

Building Future For Randolph Families

Central Vt. Habitat Preps Property For Duplex Project This Summer

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Two families will soon join the ranks of homeowners in Randolph as Habitat for Humanity prepares to build a new duplex on Central Street.

The site, just down the road from the Orange Southwest School District offices, has had some trees removed recently and work should begin soon. The property was purchased about a year and a half ago.

The most important part— selecting the people who will make the structure a home— has already happened, said Zachariah Watson, executive director of Central Vermont Habitat for Humanity.

Two families will take ownership of the duplex.

On one side will be Rose Volpe, of Randolph, a grandmother who has found herself raising two elementary-school aged grandchildren. The trio will be living in a three-bedroom home. One of the two kids has been sleeping in a hallway but will now have a bedroom of his own.

The other side will see a family of four move in.

The homeowner will be Mediatrice Muzima, a Rwandan immigrant, along with her two high-school aged children and her mother.

Each half of the duplex will be about 1,200 square feet. Volpe and her family will have three bedrooms and Muzima and her family will have four. Both homes will have a kitchen, living room, laundry room, and two full bathrooms.

The homes will be side-by-side townhouse style construction with two parking spaces as well as front and back yards.

Each unit will have a heat pump and be built to Efficiency Vermont energy performance standards to make the all-electric homes more affordable to live in. “It’s very energy-efficient,” Watson said. “It helps save money on operating the home and increases their odds of financial success.”

Watson said the families were selected by a volunteer group who went through applications without knowing anything about the applicants’ race, gender, or other personal identifiers.

Only financial information, need for housing and similar criteria was considered.

“It removes any bias,” Watson said. “We look at their finances and their living situation.”

Watson said being in subsidized housing qualifies an applicant, but they also have to be able to pay a mortgage and commit to working on their home for a certain number of hours.

Watson said Habitat for Humanity work is helping to solve the housing crisis in a more permanent way.

He said that dumping money into affordable housing is good because it gives people a place to live, but it puts people into a cycle where once they improve their situation in life they then lose their subsidy.

Because of the market, there is no path out of renting and even those who can afford to buy a house, there’s nothing on the market they can afford, he said.

That’s one reason this build is a duplex. Getting more people into home ownership quickly is the only real way to solve the housing crisis in Vermont, he opined.

“We know there’s a housing crisis,” Watson said. “We are the sole entity in the entire state, building single family homes for low-income

Vermonters. Because we're the only ones doing this, we have to change how we do this."

Building a duplex gets two families into home ownership on the same ground, which helps the organization build more houses more quickly.

Still, these homes, due to the high cost of materials, will cost about \$355,000 for each half of the duplex.

Habitat for Humanity has to fundraise to build its houses and relies on individuals and corporate sponsorships.

A groundbreaking ceremony is planned for mid-July and organizers hope to have the building ready for move-in by June 2024.

Because of volunteer labor, working with partners such as the Randolph Technical Career Center on plumbing and electrical, the price is greatly reduced, Watson said.

He also touted a new partnership with Bensonwood and Unity Homes on prefab, off-site construction that will cut the time of building the shell from about six months to about eight weeks.

"We're really excited about this partnership with them," Watson said.

And having a resource like RTCC nearby is a huge benefit, he said.

"It gives the students a chance for some hands-on learning for a really great cause," Watson said. "We're really grateful for them."

The nonprofit also relies heavily on volunteers and will need volunteers on the ground in July or August to help hang siding and sheetrock, build decks and sheds, and landscape the property.

"We have a group of volunteers we reach out to, but new volunteers or people who are interested can register on our website, through our volunteer management platform," Watson said. "We need volunteers. We have some great people who have worked with us in the past, and a core group we can count on, but we really do depend on new volunteers to do a lot of the work."

Volunteers will receive training on safety and tool use.

The families chosen will now have the space they need and the comfort of knowing they have a place that is theirs.

Watson talked about an outreach effort in which he worked with a group of kids and had them draw pictures of what having a home meant to them.

They drew photos of holidays, memories, a tree with a tire swing, and a puppy.

“It means you can have a pet, or a tree out front with a tire swing on it,” Watson said.

Adults think in terms of a physical location or a financial asset. But for kids it’s emotional.

“They have their own room, and they can paint it whatever color they want,” Watson said.

He recalled a conversation with Muzima.

“Mediatrice asked me, ‘Can I build a garage?’” Watson recalled. “I said, ‘It’s your house, you can build what you want.’ It was at that moment that she understood what home ownership means.