

Housing News Is Good for Dallas

Catholic Housing Initiative's project proves affordable homes can be built, but it's not easy

There was a party last week on Dallas' Kavasars Drive, a narrow street in southeast Oak Cliff that trails off at one edge of a wooded area and picks up again on the other side. It wasn't an elaborate party — no band or DJ — just a few dozen happy people crowded into the living room and kitchen of a brand-new house. It celebrated the approximate half-way point of Catholic Housing Initiative's home construction project in the Five Mile neighborhood.

For the past decade or so, the news about housing has been mostly bad. Lower-cost apartments and starter homes are scarce. Mortgage rates and home prices remain inflated. NIMBYism keeps defeating redevelopment projects that include multifamily housing. Against that backdrop, last week's event marked a small, hard-fought victory for families hoping to buy a moderately priced new home in Dallas, and for the nonprofit that works to build them.

The Catholic Housing Initiative typically focuses on multifamily projects. It has bought and rehabilitated, or built from the ground up, hundreds of apartments for tenants with modest or low incomes. CHI also has converted former hotels into permanent supportive housing for very low-income older, disabled or formerly homeless residents.

The public-private partnership in the Five Mile neighborhood focuses on helping working-class families become homeowners. The city of Dallas owned dozens of lots in the area, most through foreclosures related to unpaid back taxes.

CHI agreed to buy parcels for \$1,000 each, but before development could begin, the nonprofit faced two major hurdles. One was bureaucratic. Each property's title had to be cleared of liens, and many parcels required HUD-mandated environmental reviews.

The second problem was inadequate infrastructure, a common issue in neglected neighborhoods. Five Mile's infrastructure was substandard at best. Some streets were disintegrating, most lacked curbs and gutters, and existing water and sewer lines were decaying and inadequate. After persistent advocacy, the city and county allocated funds for infrastructure upgrades. The new water and sewer lines benefited CHI as well as existing property owners and the for-profit developers who also wanted to build new homes in the neighborhood.

The newest CHI houses have three bedrooms and two baths, a sales price of \$239,000 and an appraised value, according to the nonprofit, of \$300,000. Because of the public subsidy involved, potential homebuyers must earn less than about \$140,000 for a four-person household. The nonprofit has built 35 homes in Five Mile and plans to build at least 35 more.

It's a small but real win for ambitious, hard-working families who are too often priced out of the city's new home market.