

Habitat for Humanity home in Bergenfield, built with care

JANUARY 9, 2016

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BERGENFIELD — Eighty-year-old Don Bozzone has been volunteering with Habitat for Humanity for 18 years and still gets excited about helping the group build a new house in Bergen County for those who otherwise would have little hope of owning one here.

“You see this here?” he said, gesturing to the vacant, grassy lot beneath his feet that, on Saturday, played host to a groundbreaking ceremony attended by local politicians, volunteers and Habitat staff. “In four months you’re going to see something and go, ‘W-o-w.’ ”

More specifically, the roughly 6,000-foot lot behind Bergenfield’s Brookview Gardens condominium complex on Bergen Avenue will feature a sleek two-story, three-bedroom home outfitted with solar panels and other energy-efficient fixings. It will be the 25th home that Habitat for Humanity of Bergen County has built or renovated since the organization’s founding in 1994, said Executive Director Jacey Raimondo.

The land for the project was donated by the Franklin Lakes-based Jose Garcia Foundation, and the money for materials and professional services was given by an anonymous donor, Raimondo said. Construction of the house, except for plumbing, electrical, masonry and roofing work, will be completed by volunteers, including beneficiaries of the program.

Typical of Habitat’s projects, the home will be sold to a low-income family, who will then pay an interest-free mortgage to Habitat. The organization does not charge a down payment for its homes. Instead, families put in hundreds of hours of sweat equity in the form of work on their own property or on other Habitat initiatives.

Raimondo said there is a tremendous need for affordable housing in Bergen County.

“A lot of people who work in Bergen County can’t afford to live in Bergen County because of how expensive it is in terms of real estate taxes,” she said. “So people are living in substandard rental housing in Bergen County. It’s bad for kids. It’s bad for family dynamics.”

She said Habitat tries to meet that need in as many parts of Bergen County as possible. After Hurricane Sandy, for example, Habitat staff and volunteers spent more than two years performing about 80 critical home repairs in Little Ferry, Moonachie and South Hackensack.

The biggest impediment to building, Raimondo said, “is we don’t have enough land.”

Bergenfield Mayor Norman Schmelz used a ribbon-wrapped shovel on Saturday to move the project’s first dirt. He was joined by Assemblyman Tim Eustace, D-Maywood; Freeholders Steve Tanelli and Thomas Sullivan, Jr.; and Bergenfield Councilman Charles Steinel.

“I’m happy they’re building in Bergenfield, and you know what, I’m going to talk to the council and see if we can find any other strips of property that we may be able to either sell or donate,” he said. “This was a vacant piece of land, so you’re getting taxes only on a property. Now you build a house and you’re increasing your ratables.”

Bozzone, the 80-year-old volunteer, said he is looking forward to the start of construction so he has reason to spend time with the roughly 15 other dedicated volunteers — mostly retired men who refer to themselves as the “Greyheads” — who toil away at Habitat work sites at least one day per week.

“We’re just like family,” he said. Then, laughing, he added, “And it’s one day you get away from the wife.”

Robert Sandt, the former Hillsdale municipal clerk and another Greyhead, was similarly upbeat.

“I love doing this,” he said. “The guys are terrific. We’re disappointed when we can’t work because we can’t get together.”

Habitat staff members said that they expect to identify a family to buy the house by March and that construction would take about 14 months.