

Eagle County records small victories in affordable housing effort

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Earth-moving crews mobilized last fall at the 84-unit 6 West project in Edwards. The Town of Vail has purchased 23 deed-restricted units in the project and Eagle County has purchased 13 deed-restricted units. Locals say this project is an example of the public/private partnerships that are tackling the local housing need.

Daily file photo

EAGLE — When confronted with a big obstacle — a 14er to climb, a toddler-destroyed room to reorganize, a queue of emails that have gone unread during a three-week vacation — it’s easy to be paralyzed by the scope of the challenge.

That scenario could easily play out as Eagle County officials contemplate the valley’s employee housing needs.

It’s a decades-old — and well-documented — problem. Most recently, the Vail Valley Partnership’s 2018 workforce study showed 61 percent of the employees surveyed identified affordable housing as a “major frustration.” The 2018 Eagle River Valley Needs and Solution, compiled by Rees Consulting Inc. and Williford LLC, showed that 91 percent of the people surveyed reported the lack of available affordable housing as one of the most serious issues in the region. The report also showed that in 2018, an additional 2,780 units were needed to address housing deficiencies in the valley. By 2025, the study estimates there will be a need for 5,900 more housing units.

Addressing this need is a formidable challenge. But, as anyone who has summited a 14er will say, the way to climb a mountain is to start walking. The way to find more housing options is to start looking and keep working. And as the people most intimately involved in that effort can attest, while the valley’s housing issue isn’t going away, they successfully chipped at the problem in 2018.

“I feel like 2018 was a year when the leadership of Eagle County stepped up to the plate swinging,” Eagle County Housing Director Kim Bell Williams said. “They were really focused on what can we do to have the highest and best use of housing collaboratively.

“Thinking about the need to build 2,000-plus affordable housing units ... That’s an intimidating number,” Williams added, “but we are seeing little wins that are very important.”

SMALL WINS

From the purchase of deed-restricted units in larger projects to expanding its down payment assistance program, to inking a deal to build a 22-unit project in Eagle, the county recorded an active year in 2018.

“Public-private partnerships are really vital to us, because we can’t build all these housing projects on our own,” Williams said.

Partnership deals last year included the county purchase of 13 deed-restricted units at the 6West project in Edwards and a deal with Cassia (formerly known as Augustana Care) to build Two10 at Castle Peak — a 22-unit project that will initially function as local employee housing before transitioning to a senior citizen independent living center.

“We have had some incremental success,” Williams said, “but without a dedicated funding source, we can’t hit a home run like Miller Ranch.”

SETTING RECORDS

Along with projects and partnerships, one of the biggest programs offered through the county’s housing department is down payment assistance for locals who make enough money to afford a mortgage, but who don’t have the cash on hand for a down payment.

Both the Eagle County Loan Fund and the local administration of the Colorado Division of Housing down payment assistance programs had record years in 2018.

The county fund made 50 loans to Eagle County homebuyers in 2018, at a dollar volume of \$750,000. The majority of those home purchases were open market real estate. Last year the state fund made seven loans to Habitat for Humanity homebuyers at a dollar volume of \$105,000.

Additionally, the Valley Home Store presented five, free first-time homebuyer classes in 2018. Those classes drew nearly 90 participants.

As she looks to 2019, this year also promises some landmarks with construction starting on some big projects and other new housing units hitting the market. Williams said there will also be plenty of new partnership options to ponder.

“There is a lot of collaboration in our county. We have so many people participating in the effort to solve this problem,” Williams said. “That is something we should be proud of as a community. We are all working on this together.”