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Families move into land trust homes with more on the way, officials say

March 11, 2026
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A set of keys to one of the Bakersfield Community Land Trust's homes was handed over Wednesday morning in a ceremony celebrating the newest residents in an ambitious affordable housing venture.

The Bakersfield City Council voted to create the trust in 2023 and last year the organization was spun off into its own largely independent nonprofit run by Visalia-based Self-Help Enterprises.

Ward 2 City Councilman Andrae Gonzales, who chairs the city land trust committee and was an initial backer of the project, called Wednesday's ceremony historic in nature.

"We're at the point where the rubber meets the road," Gonzales told The Californian Wednesday afternoon.

Community land trusts have grown in popularity over the last decade as cities across the nation grapple with continually rising home prices, often squeezing out low- and middle-income workers.

Land trusts are an alternative model of homeownership separating ownership of the land from the home built on it.

The land is held by a trust and leased to the homeowner, typically for 99 years or more, with the goal of limiting how much the home can increase in value.

Potential homeowners had to meet several requirements, including being at or below 80% of the area's median income and being able to qualify for at least a \$110,000 loan from a third-party lender.

Homes were awarded to applicants chosen in a lottery in September.

The trust hasn't released the names of the new homeowners, but Gonzales said the first person to move into a land trust home was a single mother and on Wednesday, keys were handed to a young couple who planned to start a family.

The trust currently has 14 properties in Bakersfield, according to its website. The first three homes were purchased from a private developer and sit within a larger new development in southwest Bakersfield.

But last August the trust broke ground on a vacant lot at South Owens Street at Virginia Avenue, which sits directly across from Historic Union Cemetery. There the trust will construct two new homes.

The city has already transferred several vacant lots to the trust and BCLT is looking at acquiring and developing new properties in the future.

The city is still contributing some funding to the trust, including hiring Self-Help Enterprises, legal and insurance costs, Gonzales said, roughly \$156,000 in this year's budget.

Gonzales said he would request at least a portion of that to keep the trust running but noted the goal was to have Bakersfield's land trust become completely autonomous.

"These families are stepping into homes built with intention, not only for today's homeowners, but for the generations who will follow," said Betsy McGovern-Garcia, SHE's vice president and executive director of the BCLT.

"The community land trust model allows us to safeguard affordability while giving families the foundation to build wealth and stability," she said.