

## Land trust could break ground on first projects within year

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By: Peter Segall



The Bakersfield Community Land Trust could break ground on its first affordable housing units within the year with seven sites already identified for development.

Speaking to the trust's board of directors Wednesday, Self Help Enterprises Vice President Betsy McGovern-Garcia said staff with the Visalia-based nonprofit had toured Bakersfield last week, visiting 20 city-owned lots where affordable housing could be placed. Seven of them could see development within the year, McGovern-Garcia said.

"Six months would be aggressive, but that would be our hope," she said.

That's because Self Help Enterprises already has plans drawn up for affordable housing units it's developed in other locations around the Central Valley. Self Help was recently hired by the city of Bakersfield to manage its land trust, through which it hopes to develop permanently affordable housing.

Community Land Trusts are a model of housing ownership that separates ownership of the home from the land it sits on. The land is typically owned by a nonprofit, which leases land to homeowners under 99-year agreements.

The idea is that by splitting the land from the building, the amount a home can increase in value is limited, thereby keeping the property affordable into the future. McGovern-Garcia said Self Help was also working with the cities of Fresno and Modesto on their own community land trusts.

Bakersfield's trust is still in its early form, and will likely change over the years as the organization looks at additional ways to help people into housing, said Ward 2 Councilman Andrae Gonzales, who chairs the trust's board.

"I think over time the model will probably grow and evolve," Gonzales said after the meeting. "I think there's a lot of different concepts out there and interesting ways and strategies in which land trusts have been helpful for communities."

For now, the Bakersfield trust is going to focus on homes that are owned, rather than rented, and will require the owner to live in them.

McGovern-Garcia said when she and her team initially came to Bakersfield they had an eye toward increasing housing density, but after looking at some of the neighborhoods with potential development sites they pulled back from that idea.

"Any time we go into a neighborhood, we look at everything that's around us," McGovern-Garcia said. "We look at circulation patterns, we look at development patterns, intensity of uses, all of those things, and we try to recommend something that will fit well in the neighborhood."

When board member and Ward 4 City Councilman Bruce Freeman asked if SHE could still look at increasing density, even while keeping mostly single-family homes, McGovern-Garcia said it was possible but part of Self Help's affordability came from already having plans drawn up.

If Self Help were to develop a site-specific plan to increase density, that could require additional costs such as hiring an architect. McGovern-Garcia said that was something the trust could look into in the future, but for the next several years she recommended focusing on easy-to-develop projects.

The trust is not yet fully independent of the city. It's now its own corporation but it's still awaiting confirmation of nonprofit status from the IRS, Gonzales said.

"This organization will take some time to really develop, I'm talking a number of years before we're well-positioned financially to be running independent, like earnestly, independently of the city," Gonzales said. "My hope is that, yes, we will have some initial homes that are built out sooner than later so that we can get more families into home ownership and we could have some early successes. I think it's really important for us to demonstrate to the broader community what the land trust is and the benefits."