal.

Santa Ana Initiative Led to an Opportunity

The Santa Ana Metro East Mixed-Use (MEMU) Overlay Zone, a city initiative encouraging residential and commercial development, provided an opportune moment for Think Together to act.

Spanning 200 acres between the Santa Ana (I-5) and Costa Mesa (SR-55) freeways, this zoning effort supports the city's vision for urban renewal while enabling Think Together to maximize its assets.

Dan Young, board chair of Think Together and former Irvine Company executive, is helping lead the charge to bring this vision to life.

"We need a reliable income source," said Young, president of Camino Enterprises and former mayor of Santa Ana.

Once completed, the residential redevelopment project is expected to generate \$10 million to \$15 million in annual revenue. A professional management company will oversee the apartments. Once the debt is paid off, the revenue will be funneled directly into expanding the non-profit's educational programs.

City officials have been supportive of the initiative, seeing it as a win-win for both Think Together and the community. The organization plans to go before the Santa Ana Planning Commission as early as May. If approved, construction could begin soon after, with completion expected by late 2026 or early 2027, and residents moving in by 2027 or 2028.

“The city of Santa Ana has been massively cooperative,” Young said. “Think Together has designed a project that conforms 100% to the city’s vision. Once approved, we’ll move forward with securing financing.”

For Leon, who was one of the first students to benefit from Think Together’s programs, the project is deeply personal.

“I have the unique vantage point of lived experience in almost every facet of this project,” he said. “At the end of the day, success for this project means success for kids like me.”