MADE WITH LOVE AND TIME

The first owner-built houses at Village Fokai Bay in Wai'anae are almost finished

By Andrew Gezes 

On a hillside in Wai'anae with picturesque views of Fokai Bay, a dozen families have expended a lot of sweat building their own homes for more than a year. Maybe even some blood and tears, too.

These families, which include single mothers and some with very low incomes, have been working to build houses in a subdivision begun in the 1990s and aborted twice by separate developers due to financial trouble.

Now the last 10 homes in what started as a more than 480-home subdivision called Village Fokai Bay are nearing a halfway milestone for construction. Those last 10 homes are different because they are being built in part by the families that will own them. Previous Village Fokai Bay houses were built by developers.

Three teams of about a dozen families each are working on 35 houses. The first team of 12 is about four Please see WAIANAЕ, A3
Above, Kuo Kalolo Pattersen led a prayer at the site Wednesday during a groundbreaking. At top, a framed home from the Team 3 project overlooks Pokai Bay.

When local developer Richard Mew built about 400 homes before stopping in the midst of a housing market downturn in the later part of that decade, another local developer, Craig Watanabe of Mark Development, resurrected work in 2004 and produced 55 more homes before financial troubles stemming from the Great Recession led to foreclosure in 2011 on the last 70 lots along one mostly completed road.

Self-Help Housing, which has produced 655 homes in Hawaii over the last 54 years, also received $6.7 million from two multihomed nonprofits, Rural Community Assistance Corp. and the Housing Assistance Council, that helped make the Wai'anae project happen.

WAI'ANAEG

Continued from A1

weeks away from finishing, and a fourth team of 13 families participated in a ceremony last week to bless their progress.

Through the nonprofit Self-Help Housing Corp. of Hawaii, each family must contribute 320 man-hours of work per weekend. After paying for the lot, materials and professional assistance, they should have a $480,000 ocean-view home with three or four bedrooms that cost them $495,000. By comparison, the median sale price for existing homes on Oahu this year is $775,900.

"I would never be able to afford to buy a house without this program," Mau- Wee, a state worker and single mother, said two years ago at a blessing for the first three homes.

But progress hasn't been smooth or easy. Wan's team was expected to finish its homes in a year, and yet two years have gone by.

Much of the delay was an eight-month wait for building permits, according to Cintia Chay, Self-Help Housing's executive director.

Self-Help Housing, which helps participants obtain low-interest mortgage loans through a federal program, also reported frustratingly slow processing for home loans through the U.S. Department of Agriculture rural development program that provides mortgage interest rates between 1% and 3.25% with no down payment.

Because of the difficulties, the last of the 78 homes are projected to be finished in 2021 instead of this year.

Still, participants are grateful.

"It's helped me a lot," said Tracy Ho, a single mother of two children and a member of the fourth team who participated in last week's blessing.

The project technician at the Wai'anae Health Station in Kanoa said his monthly mortgage payment for the three-bedroom, two-bathroom house to be built by his group of families will be about $1,300 compared with $1,135 he now pays to rent a Makaihi townhouse.

Hoapapapio said Self-Help Housing's executive director, Cintia Chay, was among 900 applicants interviewed for the Wai'anae project.

Thao Kim Huu, Hawaii director for USDA Rural Development, noted that work between Self-Help Housing and the federal agency has been difficult sometimes with "light" before agreements, but he said they are pursuing a worthy goal of enabling homeownership for low-income families.

"This is a great project," he said at the blessing. "I congratulate you. You can make this dream come true."

At the Wai'anae project, 58 homes are for households with incomes no higher than 80% of the median for Honolulu, and 12 homes are for those earning no more than 50% of the median. These annual income limits for a family of four equate to $49,400 at the 80% level and $25,500 at the 50% level this year.

Inside the house, USDA Rural Development provided $30,000 grants for each home, Kim Huu said.

The Hawaii Housing Finance and Development Corp., a state agency that helps finance affordable housing, also lent Self-Help Housing $3 million to buy the property in 2013 for $4.4 million.

The subdivision dates back to the early 1990s.