

Effort puts 3 families on road to new home

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BOYNTON BEACH — They aren't much to look at now, but a trio of empty lots along Seacrest Boulevard mark a new beginning for three families.

A collaborative effort between the city, local banks and nonprofit organizations will move low-income families into three affordable, single-family houses on the property near Northwest Fifth Court by mid-2008.

During a groundbreaking ceremony Thursday, Cassandra and Juan Barroso of Delray Beach said they were looking forward to being homeowners for the first time.

It took five years and a stint on federal assistance for the Barrosos to reach this point.

"You have to work really hard," said Cassandra Barroso, a medical assistant and Palm Beach Community College student. "I just drove myself to make it to the end."

The lots were purchased by the Boynton Beach Community Redevelopment Agency last year for \$380,000, with the Boynton Beach Faith Based Community Development Corp. helping the families build their savings and qualify for a home loan. The city of Boynton Beach and the CRA also will help the families pay their mortgages and other costs.

Andrae Robinson, 32, a worker in the city's utility department who also plans to move into one of the homes, said he wants his two small daughters to grow up in a house of their own.

"It's very stressful, dealing with the credit issues and the banks," Robinson said. "I almost thought about giving up, but my two little girls kept me pushing for it."

The project is one example of the city's effort to create workforce and affordable housing opportunities. The push includes an ordinance requiring developers of new communities to allocate a percentage for affordable homes in exchange for getting permission to build more units per acre than would otherwise be allowed.

"The price of housing is taking a lot of people out of the American dream of owning your own home," Mayor Jerry Taylor said. "We as a city are trying to do something about it. We are going to pledge ourselves to continue to provide workforce housing in Boynton Beach."

People with low incomes may qualify for financial help from the CRA's home-buyer assistance program as well as money from the State Housing Initiatives Partnership through the city.

To help in the effort, the CRA agreed in October to negotiate with American Realty Development to build affordable townhouses and rental apartments at the 8-acre former site of the nearby Boynton Terrace Apartments.

Also, the CRA recently invested more than \$2 million in The Preserve on Northeast Fourth Street, where Cornerstone Development Group is building 180 townhouses, 50 of which are set aside as affordable housing.

Faith Dickens, the first person to move into The Preserve's affordable homes, attended Thursday's groundbreaking.

"The programs that are out there help you get started," Dickens said. "It takes a lot of work, but I look at it as a vehicle to prosperity."

Courtney Cain, president of the Boynton Beach Faith Based Community Development Corp., said the city, nonprofits and banks are working together to tackle the lack of workforce housing.

"This was the first project we have done from the ground up with the CRA," Cain said. "One of the goals is collaboration, and with that the sky's the limit as far as what we can do."