

Opinion

Editorial: First Homes' roots take hold

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Post-Bulletin

On Sept. 27, 2001, a news release from First Homes announced that 68 families had purchased new homes through the affordable-housing initiative of the Rochester Area Foundation.

The program, which had been launched two years earlier in response to a severe shortage of affordable housing in Rochester and the surrounding area, was still in its infancy, and then-director Sean Allen noted that "there are hundreds more yet to be assisted through the program."

The goal, Allen explained, was to build homes for 875 families -- 500 single-family units and 375 rental townhomes.

In the six years that followed, the housing market in southeastern Minnesota changed rapidly, and First Homes adapted. In addition to building new homes and rental units, the organization began acquiring, restoring and selling previously neglected properties in the city core -- or tearing down homes that were beyond repair and starting over.

But the need for affordable housing in Rochester and the surrounding communities didn't change, and neither did the goal.

Officially, First Homes hit the 875 mark on Monday after completing the renovation of a two-story home at 1140 W. Center St. The hoopla wasn't exactly on par with an episode of "Extreme Makeover" -- perhaps because the overall task remains unfinished.

Newcomers to Rochester, especially immigrants, still face a shortage of affordable housing. Without the continuing efforts of First Homes and its partners, hard-working people with below-average incomes would have a hard time building a foundation for their future. For that reason, the march toward 900 homes and beyond already is under way.

Handing out accolades for such a successful program is difficult, simply because so many people and organizations have played critical roles, including The Mayo Foundation, the Rochester Area Foundation, lenders, builders and the residents, business and groups that thus far have donated \$14 million to the effort. In addition to Rochester, families in Byron, Dover, Grand Meadow, Hayfield, Kasson, Pine Island and Spring Valley have benefitted from First Homes.

There's no word yet on a new goal for First Homes, but given its track record, we certainly expect it to be high.