

Habitat for Humanity Projects Saved: \$500,000 to Help Purchase Foreclosed Homes in Sterling

By Jason Jacks

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One charity is breathing easier, as county leaders recently approved a \$500,000 grant to keep several local Habitat for Humanity projects, including the renovation of foreclosed homes in eastern Loudoun County, up and running.

A majority of the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors decided Nov. 4 to give a portion of the county's \$3 million Housing Trust Fund to Loudoun Habitat for Humanity so the nonprofit can build homes for the needy in western Loudoun and purchase a half-dozen bank-owned homes in Sterling to be fixed up and sold to low- and moderate-income families.

"What a good thing to have this done in the Sterling area, where we have been very concerned about foreclosures and about the direction of the community," said Board Chairman Scott York (I-At large).

Without the money, the Habitat projects would have been in jeopardy. The county prefers that Housing Trust money be set aside for loans to developers to build affordable rental apartments, which can house a greater number of people. Habitat's request, though, ran counter to this since its properties are single-family homes built or renovated for purchase. In October, two Board of Supervisors committees recommended the request be denied.

"But, we are all about homeownership," said Alta Jones, president of Loudoun Habitat for Humanity, adding that property owners generally strengthen communities.

Some supervisors were also concerned the amount of the request was too great, and would substantially cut into the Housing Trust, which the county uses to fund affordable housing projects. They also hoped to hold off on the decision until a round-table of local nonprofits, county officials and developers could be held to discuss housing needs in Loudoun.

But officials at the cash-strapped Habitat said they needed the money sooner rather than later to keep operations going. They also said they have to purchase the foreclosed homes by September 2010 to qualify for federal grant money.

"I am concerned about them losing the opportunity to begin the projects in eastern Loudoun," said Supervisor Jim Burton (I-Blue Ridge), who proposed the board approve the grant. "We need to allow them to get started."

The board endorsed the request 5-3-1, with Supervisors Andrea McGimsey (D-Potomac), Sally Kurtz (D-Catoctin) and Kelly Burk (D-Leesburg) opposed. Supervisor Susan Klimek Buckley (D-Sugarland Run) was absent for the vote, but had voiced her opposition to the request before having to leave the meeting early.

“We can stretch \$3 million only so far,” Buckley said.

While Habitat welcomes the \$500,000, it had sought \$876,000 to fully realize its various projects across the county.

Of that original amount, \$276,000 was earmarked to build a five-home community in the village of St. Louis to be named for Erin Peterson, a Centreville resident who was killed in the Virginia Tech University shootings in 2007. Another \$110,000 was budgeted to build a house in Round Hill and to purchase two homes now in the county’s affordable dwelling unit program for renovation and resell. The remainder -- \$487,500 – was to be used to buy and refurbish 13 foreclosed properties in eastern Loudoun.

“No, we didn’t get all the money, but we are very happy to be getting the half million,” Jones said.

She said the \$500,000 will allow Habitat to house dozens of people who otherwise could not afford to buy a home in Loudoun. The money will be used on the Peterson project and on the foreclosed homes, though the amount of homes will be cut in half for the time being. The organization planned to close on a Sterling home on Nov. 13 that, according to Alta, Habitat was able to buy for below the appraised value. The project will be among the group's first forays into eastern Loudoun.

“We have families right now who need houses,” Jones added.

A year ago, one those families was Donna Miller and her children.

The family had been renting an apartment in Leesburg. Each year, Miller said, she struggled with rent increases of \$30 to \$50 per month, and was worried she would no longer financially qualify to remain in the home, since it was part of the county’s affordable dwelling unit program, which only people of certain income can take part.

However, that all changed 11 months ago when she purchased a home in western Loudoun built by Habitat for Humanity. She's now safely locked into a low, fixed mortgage for the next 20 years.

“Being a homeowner has given me peace for myself, and peace for my family,” she recently told supervisors. “It has also given me security, and it has given my children an inheritance.”

See www.loudounhabitat.org to learn more.