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Many forces unite to remake home green

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A blighted house on the southwest side of Highland Park received new life this week as volunteers turned the vacant, foreclosed ranch into an environmentally harmonious and affordable model that awaits a new family to call it home.

Nearly 40 volunteers teamed up Saturday to gut the home on Rosemary Road near Westridge Park and turn it into Lake County's second Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified home project.

Old drywall was torn out, carpeting pulled up, cabinets replaced, fixtures improved. The home's electrical and plumbing systems also were replaced. The new green features include an energy efficient reflective roof, low-flow water fixtures, high-efficiency mechanicals, porous driveway and sidewalks, low toxicity paints, efficient windows and all-natural spray-foam insulation.

Highland Park's community land trust bought the foreclosed home earlier this year to fix it up and sell it to a community member in need of an affordable home. The home, which has been vacant for nearly three years, won't be complete until July and a prospective buyer has not been selected.

The organization keeps a list of current Highland Park residents and seeks others who commute to town for work and who meet the affordable-housing guidelines. People interested in the affordable-housing program can apply by contacting the trust at (847) 681-8746. Priority is given to those who currently live or work in Highland Park.

"My favorite part of the job is at the closing when we turn these homes over to a family," said Rob Anthony, executive director of the Community Land Trust. "Some of them work in Highland Park and they've been commuting for an hour or more for the past 10 years and now they can finally work close to home."

Anthony said it was exciting to see a school teacher able to purchase a Highland Park townhome, one she couldn't have been able to buy without help from the affordable program.

"Houses like this are a win-win for the community," Anthony said. "Taking blighted properties and turning them into LEED-certified homes is really great."

The nonprofit trust retains ownership of the land under the home. Taking the land value out of the equation, the price stays affordable to more people. When the homeowner moves out, the home is sold back to the trust or can be sold to another person who is part of the affordable program.

The formula also dictates how much the home can later be sold for depending on a capped level of appreciation.

"(The idea is for the home to) always stay affordable for future generations," Anthony said.

The trust bought the Rosemary Road home with help from federal funds filtered through Lake County. Prospective buyers are allowed a maximum household income up to 80 percent of the area median income.

Anthony explained that a two-person family can earn up to \$48,000 to be eligible or up to \$60,000 for a four-person family.

Highland Park's Paint Jar donated two staff members for the project Saturday, Viccino's Pizza donated food for the volunteers, Abt Electronics provided discount appliances for the home and Highland Park's First Midwest bank offered the bridge loan financing at a prime rate to make the work possible.

The Highland Park Illinois Community Land Trust, which is soon to be renamed Community Partners for Affordable Housing, is a nonprofit organization that specializes in creating public-private partnerships to preserve and develop affordable housing for low- to moderate-income households who live and work in the community. The organization is the first community land trust in Illinois and receives national attention for being at the forefront of affordable housing.

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