

Habitat for Humanity Project is Making Progress

By Lynn Freehill, Daily News Staff

St. Thomas – Habitat for Humanity’s first and only Virgin Islands chapter is stepping along in efforts to organize itself, but its work to build a house for a low-income local family is running behind the time frame members has hoped for.

Land-clearing has continued since May on the 4,000 square-foot donated Adele Gade lot where the group will construct its first house, but construction won’t begin before February – about two months behind the initial projection.

That doesn’t faze Adrian Bishop, the year-old group’s new executive director. Bishop, who worked until seven years ago for Manna In., an affordable housing developer in Washington, D.C., said he’s accustomed to the sometimes drawn-out process of drawing up designs, developing applications for housing and securing building permits.

Bishop spoke Wednesday from Habitat for Humanity’s recently donated office in Royal Dane Mall, where he will keep his part-time work schedule.

“We’ve probably taken two or three complete cars out of there, loads of tires and thousands of water bottles,” Bishop said. “The dumping over these has virtually stopped.”

The cleanup has been grueling and sometimes repulsive, but worth it, said Nicole Wheatley, a member of the St. Thomas Reformed Church senior youth group, which has several times sent about 20 students to the site.

“We’ve done so much stuff in other areas, like New York and the Dominican Republic, that it feels good to be able to do something here that you know is going to make a difference,” Wheatley said.

Stephanie Bourn of the Bourn Group architectural firm is drawing a design for the two-story, three-bedroom house. Before the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources can issue a building permit for the structure, it must receive Historic Preservation Commission approval.

Habitat for Humanity typically builds wood-frame houses, but this home will be a “vernacular, West Indian cottage” that incorporates the still-standing walls of a century-old home on the site, said local attorney Tom Bolt. Bolt was recently chosen to be the chapter’s new board president, replacing founding president Matt Allen, who moved off-island.

Applications for the housing will be made publicly available in the next few weeks. The chosen family must commit to “sweat equity,” with adults contributing a suggested 200 hours of labor to the home’s construction.

Habitat for Humanity provides families with no-interest loans on the houses, which are built with donated materials and labor. The organization has built and rehabilitated more than 150,000 homes internationally.

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