

# Affordable Housing

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JAMES CITY—Marshall Toney isn't interested in talking the talk about affordable housing. He's walking the walk.

Toney, a GSH real estate agent, is a member of the Greater Williamsburg Chamber & Tourism Alliance's task force on affordable housing. He was also a member of James City County's Business Climate Task Force.

Toney's taken the lessons from those meetings to his business. Not content to wait for a government-driven program to address the workforce shortage and demand for affordable housing, he figured out his own plan of attack.

"We haven't called it a 'program' because it's more an 'opportunity,'" he said in a recent interview. "One action led to another. It's something everyone's been talking about and here's an opportunity to make it happen."

Toney partnered with Paul White, a local builder, to begin building new workforce housing priced below \$200,000. Buying lots, he said, is the "number one challenge."

Land is often prohibitively expensive, and of course, little is in it for the seller to knock down the price.

"I ask them, 'What's your future vision for your lot?'" Depending on the answer, Toney knows whether or not he's looking at another upper-end gated community or something a little more accessible to first-time buyers. So far, he's been able to find about 10 lots that could be used to build workforce homes.

That's where White comes in. He has a number of floor plans, and prospective buyers are even able to pick and choose features before ground is broken.

So far, the pair have two closings scheduled this month, both in Grove on Pocahontas Trail. White has agreed to pay \$6,000 in closing costs. Three more homes are under construction, and the pair are negotiating for land to build another five or six homes.

For Toney, it's part of creating consistency in a housing market dominated by high-end homes available all the time and affordables only being available now and then.

"There are opportunities," he said. "But not a lot, and few and far between. That's when people lose hope."

The switch to a buyer's market has apparently put more affordable homes for sale. Five months ago the Gazette searched real estate listings in James City for homes priced under \$160,000, the county's new threshold for affordable homes. There were two. Another search this week produced a dozen, including four single-family detached homes. There are also more than 60 attached or detached homes for sale locally under \$200,000 (see box).

Toney and White defy the stereotype of the Realtor and builder who are looking to turn as much

profit as possible. Although they admit the project cuts into their pockets, they argue that it makes long-term sense to invest in first-time buyers and affordable homes.

“As long as you stay in business, that’s the main thing,” White said, noting that high-end homes are languishing in the market, anyway. “This is where the greatest need is and where the least is being done.”

They also meet people and make connections with a group of buyers and future sellers that will return to them in subsequent years.

“I’d like about 12 more Marshalls,” said Mary Beth Pauley, GSH’s managing broker, noting that agents as rooted and community-minded as Toney inevitably pay off in time.

Toney would also like to take his efforts further. He hasn’t quite figured out how to do it, but he’d like to hit that \$160,000 price point.

“I really think they deserve that,” he said of buyers. “If we can get that ideal lot... It’s not going to be your Taj Mahal, but it’s still going to be somebody’s home.”