

First Homes at 875 and counting

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You can say there's no place like home. Rochester's First Homes has said it more than 875 times now.

In ceremonies on Monday, the affordable-housing initiative of the Rochester Area Foundation celebrated the opening of its ceremonial 875th residence, a rehabilitated two-story house at 1140 W. Center St. The tally meets a goal set in 1999, when First Homes was started.

"It's a major accomplishment, I think, in this community," said Al DeBoer, a Rochester businessman who helped start First Homes. A plaque on the front of the house identifies its standing as residence No. 875 -- though, in fact, there are now 880 First Homes dwellings -- and commemorates DeBoer's leadership.

Steve Thornton, executive director of the Rochester Area Foundation, said that, in the past, people were taking Mayo Clinic jobs and then resigning a few weeks later because they couldn't find permanent housing they could afford. It was regarded as a serious problem.

With help from the Greater Minnesota Housing fund, local leaders conceived what would be the state's largest-ever community-based assisted-housing program.

Mayo Foundation committed \$4 million, plus another \$3 million in matching grants. The Rochester Area Foundation pitched in \$1 million and raised more money.

The program started slowly, with only about 20 homebuyers in the first year taking advantage of the \$10,000 "gap loans" First Homes offered. That number increased to about 100 in the second year.

First Homes now develops and sells properties under what is called a Community Land Trust. In it, First Homes retains ownership of the land under a house and holds rights to one-half of the added value of a house as it appreciates.

In so doing, First Homes intends to keep its homes affordable for future buyers, said Sean Allen, who leads the initiative.

Interested in First Homes?

Here are some of the early steps to participate in First Homes:

- Contact a certified First Homes lender. He will help you determine whether you meet income requirements and qualify for a mortgage.
- Attend an orientation class.
- Identify the home you would like to purchase. Visit one of several First Homes-designated developments and meet with the builder to determine the home you want to purchase.
- Once you have selected a home, schedule a time to meet with the builder to sign a purchase agreement.
- Attend a Homestretch class.

For more information call 287-7117