

Helping hand for homebuyers

BY MARTY HOPE, CALGARY HERALD JUNE 26, 2010

A unique housing program is making homeownership a reality for working Calgarians who are struggling financially to put a roof over their heads.

Trico Homes and the Calgary Habitat for Humanity Society have partnered to develop PEAK (Public, Essential And Key workers) -- a program that aims to make homeownership attainable.

Trico has made 65 homes in its 112-unit Milano development in the northwest community of Panorama Hills available to PEAK.

To date, 56 applications have been received.

Of that total, 49 have been pre-approved for a mortgage, says Richard Gottfried, vice-president of corporate communications for Trico Homes.

Of the 49 new owners, 24 will live in two-bedroom apartments, with another 10 in one-bedroom units. Another 15 will be living in townhouses.

"We're off to a very auspicious start," says Gottfried, adding that the rollout of PEAK took 3 1/2 years. "We expect to be able to match up all 65 applicants with their homes by the end of September."

The program has been successful in placing middle-income families into home ownership who might not otherwise be able to afford it, says Lisa Clement, manager of family services for Habitat for Humanity-Calgary.

"This is a unique program for Habitat, but it fits with our mission to build affordable housing," she says. "This has been one of the first opportunities for us to take on attainable home ownership."

PEAK's focus is on employed people in "essential services" who pay their bills but are finding it difficult to put money aside to own a home, says Gottfried.

PEAK owners might include people in the early part of their careers -- everyone from firefighters to paramedics, health-care workers, teachers, bus drivers and air traffic controllers.

"It's about home ownership," he says. "PEAK is about attainable housing -- it's not social housing and it's not affordable housing."

Homes must be used as principal residences. If sold after one year, owners will get only 50 per cent of earned equity and 80 per cent after two years.

"This is to prevent any flipping," says Gotfried.

Of 91 units released to the market in phases one and two, 49 have been sold to the general public, with a further 26 to be "matched" with approved PEAK applicants during the coming two weeks -- or more than 80 per cent of the 112-unit total.

Release of the third and subsequent phases to both the general market and PEAK applicants will take place over the coming months as more applicants move through the approval process and into mortgage pre-approval, says Gotfried.

The PEAK program was established with the help of Alberta Housing and Urban Affairs, which provided cash to help owners buy their homes, as well as subsidize some of the mortgage payments.

PEAK works by lowering the qualifying income by \$15,000 or more on the market value of the homes.

Financial qualifications must still be met and mortgages approved. The homes must be for principal residences and not used as investment or revenue properties -- and eligibility depends not only on income, but also need as well as financial and credit worthiness.

Habitat for Humanity does all the screening of applicants.

All homes are priced at market values, but those involved in the PEAK portion get a break on the qualifying aspect.

"We thought with that number, we would get a proper integration of owners," says Gotfried. "This is YIMBY at work -- 'yes, in my backyard'."

The apartments and townhouses that have been designated part of the PEAK program are each finished with standard specifications, says Gotfried.

The Coretto show home, a three-bedroom model measuring 1,225 square feet, is typical of the townhouses involved.

From the front entry, laminate flooring is used in a hallway and throughout the main level of the home.

The hallway extends past the stairway to the second floor and the garage entry to the main living area of the home and opens on to the Ushaped kitchen with laminate countertops, maple cabinets and black appliances.

The dining area has a sliding door to the rear deck. Opposite the kitchen is the powder room.

Adjacent to the kitchen is the great room, which has an electric fireplace tucked neatly into a corner.

The second floor of the home is finished with carpet, except for the two baths that have tile floors.

At the back of the home are a pair of smaller bedrooms, one with a walk-in closet.

The master suite is at the front and has a walk-in closet and ensuite with tub/shower.

The U-shaped kitchen, right in photo, has laminate countertops, maple cabinets and black appliances. It is next to the dining area.

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

PROJECT: Milano. Sixty-five of the 112 units are under the PEAK program, which provides a reduced level of mortgage qualification. All are priced at market levels.

DEVELOPER: Trico Homes.

AREA: Panorama Hills in northwest Calgary.

DIRECTIONS: From Country Hills Boulevard, turn north on Harvest Hills Boulevard, left on Panatella Boulevard and right on Panatella Hill.

HOURS: The show suites are open from 2 to 8 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, and from noon to 5 p.m. weekends and holidays. They are closed Fridays.

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