

5/4/06

Topic: Habitat for Humanity's Innovation Island

No preferential treatment, just good policy

I was saddened to read Gabe Lowe's Soapbox in the April 27 Coloradoan.

Lowe implies that Fort Collins city planners gave special consideration or gave Habitat for Humanity preferential treatment in our application for Innovation Island development at the corner of Taft Hill Road and West Harmony Road. Nothing could be further from the truth! In fact, not one penny of city money referred to by Lowe was used.

There is a prescribed process that every developer must follow. Habitat for Humanity followed that process to the letter. The land is zoned LMN, Low-density, Mixed-use Neighborhood. Multi-family residential is a permitted use.

Habitat submitted an attractive plan. We hired excellent land planning consultants, traffic and civil engineers, who designed a functional attractive development, not an unattractive "low-income project" as Lowe would lead you to believe.

Habitat families are decent, hard-working people. They are not given their homes. In addition to "sweat equity," they all must save for a down payment, pay a mortgage and property taxes. They attend mandatory homeownership training and are better prepared for home ownership than most first-time buyers. Habitat owners worked hard to achieve their goal of home ownership and are extremely proud to be homeowners.



Candace Mayo

Soapbox

They take good care of their homes. Fort Collins Habitat has not had one foreclosure, which is amazing considering the foreclosure rates in Colorado, currently highest in the United States.

We were thrilled when this parcel came on the market. It is an opportunity for infill development that the city has been advocating to prevent sprawl. We can now build housing that is closer in town. Although all facilities aren't within a 1.5-mile radius of services that Lowe feels is desirable, it's closer than other areas in which we've built, as indicated at the neighborhood meeting.

The city's latest "Priority Affordable Housing Needs and Strategies Report" shows that there is a dire need for housing affordable to families earning 35 percent to 50 percent of the area median income. These families work in retail and service industry jobs here in our community. Habitat is the only organization providing home ownership for this income range. Both city planning staffs and City Council have recognized the need for "affordable" or as I prefer to call it, "wage-appropriate" housing.

Lowe's comments tell me his real issue is that he's afraid that Habi-

tat Housing will affect his home's value. Those of us who work to advocate and provide affordable housing in our community are weary fighting NIMBY (not in my backyard) phenomenon where neighbors reject affordable housing. It's inappropriate to say they don't want "those people" in my neighborhood, so they claim traffic issues, overcrowding of the schools, impact to their home value — and, of course, preferential treatment. All these issues were investigated by the city and determined to be unfounded.

One wonders why, if Lowe is so concerned, he never signed in at the required public neighborhood meeting, never signed in to speak at the Planning and Zoning Board hearing or at the City Council appeal hearing. Why didn't Lowe come forward earlier?

Our vision for Fort Collins is that it is an inclusive community. We recognize that every resident has worth and can contribute to the greatness of our city. We do not discriminate because of a person's race, sex, religion or economic ability. Habitat families are "salt of the earth" people who are a credit to themselves and the city. I hope that once Innovation Island is built, Lowe will introduce himself to his neighbors, and maybe then, his fears will be abated.

Candace Mayo is executive director of Fort Collins Habitat for Humanity Inc.

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