Group rebuilding Keys after Irma

BY TIMOTHY O’HARA
Key West Citizen

A new Florida Keys nonprofit group that was started after Hurricane Irma has already purchased 16 properties targeted for worker housing and will break ground next week on its first housing project.

The Florida Keys Community Land Trust will place four single-family homes along Avenue D and E on Big Pine Key, which was one of the hardest-hit neighborhoods during Hurricane Irma. The stilted, 780-square-foot homes will be two-bedroom, one-bath units, said Marianne Cusato, who is overseeing the construction of the units on Big Pine Key.

The energy-efficient homes will be raised out of the flood plain and built to withstand Category 5 hurricane winds, Cusato said. The homes will be rented out at affordable rental levels. The homes are similar to ones built in Louisiana and Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina, said Cusato, and referred to them as Katrina Cottages. Cusato described the homes as kit houses that will be assembled on site, but without the need for a large crane or other heavy equipment. The units, called Keys Cottages, are constructed to help streamline the assembly process. The units were initially developed to be an alternative to Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers and can be used temporarily or permanently, Cusato said.

The founders of the group, Maggie and Richard Whitcomb, have donated $1 million to the trust and are working on securing another $1 million, Cusato said. In addition to the 16 parcels already purchased, the trust has three to four more properties under contract, Cusato said.

The Whitcombs, who live in Atlanta, have been coming to the Florida Keys for years and purchased a home on Big Pine Key prior to Hurricane Irma. They were so moved by the plight of Keys’ residents in the wake of the storm, they started the land trust.

The group has partnered with the Ocean Reef Community Foundation Fund, the Caldwell Banker Schmidt Charity Foundation and other groups, Monroe County Commissioner George Neugent said.

The group received accolades from Monroe County Commissioners at its monthly meeting on Wednesday. The commissioners spoke favorably of the group and how quickly it has raised money, purchased land and started projects. The commissioners asked representatives of its Land Authority to look at what the group has done and possibly model some of its efforts after the group’s efforts.

“This is the only way truly affordable housing is going to be built in the Keys,” Neugent told The Citizen after the meeting. “They are taking the profit motive out of it. It’s a philanthropic effort.”

Irma

Commissioner Heather Carruthers wants the county to work with the group to keep the units affordable in perpetuity.

The cottages on Big Pine Key are being developed with market rate Rate of Growth Ordinance (ROGO) units, but will be rented out at affordable prices to Keys workers and their families.

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