

Habitat Receives \$1 Million

Trailer parks, new project to benefit

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Habitat for Humanity of Greater Charlottesville has received a \$1 million gift to support affordable housing in the region - the largest single gift in the organization's 15-year history.

"We're just overwhelmed," said Lynne Conboy, chairwoman of Habitat's board of directors. "We're really, really thrilled."

The gift from Charlottesville philanthropist Hunter J. Smith's family foundation will be split between three projects - the revitalization of the Sunrise and Southwood trailer parks, as well as the development of a new, 28-unit affordable housing neighborhood.

Smith is the widow of Carl W. Smith, the founder of coal and natural gas company Amvest, and is a longtime benefactor to Charlottesville-area organizations. In recent years, she has made sizable contributions to Monticello; the Shelter for Help and Emergency, a Charlottesville domestic violence shelter; and the University of Virginia.

The three Habitat for Humanity projects that will benefit from Smith's largesse mark a departure from the group's traditional strategy of building one affordable house at a time. These projects will feature numerous affordable units, as well as market-rate homes.

By mixing housing for families with different income levels, Habitat can build a greater number of affordable homes and sell the other lots to builders.

"Mrs. Smith really grasped our mixed-income strategy," said Habitat's executive director, Overton McGehee. "She took a tour of our projects and she really got what we're trying to do."

Habitat's new strategy came about because of rising land costs in Charlottesville and Albemarle County. Five years ago, McGehee said, the organization could purchase a single lot for \$15,000 and build a home for a low-income family. But now, the value of land has quadrupled, he said, making such single house projects impossible.

At the 2-acre Sunrise Trailer Park on Carlton Road, Habitat is working to replace 17 trailers with a minimum of 48 townhouses and condominium units. The new community will include affordable units for the trailer park's current residents. The organization intends to file for a rezoning for the project during the summer, with construction slated to begin in 2009 and be completed in 2012.

The Southwood Mobile Home Park, just south of Charlottesville off Fifth Street Extended, currently has 353 trailers on 100 acres. Habitat intends to transform the trailer park into a higher-density, mixed-income community with the potential for 500 to 900 homes, including many designated as affordable units. The group expects to file for rezoning in two or three years, with construction wrapping up in five or six years.

Construction of Habitat's first mixed-income development is already under way. The 4-acre project on Nunley Street in Fifeville has been rezoned for 35 homes, 18 of which will be designated for households that earn 25 percent to 60 percent of the area's median income, while an additional six

to 10 units will be for families earning 60 percent to 120 percent of the area median income. The Charlottesville metropolitan area's median income is \$66,800.

Seven market-rate units at the Nunley Street project will be built by local homebuilders and eventually sold on the open market. Habitat expects the project will be done by 2010.

Habitat officials hope the group's new strategy will be a sizable step toward tackling the region's lack of affordable housing.

"We have a real crisis in this community," McGehee said. "We've reached the point where even police, firefighters and registered nurses can't afford to live here."

Jill Whitley, of the Smith family firm Smith, Vicars & Co., said that Smith and her family hope other local philanthropists see the value in Habitat's work and make contributions.

"She hopes that other people will get on board as well," Whitley said.