

# HOME *and* Real Estate

## A homecoming

### Program seeks to re-envision neighborhoods

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For The Dominion Post

“We are trying to increase home ownership by improving the affordability and quality of houses in the city of Morgantown.”

This has been the mission of the Morgantown Homecoming program - supported through Fairmont-Morgantown Housing Authorities - since it began in 2006, according to Christopher Eckhardt, sales and development coordinator.

And, over the past four years, the program has begun to affect a steady change in the landscape of the city, reversing a trend toward tenant housing, which has come to define most neighborhoods.

In particular, Eckhardt said, the program has focused its efforts on recapturing some of the older areas of Morgantown, like Greenmont, Wiles Hill and Woodburn.

“We really try to bring back a sense of community to these areas,” he said.

And since property is limited within Morgantown, the program’s mission is accomplished primarily through the purchase and rehabilitation of existing single-family homes. These houses are then sold on the open market with owner occupied deed restrictions to ensure long-term homeownership.

When selecting project houses, program officials help revitalize entire neighborhoods by targeting “distressed properties” for renovation, Eckhardt said, which, in addition to being eyesores, can devalue surrounding properties.

“We’ve had a lot of success in the past, and we’re working on a couple big deals right now that could really improve the landscape of those main neighborhoods,” he said.

Once purchased, an experienced in-

house construction crew works on the home. Among other improvements, the team can handle insulation, roofing, electrical, plumbing, and heating, ventilation and air-conditioning systems. Renovation work on these houses can range from general improvements to completely gutting and rebuilding the entire structure, said Ken Fletcher, with the housing authority’s construction administration.

“It depends on the condition of the house when we purchase it,” said Fletcher, who oversees all new rehab and construction projects through the program. “We’ve done practically everything to some of them.”

Some new houses have even been built from the ground up, on in-fill lots through the Morgantown Homecoming program. In fact, Fletcher said his crew is currently in the process of constructing a new, energy efficient house, which will be Energy Star-rated and feature all Energy Star appliances.

After each project is completed, Eckhardt said a “drastic change” can be seen in both the project house and surrounding neighborhood as a result of their efforts.

Eckhardt said performing the majority of renovation work in-house allows them to better control costs, which allows the program to cater to low- and moderate-income families.

“Most of the homes sell quickly due to being attractively priced,” Eckhardt said. “And, of course, our quality, we think, speaks for itself.”

Since the program was founded, a total of 17 homes have been completely renovated and sold within the city of Morgantown.

Brian Persinger and his wife, Vickie Crowder, were able to find their ideal home after learning about the Morgantown Homecoming program through word-of-mouth. Interested in purchasing within the city, Persinger said they researched available homes through the program and found what they were looking for with a completely renovated early 1920s house in Greenmont, which they closed on in October 2009.

“The house was 90-percent redone and



Morgantown Homecoming renovation at 222 Cherry St., in Greenmont.

it was ready to move into as soon as we purchased it,” he said. “And that was one of the big selling points, because we wanted something we could move right in to.”

Persinger said the house featured a brand new kitchen with all new appliances, new siding, new bathroom, new windows and walls, and new electrical wiring, among other improvements and updates.

Persinger and Crowder also received home ownership counseling from the Fairmont-Morgantown Housing Authorities and received a special discount on their home inspection by purchasing through the program.

“The counselors had lots of information and programs available to us, and those are things that I don’t think you would get if you were purchasing through a regular real estate agent,” he said.

As with renovation work, when it comes to selling project homes, it’s primarily done in-house Eckhardt explained, with Morgantown Homecoming partnering up with the realty community for assistance in finding potential buyers. They also advertise in *The Dominion Post* and local real estate magazines.

And while the program does receive some local and state assistance, Eckhardt said funding for projects comes from home sales, which goes right back into each new project.

“We are here to invest in Morgantown and we’re going to continue to do it by increasing the quality and affordability of housing,” he said.