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Will region take on housing? AFFORDABLE HOUSING A TOP NEED THE BASICS OF THE PLAN WHY SEEK REGIONAL SOLUTION?

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This summer, two teachers, a firefighter and a school bus driver showed up at a class for first-time home-buyers.

They and the 11 other class members thought the tide of foreclosures would translate into cheaper houses and the opportunity to own their own homes.

Those 15 potential home-buyers also represent hope for a gloomy housing market. First-time home-buyers aren't only the most enthusiastic clients, said Realtor Vickie Clark-Jennings, but they help drive the market by buying houses in the lower price ranges.

Still, most of the would-be buyers couldn't find a deal among the more than 500 foreclosed homes in the Fredericksburg area, said Cheri Miles, a counselor with the Central Virginia Housing Coalition and teacher of the home-buyer class.

The majority of the houses they saw had been damaged by the previous occupants. Appliances and light fixtures ripped out, carpets torn up and walls spray-painted.

"Teachers, firefighters come in with basic wages, looking for their first house," Miles said. "They save up enough to get into the home--the down payment, the closing costs--but they're not walking into this thinking, 'Oh, I have to have eight grand just to make the house livable.'"

A plan proposed by the regional Affordable Housing Task Force could get help for Miles' students and other area residents trying to buy a home.

The idea is for local governments to band together to purchase foreclosed homes, fix them up and sell them at an affordable price.

"It is in our best interest to get these properties back up, with people living in them," said Fredericksburg City Councilman Matt Kelly, who serves on the task force.

He and other members proposed the idea using credit from area banks. But in July, the federal government sweetened the pot when Congress passed the Housing and Economic Recovery Act.

That legislation gives \$3.9 billion to localities nationwide for buying and rehabbing foreclosed homes. The task force doesn't know yet just how much could come to the Fredericksburg area, but estimates \$5 million.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development federal government encourages localities to apply for the money. Leaders of the George Washington Regional Commission, which ran the task force, hope local governments will work together to make this housing more affordable regionally.

The plan will help the higher end of the low-income sector, said Kevin Byrnes, director of regional planning with GWRC. Federal guidelines say people who make up to 80 percent of the area median income--about \$55,000 for a family of three in Fredericksburg--would qualify for the housing program.

This plan helps those in the 50 percent to 80 percent of median income, Byrnes said.

The plan really targets work force housing, Miles said.

Byrnes said he hopes the program would be "the baby steps" of a regional plan to help those who can't afford a place to live.

A "memorandum of understanding" was given out Tuesday night to officials from the city and five surrounding counties. Task force members hope to see each locality vote on the memorandum at their next meetings, Kelly said.

Local officials had few comments and questions after Tuesday's GWRC meeting.

Byrnes urged them to go back to their boards and talk about it.

Bruce Seger, director of the Greater Fredericksburg Habitat for Humanity, said task force members will forge ahead. Habitat gets three calls each week from people looking for a Habitat house, but Seger has no room on his waiting list for them.

"Obviously, the HUD money would help us get more families in, but if that doesn't happen, we are working with Realtors and the local bank to go ahead and get families into these houses," he said.

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Under the proposed plan, localities could join together to apply for money through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. A regional commission created to address affordable housing would buy foreclosed homes--possibly getting discounts for buying multiple properties.

The regional group would then rehab the homes and sell them for the cost of the house plus renovations.

Additionally, the task force members hope localities will waive some permit fees and streamline the approval process to keep the cost of the properties down.

The group would recruit and approve home-buyers who can pay the mortgage but who need a home at a lower cost.

Kevin Byrnes calls the project For Sale By Region.

--Amy Flowers Umble

In 2002, when the Rappahannock United Way surveyed area residents, affordable housing showed up as one of the top local needs. Five years later, it topped the list.

Next time, "I hope it's not the Number One issue," said RUW President Stephen Batsche.

A committee formed after the first Community Needs Assessment, and the Affordable Housing Task Force started after the results of last year's assessment were released.

The need continued to rise as housing prices soared through early 2007. The area's population of those living in motels and those seeking foreclosure help jumped this year.

Foreclosures offer cheaper housing options, but government-backed loans require houses to be in good condition, and many foreclosures in the lower price range aren't.

The area has long wanted a regional solution to the affordable housing crunch. Area leaders also discussed a regional housing authority by 2004 but never reached a consensus. The predecessor of the George Washington Regional Commission often talked about affordable housing but no solution ever developed.

Politics often get in the way of regional fixes, and smaller counties worry their interests would be lost in the fray with larger localities.

Caroline County Supervisor Bobby Popowitz said, "We just need to make sure our voices are heard."

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