

Quality housing uplifts families, city

Arthur Woodward
Guest essayist

October 25, 2005

A corporate executive recently questioned me about the effectiveness of the Habitat for Humanity home-ownership program. In terms of “bang for the buck” he speculated as to whether it would make more sense to invest in job training for the unemployed or mentoring programs for at-risk youth.

He had some valid points.

For the thousands who have volunteered over the past 20 years to build homes in Rochester’s most challenged neighborhoods, it is a satisfying experience. Taken on a purely emotional level, Habitat is successful. However, beyond the emotional and anecdotal, what are the quantifiable outcomes of the Habitat program? Is it truly successful in terms of family stability and achievement? What contribution has Habitat made to the economic well-being of our community?

These are exactly the questions we sought to answer. With support from the George and Anne Fisher Foundation, Flower City Habitat for Humanity engaged consultant Janet Nelson and her team OQL Solutions to quantify the economic contribution of our homeownership program to Rochester and the success of families who become Habitat homeowners.

Key to the study was identifying data sources that enabled the research team to compare “apples to apples.” This was no easy task and involved obtaining comparative data from various government sources as well as extensive data from Habitat. Also important was ensuring that the comparison population was equivalent to the Habitat population.

*Economic impact: Since its founding in 1984, Flower City Habitat has built or rehabilitated 140 homes, most of which were built in the last 10 years and all but one built in Rochester’s “crescent of poverty.” These homes have added \$5.6 million to the city’s tax base, and during the same period more than \$1.2 million has been paid in property taxes. Every 11 new Habitat homes add more than \$500,000 to the tax base annually.

Flower City Habitat has made a significant contribution to the revitalization of Rochester. Of the 701 homes built in the city in 1990-2000, 61 (11 percent) were Habitat homes.

Habitat homes have significantly impacted neighborhood stability and well-being. Habitat homes are assessed at more than twice the average city home on the same street (\$44,161 vs. \$21,547) and non-Habitat homes on a Habitat street will be assessed at least 8 percent higher than homes on the next nearest streets. Habitat families add stability to neighborhoods, with the average Habitat owner living in their home for 7.2 years as of 2005 and 97 percent still in their original Habitat home.

This contrasts with data from the Jay Orchard Street Area Neighborhood Association area, where 43 percent of renters rent their homes for less than one year. Sixty-three percent of Habitat owners participate in some kind of neighborhood watch program.

With no quick solutions to the problem of lead paint in the aging housing stock in the city, Habitat's homeownership program has removed 344 children from lead exposure and its negative economic effects in terms of school and health costs to the community.

*Educational impact: As noted earlier, Habitat homeowners are stable and their children do not change schools as frequently as do many low-income renters. Remarkably, 71 percent of children of Habitat homeowners graduate from high school and attend an institution of higher education. Of those who do not graduate, data indicate that the dropout rate is 46 percent lower in children of Habitat homeowners than those in similar geographies (8.3 percent vs. 13.5 percent). Of those who drop out, Habitat children are more likely to pursue GED than youth from non-Habitat homes.

*Implications and the way forward: While we can look with pride at what we have accomplished, it really is a drop in the bucket of what we could achieve given more resources. We are currently building nine or 10 homes a year. But just think what we could achieve if we built 20 homes per year.

Since we accept no government funding, Flower City Habitat relies on contributions and house sponsorships from the faith community, businesses, professional organizations, foundations, and individual donors. We offer tangible results for each donation: decent affordable housing for a low-income family and neighborhood improvement through homeownership.

Woodward is executive director, Flower City Habitat for Humanity

Reproduced with permission of the copywrite owner