

A place to call their own

A non-profit group that wants to build housing in Beaverton for young adults who are disabled gets a funding assistance from the city

By JAKE CARLO

Of the Times

BEAVERTON - Making a home in the world isn't easy for anyone, and it's even harder if you're building from the ground up.

But that is exactly the task being faced by a group of Washington County families who are trying help their children find that place to call home.

Members of Washington County Families For Independent Living are trying to create a place where young adults with a variety of developmental challenges can find their independence within reach of a few helping hands that will keep them standing on their own two feet.

This week, the non-profit organization came a little closer to realizing that goal. On Monday, the City Council set aside almost \$350,000 that will be used to purchase and improve a plot of ground where the group is hoping to build a new kind of housing project for developmentally disabled young adults.

The organization was formed about three years ago by a group of parents whose sons and daughters were in their 20s and participated in local programs such as the Special Olympics.

Most of the young people whose parents gravitated to the group have overcome various developmental delays to begin building lives outside the home, lives that included jobs and continuing education beyond the high school level. A more or less independent life was very nearly within their reach - so much so that the next logical step was to move out of their parents' homes.

That last step has proven to be a big one, however. Most of the jobs held by the young people don't pay much more than the minimum wage and most of them work part time. Their average monthly income is somewhere in the range of \$500 to \$700 a month. That puts all

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staff photo by Jaime Valdez

HEADING HOME - (from left to right) Barb Kragrud, Theresa White, Michael Curtis, Tiffany Bergreen, Melissa Terry and Tiffany Bombino take a stroll along Southwest Allen Boulevard in front of the future site of a

housing development their parents have been working hard to get on the drawing board. The project is intended to provide a place where kids who have overcome developmental delays can live independently.

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but the most substantially subsidized housing out of their reach.

Add to that the fact that many of the young adults would be looking for some help with the little details of daily life such as bookkeeping and preparing a square meal that would make an independent life possible apart from their families.

Looking around at the options available in the low-income housing market, none seemed to fit the bill. For several months, the group struggled just to figure out what kind of housing would, in fact, meet their children's needs.

About a year ago, Peggy Bergreen, joined the group, determined to find a solution to the problem for her daughter Heather, now 19 years old. Bergreen, now the president of the group, began searching for examples of unique living situations for developmentally disabled young people being created within low-income housing projects, but ran into the same problems. On top of everything else, the projects Bergreen looked at weren't always well taken care of, and didn't look very safe in some cases.

"Our kids want to live with their peers and not in a complex where they might be isolated, or . . . become victims in some ways," Bergreen said. "We wanted a place for them to be safe in and be able to live as independently as they can when we're not around. That's kind of the goal of the whole group, too, dealing with what going to

happen when we're not around."

Last January Bergreen attended a conference on low-income housing in Tigard and through that was introduced to an expert in low-income housing development who has gone on to become something between a knight in shining armor and Merlin the magician for the group.

Bill Haack has been working in low-income housing circles throughout the Western states since 1988. He moved to Oregon about a year ago to operate Tualatin Valley Housing Partners, a non-profit organization with Haack as the sole staff member responsible for coordinating the funding and design of low-income housing developments.

Haack met with the organization and agreed to from a partnership to pursue the group's dream. He helped Bergreen and the other parents involved in the group begin giving shape to what for years was just a basic need, to find a safe, comfortable place for the youths to live.

The organization's challenge presented itself to Haack not only as a worthy cause, but as an intriguing design problem as well.

"This is something I didn't realize, and part of why I'm taking this time with this project," to," Haack said. "It is highly likely that the people who move into this complex will live there their whole lives. And the reason is because there won't be another place for them to move."

It was clear that nothing in the cur-

rent market would do, and so Haack and the members of the group began looking for a location where they could start fresh.

In November, they met with Beaverton Mayor Rob Drake and city staff, trying to generate enthusiasm for the project and casting about for funding opportunities. Drake and others at the city saw an opportunity to channel \$343,000 in the Community Development Block Grant Program into a housing project that would fill what has been identified by housing experts as one of the most serious gaps in the county's housing market, said John Engel, the city's redevelopment manager.

The search for a suitable site began in earnest, and eventually two properties at the northeast corner of Southwest 141st Avenue and Allen Boulevard was settled on. The plot is centrally located near both public transportation and many of the service providers the families have been dealing with for years.

The council's action on Monday should put the property under Haack's control in short order, and now the next phase of the project can begin. Haack and the organization members

will seek donations matching the city's contribution next year. Following that, Haack will be working on obtaining low-interest loans to cover the balance of the project's cost, which all told could come in at close to \$1.5 million.

When completed, the project will house between about twenty individuals in single apartments that will probably have communal areas that will function like the kitchens and living rooms of a single home. The group plans to employ a single staff person to stay on hand to offer the basic kinds of support the children's need, and as an extra safety measure. Designers will work with the young people likely to be moving in to actually produce the project's plans.

And what do the young adults think of the idea? Frankly, they can't wait.

"I'm ready to get out of my parents' home," said Tiffany Bombino, 19, who is one of Heather Bergreen's best friends, and plans to move in along with Heather when the project is complete. As for what Heather, Tiffany and their friends will do once they get there, the answer is simple, and predictable from a group of high-energy youths: being with friends, staying up late, and of course, partying.



staff photo by Jaime Valdez

WELCOME HOME - (from left to right in rear) Melissa Terry, Tiffany Bombino, Michael Curtis, Heather Bergreen, Theresa White and (in front) Barb Kragrud hope to make a home for themselves away from their families, but not too far away. The land their parents and community developer Bill Haack have secured is centrally located in Beaverton and puts them within easy reach of other friends, family and service providers.