Replacement Housing For Flood Victims Breaks Ground

Community Action Team's Program Doesn't Work for One Affected Family

By Scott Laird

As most of us know, every story has two sides. In Vernonia, the Community Action Team (CAT), working with Columbia County Flood Relief (CCFR), has put together a plan to build homes for families whose homes were damaged in the flood of December, 2007. The program is innovative and unique and offers a solution for families who have been left with few options for fixing their damaged homes. CAT has broken ground and is preparing for construction of the new homes. But the long wait and changing information from Federal and local agencies has left at least one family who are waiting to repair their damaged home confused and frustrated. An impending deadline to move out of FEMA-provided housing has caused that same family to re-evaluate their participation in what originally looked like their salvation. An opportunity that looked like it provided all the answers has another side to it.

Over a year after the flood, some families are still not back in their homes, are still waiting for assistance packages to be put together, and still don't know when they will have clear answers to some of their questions. For those familiar with FEMA recovery programs, the long timeline is not unexpected. For those who have been waiting for fourteen months, it's not moving fast enough.

In our March, 2009, issue, Vernonia's Voice printed a short story explaining a grant program called HOME, that was developed by CAT and is available to assist with the development of new replacement homes for flood victims. That article triggered an email from one of the potential participants, Cami Archer, who expressed concern that there is a misconception in the community about how the project is arranged. The article "...reads as though those lots up on the hill are being given to the people who are in the buyout process," wrote Archer. "It needs to be addressed so the community understands that the families having the houses built still have to pay for it."

For those unfamiliar with the replacement program, a little background might be helpful. CAT has purchased five contiguous lots in Vernonia that are out of the flood plain, with the intention of using their resources to help families relocate from damaged homes, without drastically changing their personal financial circumstances. "Our goal in developing the Corey Hill homes is to help owners recover to a financial situation similar to the one that preceded the flood," said Jim Tierney, Deputy Director of Community Action Team. "By that, I mean we hope to come as close as possible to reproducing the family's equity and/or the monthly housing cost."

The CAT staff, working through the CCFR, is assisting families with the buyout process through FEMA, opening up the opportunity for flood victims to move out of harm's way and into new homes. One option available for homeowners is the home replacement program CAT has developed specifically for this situation. The availability of grant funding and donated labor is helping make the program affordable and attractive to many property owners wishing to move their families out of the flood zone.

Cami and Nick Archer have been working with CCFR, and more recently with CAT, to be one of the first families to participate in this innovative program. Cami Archer is a stay-at-home mom, with three children, including a four-year-old son and a sixteen-month-old little girl. Archer's email to Vernonia's Voice expressed her concerns about the misconceptions in the community about the program, and also raised questions about the program's operation.

The home buyout process is complicated, and as CCFR has continued to state throughout, every individual family project is different based on personal circumstances.

The Archer's project is one example of how a home buyout is designed to work. In order to explain this, we have rounded numbers here for simplicity. The Archers have a mortgage on their property on which they owe around $90,000, but which has been valued-- pre-flood conditions-- at $120,000. FEMA funds would be used to buy out that property based on its pre-flood value. However, FEMA only pays for 75% of that-- in the Archer's case, about $90,000, which would pay off the mortgage they owe. Increased Cost of Compliance Funds (ICC) from the Archer's flood insurer would have been used to demolish their old home. The Archers would have been required to obtain a new mortgage for around $100,000-- similar to the original mortgage on their damaged home.

The cost for the new home project for the Archers was estimated at around $160,000, including the cost for the lot. Donated labor arranged by CAT and CCFR was to have substantially reduced construction costs. Added to the new mortgage was the almost $40,000 in insurance money the Archers have available to repair their current home, leaving the Archers about $20,000 short of the cost for their new home. That shortage would have been made up with funds available through the grant programs CAT and CCFR have secured. This is a simplified version of the home buyout and replacement process-- projects are actually more involved and complicated, but those are the basics. Again, each individual project has its own complications and issues that need to be worked out.

Cami Archer understands that the process is complicated and, above all, time consuming. "The FEMA representative who we work with monthly for our manufactured home occupancy told me he has never seen a buyout happen in less than eighteen months," said Archer. "So we knew this would take time to put together," she said.

But mixed messages and changing information from CCFR have confused the process for the Archers. "They would tell us one thing, and get our hopes up, then pull the rug out from under us," said Archer.

A deadline of June 8 for all occupants to move out of the FEMA manufactured homes precipitated the Archers reevaluating their participation in the buyout program. An extension allowing occupants to stay longer was being considered, but in the end it was decided it wasn't necessary. "The timeline from Flood Relief was just not consistent with the new homes being built," said Archer. "The information keeps changing, and we felt like we needed to know what was going to happen in June."

Cami Archer with Miley and Adrian at their temporary FEMA provided manufactured home.

In fact, the Archers were one of only three families that FEMA or CCFR hadn't found alternative housing for in case their new home wasn't ready by June 8. CCFR Flood Director Dan Brown summed it up, "We are very frustrated by the length of time this process has taken. Worse than the delay has been the shifting sand of program interpretations from our public partners."

Cami Archer expressed her concerns about the program to Vernonia's Voice in mid-March. She complained about CAT's project requirements and the project management costs included in the home costs by CAT. "I'm not questioning anyone's integrity," said Archer. "I believe everyone involved is good, and trying to help. We just decided this wasn't right for us."

CAT staff explained that the HOME Program CAT is using on the project comes from Oregon Housing and Community Services. State and Federal regulations require that eligible families occupy the homes for a set period of years. This requirement is secured by using a no-payment, zero-interest loan with an annually decreasing balance. If the homes are sold before the period expires, the pro-rated balance must be repaid.

The Archers pulled out of the buyout program in late February, and plan to use the ICC money to raise their home instead of demolishing it, and their insurance money to make repairs. "We feel like we have more control over our project now," Archer said.

Tierney explained the project management costs. "CAT has risk and expense on any of its development projects. Prudently, our board requires that we include these costs in a project's budget before they authorize it."

Brown said he is disappointed that the Archers have decided to pull out of the program. "We hope they are not walking away from the best arrangement for their family. Everyone in our office is rooting for them." When asked about the cost to CCFR of the Archer's withdrawal, Brown said, "We do have a substantial investment in this project. However, the important thing is a successful recovery for the Archer family."