

Community effort builds housing project

By Jennifer Smith - Vernon Morning Star

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In tough economic times, the community is coming together under one roof to build a brighter future for those who need it most.

A unique partnership has been formed, known as the Under One Roof partners, to build a six-plex townhouse, with four family and two single units.

Two of the rental units will be provided for low-income families through the Vernon and District Community Land Trust.

Clients with developmental disabilities at the Kindale Developmental Association will benefit from three of the rental units (two single and one family). That will give them an opportunity to live an independent life just as their peers.

The last unit will give a low-income Vernon family the opportunity to purchase a home. The employed family will not be required to put forward a down payment, nor will they pay interest on the mortgage, which is based on one-third of their income.

"It makes it very affordable," said Glory Westwell, Habitat for Humanity chairperson, at a fundraising breakfast Thursday put on by the Prestige Inn.

The City of Vernon has donated the land at 4100 25th Ave. and work on the townhouse is set to begin April 1. The goal is to have the townhouse completed in eight months.

"We would love to be able to give someone a home for Christmas," said Westwell.

But before the sound of hammers and saws echoes through the city, the project needs to raise \$300,000 worth of support.

So far, the fundraising breakfast attended by more than 200 people managed to raise a total of \$3,825. On top of the cash donations a number of in-kind donations were made, such as \$5,000 towards appliances from City Furniture and structural engineering from Titan Structural Consulting.

The donations are just a portion of the funds needed for the project. The remainder is anticipated to come from grants and financing to make up the \$1.2 million project total.

But what will also literally get the project off the ground is volunteers. Westwell anticipates 100 volunteers will be needed over the span of the project. Anyone wanting to pitch in can call her at 250-558-0072.

Thankfully, approximately 70 per cent of the foundation and framing work will be completed by students at Okanagan College. As part of their construction course, the students learn the skills of the trade by physically building a house.

MQN Architects has also partnered in the project, as well as Heartwood Homes.

“For me, it’s about giving back to the community,” said Rob Dubland with Heartwood Homes. “It’s just great to see so many different groups pulling together.”

The many-faceted partnership is also a milestone, as it is the first time Habitat for Humanity has ever partnered with other organizations to build a home.

“We usually always build our homes on our own,” said Westwell, adding that this is also the first Habitat for Humanity-built home in Vernon.

The Social Planning Council for the North Okanagan has also been instrumental in bringing the project this far.

Annette Sharkey, executive director, recalls what the housing situation was like when she was first hired three years ago.

“Really what I was hearing was there is a lack of housing.”

With the median income for families being \$55,000 (\$24,050 for individuals) and considering the 2007 average price for a single detached home at \$375,000, a family income of \$98,000 is required to purchase a home in Vernon.

Add to that the fact that Vernon has one of the lowest vacancy rates for rental units in B.C., less than one per cent, and the partners agree that this is just the first step in the right direction.

“Thank you for your support and helping us build a community under one roof,” said Westwell.