

June 28, 2009

Dear Fellow Habitaters-

Your imagination does not deceive you and your memory is not playing tricks on you. We have had a lengthy hiatus (some cynics might say "welcome") since our last Habitat communication. Don't let the passage of time fool you into thinking nothing has transpired. On the contrary, there's been much work going on to determine where our formidable Habitat team will next put its talents to use.

So grab a coffee or cold drink and settle in for some background on what our options are going forward.

Our Situation

For the first time in seven summers we have no Habitat Blitz Build on the calendar.

Why? Well, to put it simply, we never appreciated how good we had it for so many years when our Sound Coalition partner First Church Congregational, Fairfield had MBI Inc. lined up to pay the construction costs of a new Habitat home each year.

Now the economic landscape for our Habitat projects has changed as it has for the rest of the world. MBI is no longer in a position to pay for the Sound Coalition homes. Habitat of Coastal Fairfield County requires a substantial portion of funding in advance for any new home starts. In past years due to MBI's extraordinary generosity we had funding in place in advance of the construction of our new homes with the exception of our most recent "Green" project on Helen Street.

For Helen Street the four partner churches in the Sound Coalition agreed to share the construction costs equally. Thanks to the generosity of WCC's Missions Board and our very successful March fund-raiser, we've paid down over 80% of WCC's portion of the cost of Helen Street.

The challenge before us is where we go with the tremendous combination of our skilled volunteers and highly motivated young people in our partnership with Wilton High's Habitat Club.

For the answer I turn to the greatest resource we have going for us: each of you.

You may hold the solution or have a suggestion how we can identify and/or fund some projects, even in this challenging business and economic environment.

What we have built over the seven years in terms of people and capabilities is too valuable to lose.

Here's a snapshot of where things stand.

Habitat for Humanity - Coastal Fairfield County

- Our Sound Coalition partnership has drifted apart. Some members (First Church, Fairfield and Greenfield Hills) are supporting a very worthy home repair/improvement initiative called "Rebuilding Together" (see below)
- One Sound Coalition partner, Monroe Congregational, still wants to work with Wilton on building projects
- For 2009 Habitat of CFC is committed to completing the six town home, twelve family condos in the historical preservation project on Williams Street. We've worked a few days there over the past 18 months. Its brick exterior and lack of any yards and landscaping does not lend itself to the type of work our legendary Wilton Swarm pulls off with grace and style. And Habitat of CFC needs to finish the 12 condos this year, homes for a substantial group of deserving families.
- On another front Habitat of CFC is actively negotiating with the City of Bridgeport to get title to several abandoned, burned out home-sites. Those properties are eyesores and degrade the surrounding property values, including some Habitat homeowners' places. The plan is to dismantle the homes or multi-family buildings and recycle the useful materials. Then the vacant properties will be titled to Habitat as future home-sites. Habitat of CFC knows Wilton wants to play a role in the "deconstruction" process.

But it may take months to get the projects to a stage where we can work on them, given the slow movement of the government wheels.

There's also a possibility of rehabilitating a Habitat home that has become vacant due to a divorce.

Habitat for Humanity - Danbury

I have reached out to this smaller Habitat affiliate and pitched the experienced workforce all of you represent.

Our skill level is definitely of interest to them. At this point the first available workday is December, though there may be other projects available sooner.

Next week we will send our two carpentry leaders, Ian and Dexter, for a recon visit and meeting with the head of construction in Danbury. Hopefully they'll scout out some Dunkin Donuts locations in the area.

Rebuilding Together - Stamford

- As noted two of our Sound Coalition partners started working with Rebuilding Together two years ago, the Stamford affiliate of a small national organization that has a "Christmas in April" mission for needy homeowners
- Rebuilding Together works on existing homes, assisting homeowners with repairs and painting, similar to what our Youth Mission groups do on their trips
- Rebuilding Together coordinates the projects, does the cost estimating and turns to the volunteer groups, often churches, to fund the construction materials ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars per project
- Rebuilding Together assumes the liability for the projects it manages, a major consideration for any group looking to do good in a litigious society
- I have reached out to the Stamford director to learn more about how we might work with the group

Habitat in Wilton/Lower Fairfield

- A dream at this stage, this could be a good use of our many hands, serving a deserving Wilton homeowner (or one in Norwalk, Easton, Redding or elsewhere) who needs some construction work done to maintain a home or add a ramp for a disabled resident
- WCC would need to work with Rebuilding Together to cover the liability and project coordination issues
- Through our Nancy Toll, I am in contact with the Mid-Fairfield County Service Agency, which identifies and screens needy families. The Agency is looking for projects for our team
- Likewise our WCC membership and Habitat team members may have some local projects to suggest, in which case we'd ask Rebuilding Together to work with us on the venture

In summary, what we need is the right project(s) for our team.

So give a thought to the following questions.

1. Do you know of any Wilton or area homeowners (or agencies that know them) who are in need of construction work, repairs or painting but are unable to pay outsiders to do the work?
2. Do you work for or know of any corporations or donors that might be willing to partner with us and donate funds for the construction of or repairs to a home, which we could carry out on their behalf and/or with their employees?

Thanks in advance for giving this some thought and coming forward with any suggestions or ideas.

Attending last Saturday's graduation of the Wilton High Class of 2009, I saw a dozen seniors who started working with us on Habitat as freshmen. They contributed to so many of our projects and it's a joy to see them head off to new lives outside of Wilton, armed with the gift of giving back through Habitat.

We simply have to keep our momentum going. The work we've done and the lives we've improved over the last seven years, including our own, are simply too worthy to let slip away.

Something will work out for us here. I am confident it will. And most likely it'll be several things.

Thank you, as always, for your continuing support of Habitat.

All the best, Jim

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