St. Pete Catalyst: Elected officials from across Pinellas join forces for Habitat

Habitat for Humanity of Pinellas and West Pasco Counties hosted a unique volunteer build day Friday, as over 20 elected officials from across the county and political spectrum pitched in to build homes for three deserving families.

The number of local officials committing to volunteer surged as those who agreed to participate started a social media challenge in which they publicly asked their colleagues to join the cause. The bipartisan show of solidarity coincides with the affordable housing crisis that has gripped the area and dominated headlines. Following the on-site work throughout the morning, the extensive group of officials held an informal discussion on how Habitat is helping to alleviate the problem.

The public servants participating in the build day hailed from every corner of Pinellas County from Oldsmar to Gulfport. St. Petersburg City Council was well represented, as Councilmember Brandi Gabbard challenged three of her contemporaries to join her in a day of giving and discussion. Gabbard said she has volunteered with Habitat for many years, and the organization holds a special place in her heart.

Councilmember and mayoral candidate Robert Blackmon took part in the volunteer build day.

 I just really believe in the mission of homeownership and affordable homeownership and how it changes lives and communities, said Gabbard.

 We decided, hey, well all of those people we know and love, let s get them all together and put a little muscle behind what we say that we believe in. It s been a great opportunity to do that today.

The full list of elected officials who attended are as follows:

Florida Representative Michele Rayner, Florida Representative Linda Chaney, Pinellas County Property Appraiser Mike Twitty, Clearwater Vice Mayor Hoyt Hamilton, Clearwater Council Member Kathleen Beckman, Clearwater Councilmember David Albritton, Dunedin Mayor Julie Bujalski, Dunedin Vice Mayor Jeff Gow, Gulfport City Councilmember Paul Ray, Indian Rocks Beach Mayor Cookie Kennedy, Largo Mayor Woody Brown, Largo Commissioner Donna Holck, Largo Commissioner Michael Smith, Largo Commissioner Eric Gerard, Oldsmar Mayor Eric Seidel, St Pete Councilmember Robert Blackmon, St. Pete Councilmember Gina Driscoll, St Pete Councilmember Brandi Gabbard, St. Pete Council Chairman Ed Montanari, Pinellas School Board Member Dr. Nicole Carr, Pinellas School Board Member Caprice Edmond, Oldsmar Councilmember Dan Saracki, Pinellas County Clerk Ken Burke, Pinellas Park Mayor Sandra Bradbury, and Pinellas Park Councilmember Keith Sabiel.

The officials traded in their usual professional attire for work pants and bright blue Habitat hard hats and T-shirts most of which showed the effects of a morning of manual labor. They painted, spread mulch, and even laid sod on three separate homes in the Tellor Estates subdivision, where Habitat is in the process of building 75 homes. These homes represent a better future for 75 families and offer one answer on how to solve the affordable housing crisis.

 Our intervention is a permanent solution, said Sean King, Director of Government Relations and Advocacy for Habitat for Humanity. The homeowners that live here, they re not going to need another affordable rental again this is their home.

Mike Sutton, President and CEO of Habitat for Humanity of Pinellas and West Pasco Counties, thanked the City of Pinellas Park for its help in making the Tellor Estates development possible. He explained that the city eliminated some of the red tape involved in making these new homeowners dreams a reality, including a five-day turnaround on permits and reduced impact fees. He encouraged those representing other areas to do the same and pointed out how these projects are mutually beneficial.

 The tax contribution from this neighborhood is probably going to be about a quarter of a million dollars a year, said Sutton. When before, it was maybe 15 grand a year.

 At the end of the day, all of our staff here, all we want to do is serve more families and build more homes.

And build they have.

Habitat for Humanity of Pinellas and West Pasco Counties has now built 715 homes, with just six foreclosures. Its delinquency rate is only about 1.5%.

 You could put those against any bank, and they would say I d love to have those numbers,   said Sutton.

Sutton explained that out of 1,100 Habitat for Humanity affiliates in the country, the Pinellas and West Pasco chapter is ranked second for new home builds. To put it in a local perspective, Sutton said, our friends on the Hillsborough side will build about 15 homes this year, we will build 70.

The elected officials had an informal discussion on affordable housing and Habitat s role in addressing the issue over lunch.

The discussion on affordable housing and Habitat s role in addressing the problem was decidedly informal. The large group of elected officials sat close together in lawn chairs in the driveway of a home that would have otherwise been out of reach for the family that will soon occupy it. They listened, laughed, and shared ideas over a box lunch prepared by Pete and Shorty s. There were no partisan politics, just dirty work clothes and brainstorming ideas.

 I think having these conversations and getting everybody together when was the last time this kind of group was in a room together and not working on something else, asked King rhetorically. I ve heard from people throughout the day that it s good to be out here, it s good to be informal, and people have made some connections.

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Written by Mark Parker