

Habitat proposes Pine Hills condos

The soaring cost of land moves the nonprofit to seek new ways to build housing.

Kate Santich

Sentinel Staff Writer

Habitat for Humanity Orlando plans to build a \$6 million, 58-unit condominium development in Pine Hills, a historic move that could help transform the working-class neighborhood, the charity announced Monday.

Until now, Habitat has built only single-family homes in Orlando. But Habitat chapters nationally are turning to condos as land in major urban areas becomes more scarce and more expensive.

"We have been working on this concept for about two years," said Thomas Karastamatis, chairman of Habitat Orlando's board of directors. "We are excited about the possibility of building decent, affordable homes for potentially 170 children and their parents."

The project, called Staghorn Villas, will be built on 3.9 acres at Staghorn Drive and Silver Star Road. Plans call for 10 two-story buildings, each with four- to eight-unit townhouses, and green-space play areas. Habitat Orlando hopes to break ground in February 2008 and finish in spring 2011.

Prospective condo owners would need to meet the same requirements as other Habitat owners, including putting in 300 to 500 hours of sweat equity if they're physically able. But because of the project's magnitude, the details of their work haven't been ironed out.

"We're still evaluating -- you know, do we really want volunteers on the roof of a two-story building?" Karastamatis said. "But there will be opportunities for volunteering. We're still going to need people to hang drywall; we're still going to need people to paint; we're still going to lay sod."

Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer welcomed the project, saying in a statement that the city supports "innovative efforts to increase housing for lower-income families."

But Habitat leaders hope that the project not only will help individual families but give a much-needed boost to surrounding neighborhoods.

"Whenever we can go into a neighborhood and have a majority of the lots be Habitat homes, that's where we can really effect change," Karastamatis said. "You know, we put in these new houses, they look good, and so the neighbors start making upgrades to their own homes. You really see a transformation once you get to a certain critical mass of Habitat homes in a neighborhood."

Already, the nonprofit has sent staffers into the area to talk with residents about the coming project, and reception so far has been positive.

Unlike public-housing tenants, Habitat homeowners must have a good credit history and have enough income to qualify for zero-interest, 20-year loans. They also must demonstrate that they currently live in substandard conditions -- such as crowded apartments with no heat or running water or working toilets.

In recent years, the nonprofit has built an average of 10 to 15 homes annually in Orange County. Though Habitat Orlando executive director Dee Danmeyer said the organization will continue to build single-family homes for large families of six or more, Karastamatis said single parcels are becoming hard to acquire.

"There's going to come a year when our ability even to find 10 to 15 individual lots a year will be severely hampered," he said.

Habitat is changing its funding approach for the project as well. While it normally relies solely on local donations to pay for its work, Staghorn Villas will also use government grants, private-foundation grants and commercial financing.

For more information on the project, call the Habitat office at 407-648-4567 or check the Web site at habitat-orlando.org.

Kate Santich can be reached at ksantich@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5503.