

Historic housing development breaks ground in Jefferson County

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Speaking at the groundbreaking ceremony for Habitat for Humanity's Mason Street neighborhood, U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., promised to continue to make housing a priority at the federal level. (Christy Carley/Peninsula Daily News)



PORT HADLOCK — Hundreds gathered on a former airstrip in Port Hadlock to celebrate the groundbreaking for what will eventually become 138 permanent, affordable homes.

Wednesday's groundbreaking marked the first phase of the largest affordable housing project in East Jefferson County. Spearheaded by Habitat for Humanity, the Mason Street Neighborhood is an example of what can happen when community members team up with leaders at the county, state and federal levels.

Speakers included public officials, community leaders and Adrienne Goolsby, senior vice president of Habitat for Humanity International, who flew in from Atlanta.

"There's so much a spirit of community in the air," Goolsby said. "This is phenomenal."

In a shift from Habitat's usual model, the Mason Street development provides mixed-income housing. It will include homes available to households making anywhere from 40 percent to 150 percent of the area median income (AMI). About 55 percent of the homes will be available to households earning below 80 percent of the AMI, while the remaining 45 percent will serve those earning between 80 percent and 150 percent of AMI.

Through a partnership with Olympic Neighbors, two of the 138 homes will serve a total of 12 adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

Plans for the project also include an orchard, community garden and walking paths. While zoning in the area could technically allow for higher density, Habitat chose to make plans for a lower-density neighborhood to preserve green space and other amenities.

Phase one involves installing infrastructure, such as a sewer system, and constructing the first 32 homes, which are set to be completed in about 15 months. The entire project is expected to wrap up 2032. Habitat is currently taking applications from potential home buyers.

Years in the making

In November 2021, Siobhan Canty, the executive director of the Jefferson Community Foundation, got a call from a community member who had been working with a group that connected through the Housing Solutions Network.

While looking for properties and homes that could be transformed into affordable housing, the group came across the old airstrip. They envisioned a neighborhood for mixed-income levels that could serve the needs of working families who were being priced out of Jefferson County.

Canty connected the group with Jamie Maciejewski, the executive director of East Jefferson County's Habitat for Humanity. While Maciejewski put the wheels in motion for the development, the community foundation helped raise \$4.5 million to buy the property — a goal it met in just four months.

"None of us knew that this day was what we were working towards," Canty said to the crowd on Wednesday. "We just knew that we had to step up, get involved, and do whatever we could one step at a time."

Over time, organizations worked with local, state and federal leaders to fund the project.

U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., who also spoke at the gathering, helped secure \$3 million in congressionally directed spending for the area's \$35 million sewer system. Another \$3.4 million came from the American Rescue Plan.

"This transformational investment is what exactly America needs to be doing," Cantwell said in her speech. "Today we are putting this down payment in place for the future."

At the state level, Rep. Steve Tharinger, D-Port Townsend, helped secure another \$20 million to help with the sewer. Jefferson County District 2 Commissioner Heidi Eisenhour, who has lived in Port Hadlock since she was 10 years old, said she cried when she got the news.

"This is a momentous occasion for our community," Eisenhour said in a speech. "I feel nothing but joy and gratitude today."

A mounting crisis

The state Department of Commerce estimates that Jefferson County will need 3,985 new homes by 2044.

Scott Mauk, superintendent of the Chimacum School District, said families in the district often struggle to rent or buy homes in the area. The same goes for faculty and staff.

"Recruiting and retaining great people can be difficult due to the shortage and expense of housing," he said during a speech. "Many of our people commute from neighboring counties. I think at one point I had five counties people were commuting from, where housing is more plentiful."

Mauk also has watched students struggle with a lack of stable housing.

"Jefferson County has the second highest youth disengagement rate in Washington state," he said, referring to the percentage of young people neither working nor studying. "Many of our children live with food insecurity. There's mounting drug use and mental health challenges in adults and children. While people learn through moderate challenges and stress, children and adults who are overly stressed don't learn at all."

U.S. Rep. Emily Randall, D-Bremerton, has firsthand experience with housing insecurity. She said her parents defaulted on their home when she was a child.

"I grew up knowing that housing wasn't guaranteed for families," she said as she spoke at the event.

Randall emphasized that stable housing often is a precondition for meaningful community engagement.

"The ability to advocate for environmental protections, the ability to advocate for a more balanced tax code, the ability to advocate for so many things is out of reach for many people who don't have reliable housing and stability in their lives," she said. "It's hard to think about what else is out there beyond your walls if your walls are something you can't take for granted."

Maciejewski estimated that the new neighborhood will inject \$67 million into the local and regional economy while housing more than 200 members of the workforce.

The first infrastructure project for the development was awarded to a local business.

Nationwide problem, bipartisan attention

As she spoke with reporters, Cantwell emphasized that affordable housing is a problem nationwide. At the federal level, she said, support for affordable housing measures "is gaining momentum."

The scale of the housing problem means it's drawing attention – and collaboration – from both sides of the aisle.

An recent increase in the Low Income Housing Tax Credit received broad bipartisan support, as did the 21st Century ROAD to Housing Act, which passed on July 11.

“People realize (the housing crisis) is happening everywhere,” she said. “It’s not just happening in urban areas, it’s happening in rural communities too.”

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