

Donated home is almost ready

By ROY JACOBSON South Whidbey Record Reporter

SCATCHET HEAD — When you're battling the high cost of housing, there's nothing like a freebie. "How often does someone donate a house?" asked Sandra Stipe, executive director of Saratoga Community Housing. "We hope it happens a lot." And once you get a free house, there's nothing like some free labor to spruce it up. "These people are great," Stipe said, nodding toward the 19 volunteers from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island in Oak Harbor swarming over the cottage at Scatchet Head last Saturday. "Look at those guys work."

The organization's aim is to provide affordable housing for lower- to moderate income residents of Island County.

Formed in June 2006, SCH received nonprofit status a year ago, and has been busy ever since organizing, acquiring land and raising money. The organization now has 130 members, Stipe said Monday. More than 20 people are taking classes to learn how to become eligible to purchase a home in the program. "Community land trusts have worked on Martha's Vineyard," Stipe said. "They've worked on Orcas Island, Bainbridge Island and Vashon Island. "We're just getting started here," she added. "But we hit the ground running."

Saratoga Community Housing holds its land in a trust forever. For a qualified buyer, the price of the land is subtracted from the cost of the mortgage on the house that sits on it, a significant reduction. Potential buyers of Saratoga Community Housing properties must have an annual income of not more than \$55,000 for a family of three, or \$43,000 for a single person, Stipe said. She said housing prices on South Whidbey are rapidly becoming out of range for most working people, young families and seniors on fixed incomes. In the second quarter of this year, 45 houses here sold for a median price of \$468,000. As for rents, she said you'd easily pay \$1,200 a month for a two- or three-bedroom house on the South End. "We're looking to put people in houses with mortgages of less than \$1,000 a month," Stipe said. "And we only do conventional loans, none of that weird stuff."

"We're talking about working class people, wage earners," Stipe added. "We're talking about retail clerks, bank tellers, school teachers, police officers." Stipe said studies have shown that homeowners are more involved than renters in their communities. "If there's no hope in owning a home, why are you going to stay here?" she said. "I'll be able to rent a home until I die' — that's not the American dream." Habitat for Humanity, a nationwide program to provide affordable dwellings, has built three houses on Saratoga Community Housing land in Island County, including one in Greenbank.

The Scatchet Head cottage is the first existing house donated to the nonprofit. Built in 1982 by their son, Mike, the two-bedroom house belonged to Thomas and Jacqueline Page, who lived in it for years. At one point, Thomas Page's cousin, Nancy Nordhoff of Langley bought it to provide money for the Pages to travel. Jacqueline Page died in 2000, and Thomas Page, now 96, has moved in with his son's family in Clinton. Nordhoff is a member of Saratoga Community Housing, and she and the Page family decided together to donate the house. "I'm really concerned about the slow movement to achieve affordable housing in the South End," Nordhoff said Monday. "It felt good. I just hope this sets an example." "My folks



Navy Chief Petty Officer Rusty Vonqueruer, one of 19 volunteers from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, helps paint a Scatchet Head cottage recently donated to Saratoga Community Housing for its Community Land Trust program.

got their money's worth out of it," Mike Page said Monday. "It's something we wanted to do for the memory of mom and dad; pass it on to somebody who has a need for it."

Stipe said the likely new owner of the house, once the application process is completed, will be a young woman who works for the South Whidbey parks district. She grew up in the neighborhood and knows the Pages, who asked Saratoga Community Housing to give her first crack at the property.

The Navy volunteers giving the house a polish were part of a group of 70 who fanned out across the island on a sunny Saturday to do good works. At Scatchet Head, they painted inside and out, stained the deck, replaced countertops, swapped out a stove and hot water heater and did yard work. "The community gives a lot to us," said Chief Petty Officer Justin Ewing as he spread blue-gray paint on a piece of exterior trim. "This is our chance to give back, to say thank you for your support." "For all of us, it feels really good to come out and help," Chief Petty Officer Tye Anderson added. The Navy contingent was joined by other volunteers, including four students from South Whidbey High School and Bayview School. "This is a community effort," said Stipe as she handed out brushes. "If you walk by, we'll put you to work."

Stipe said Saratoga Community Housing is in the process of acquiring three building lots in Oak Harbor, three in Freeland and a couple in Coupeville, and is looking for property in Langley. And she'd welcome more donations of existing houses. She said urban locations are best for the nonprofit's program, because of the availability of services. "When it comes to volunteering, you can't beat this island," Stipe said. "But we still need money."

To donate money, goods or property, to join Saratoga Community Housing or to become a volunteer, call 360-331-4248 or visit www.saratogacommunityhousing.org

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