

Religious group keeps its promise on housing

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Roger Chesley

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THREE YEARS AGO, a fledgling interfaith organization pledged to make work-force housing - the type police officers, teachers and municipal employees can afford - more than just a notion in Virginia Beach. Priced out of the booming real estate market, locals found it tough to live in the same city where they worked.

Some onlookers said a silent prayer, knowing that Empower Hampton Roads could lose faith.

Not to worry. In forums open to the public and smaller meetings with stakeholders in the housing industry, Empower Hampton Roads made the pitch, time and time again: We need more affordable housing in the Beach. As one group member said in 2004, "It's so expensive that working people can't afford anything in Virginia Beach." The group promised to flog the issue - with grace.

Talk about tenacity.

It's taken several years and many conversations, but Empower Hampton Roads saw the fruits of its efforts pass the Beach City Council on Tuesday night. The winners will be middle-income workers who otherwise couldn't buy a home in Virginia's largest city.

The council overwhelmingly approved a program that encourages construction of homes priced from \$150,000 to \$250,000, according to an article by The Pilot's Susan White. Developers would get the chance to increase density on their land, in exchange for designating at least 17 percent of the project as work-force housing.

It will be one of only a handful of affordable housing programs in localities in the commonwealth. They've had mixed results: generally welcomed in Fairfax County, generally ignored in Suffolk.

Others besides EHR deserve credit, too, for making the concept a reality in Virginia Beach. Andrew Friedman, the city's housing director, played a notable role, according to various officials I talked to.

But Empower did much of the grunt work, and it even started a Housing Roundtable that brought together bankers, developers, city planning officials and others. "We've used this forum to talk out our differences and come to a collaborative position on work-force housing," Tim McCarthy, head of EHR's regional housing equity task force, told me. The coalition includes about two dozen congregations on both sides of the water.

As to the Beach council's approval, "We consider it a victory," he added. "We've put all of our energy into it the past three years."

The program is not as strong as it could be, and that's troubling. The big sticking point: It's voluntary, not mandatory, for home builders. Who knows how many of them will eventually participate - or instead prop up the status quo?

Such a mentality could well backfire, McCarthy notes, saying that affordable housing - or its lack - is also an economic development issue. "For young people wanting to move here for employment, but who can't afford to live here, there would be no incentive" to relocate. Luring young adults to an area helps keep a community vibrant and fresh.

That point was echoed by Chris Lowrie, executive director of Richmond-based Housing Virginia, a statewide coalition of advocacy groups. "Companies won't locate where they can't find homes for their employees," Lowrie said Thursday.

Nonetheless, Empower Hampton Roads deserves some props for sticking to this effort like... well, cement to a brick. Even Mayor Meyera Oberndorf noted the efforts. "It's been a consistent advocate to the city to adopt a work-force housing program," she told me Thursday evening. "I think they are as capable as any group of citizens that the city has had the opportunity to work with."

Promises kept indeed.

Roger Chesley is associate editor of The Pilot's editorial page. Reach him at (757) 446-2329 or roger.chesley@pilotonline.com.