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Rock Hill offers hope to aspiring homeowners

Future of Arcade Mill site remains unclear

By Matt Garfield · The Herald

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Andy Burriss ✉ aburriss@heraldonline.com Houses under construction on Hagins St. in the Hagins-Fewell neighborhood in Rock Hill Wednesday.

Amid record declines in the national housing market, an affordable homes program in Rock Hill is gaining new momentum.

Families that have never owned homes soon will move into 14 houses nearing completion in the Hagins-Fewell and Flint Hill neighborhoods near downtown.

The Housing Development Corp. of Rock Hill hopes to ease challenges for aspiring homeowners — and help revitalize neighborhoods in the city’s aging urban core.

With prices ranging from the \$99,000s to \$110,000s, boosters say the homes will go to people who otherwise might not be able to afford them. Many will get \$10,000 for down payments and closing costs through a first-time homebuyers program.

“If a developer built this house, he’d have to charge \$140,000 to pay his employees,” said city director Ray Koterba, standing on the porch of a home going up on Lige Street. “We don’t have to do that. I don’t have to worry about profit.”

The corporation, connected to the city but overseen by a volunteer board, buys vacant land and hires contractors to put up homes, which are then made available to families that qualify based on incomes.

Future unclear for Arcade Mill

Progress hasn’t reached all areas. City officials still don’t know

when they'll be able to build homes at the site of the old Arcade Mill, now a grassy clearing in the heart of Hagins-Fewell.

Fire destroyed the mill in 1997. Debris from the old mill was finally cleared more than a year ago, but the city hasn't finished removing contaminants in the ground and streams.

Until that happens, the state Department of Health and Environmental Control says it won't sign off on new home construction. Koterba's outlook underscores the uncertainty clouding the future of the mill site.

"I'd like to be able to build there one day," he said. "And I hope we will. But I just don't know."

In the meantime, construction workers are busy at work around the perimeter of the mill property, where a row of homes is going up on Hagins Street.

"I've said on many occasions to some of our developer friends, 'What we really want is to build neighborhoods, not houses,'" Mayor Doug Echols said. "That's what we're doing here."

The homes are designed with energy-saving features — including recycled building materials and special foam insulation — aimed at earning "green" ratings from the U.S. Green Building Council. This would be a first for the corporation in its 20-year history.

City officials also believe it's the first affordable housing project in South Carolina to earn green-friendly certification, known as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED).

The features add about \$1,000 to the cost of the home, or \$6 a month, but officials say homeowners can expect to save as much as \$40 a month on utility bills.

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