



Mike Mitchell, CEO of Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake, in the 2400 block of Jefferson St. where Habitat has a dozen houses. Former President Jimmy Carter will visit 2416 Jefferson St. during his annual Habitat work project week in October. (Baltimore Sun photo by Kim Hairston / August 25, 2010)

Baltimore Habitat affiliate lands a VIP volunteer

The Interview: Mike Mitchell, CEO of Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake

By Jamie Smith Hopkins, The Baltimore Sun
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Habitat for Humanity needs lots of help to build affordable homes for lower-income residents, but one particular volunteer is especially prized.

Every year, former President Jimmy Carter dons a tool belt and joins construction efforts in a handful of communities for a week — and helps raise the profile of the international Christian charity. Every Habitat affiliate wants to be picked.

This year, he's spending a day of his annual "work project" week in Baltimore and Annapolis, and leaders from the Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake are thrilled. Mike Mitchell, Chief Executive Officer of the Habitat affiliate, hopes Carter's visit, planned for Oct. 5, will bolster fundraising efforts and morale.

Mitchell chatted with The Baltimore Sun recently about the presidential factor, the charity's pace of homebuilding and whether the economic downturn has any silver linings for affordable-housing builders.

Question: How did Habitat for Humanity International, Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, choose the cities they will be working in this year?

Answer: What they wanted to focus on this year was this issue of neighborhood revitalization, this idea of rebuilding communities. ... Habitats are doing more and more of that around the country.

People should be excited that the president, the former president, who's often seen on television promoting democracy in places like Africa, the Middle East, has decided to come to Baltimore to promote a more democratic society by ensuring that everyone can have a simple, decent home.

Q: This isn't the first time Carter will be in Baltimore for a work project, is it?

A: The last time he came was in 1992, and he visited Sandtown Habitat for Humanity, which was a great visit, I understand, and still talked about.

Q: What does his participation mean for you?

A: It does three things. The first thing is that it helps draw attention to ... the need for decent housing. The second is, because [of] the president's reputation as a humanitarian, it generates interest for people to come out and volunteer, both that week and in a broader sense on an ongoing basis. And ... it draws resources to the affiliate.

Q: How much money do you think you will raise as a result of his visit?

A: We have raised \$758,000. ... Our original goal was \$750 [thousand] — we've now surpassed that goal and we are now stretching it out to \$1 million.

Q: Companies sponsor the work project, allowing their employees to participate while the former president is in town. Are you raising funds in other ways as well?

A: A number of different companies have made commitments. And then we're raising money through individuals. ... They can actually get sponsors themselves to volunteer, so in the same way someone would volunteer for a breast cancer walk, they can volunteer by getting their friends and family to contribute for them to come out.

Q: How much does a would-be volunteer need to raise?

A: We're asking volunteers who are going to work the day of the Carter work project to raise \$1,000. If it's any other day in the week, we're asking them to raise \$500.

We've never done this before, where we've asked volunteers to raise money in this way. We thought given the state of the corporate economy that it might be a creative way for individuals to participate.

Q: Will both Carter and his wife work on Habitat homes while they're in town?

A: It will be both. In fact, Jimmy Carter's son will be with us for the whole week.

Q: What will Carter do on Oct. 5?

A: His visit to Annapolis is just to visit — he's going to tour the site. His building will actually be in East Baltimore, and he'll be there for about two hours.

Q: What will you be building that day?

A: We're going to be working on 10 houses in Annapolis — there will be 10 brand new homes that will be under construction. And it will be 10 renovations in East Baltimore.

Q: It's been a rough several years for most homebuilders. How has the economic climate affected your work?

A: We have a line of buyers, unlike other builders. In fact, The Wall Street Journal just named Habitat the eighth largest builder in the United States for 2009. Obviously, times are difficult. But we believe in the justice of our mission, and that commitment to that mission is drawing the attention of individuals and companies.

Q: You offer no-interest mortgages to your buyers. Where does the money for those loans come from? Did the credit crunch limit your options?

A: Because the money comes from donors, such as sponsors for the Jimmy Carter work project ... we haven't been negatively affected as much as we might be. ... Now, in terms of our ability to raise money, like any nonprofit, it remains a challenge. But this year, we'll complete more than 40 homes.

Q: How does that compare with previous years?

A: It's significantly more. In prior years, Anne Arundel and Chesapeake Habitat together were producing around 30 homes. [The two merged to become Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake last year.] ... So this year we will do 10 more.

Q: Are there any affordable-housing upsides to the housing downturn and recession?

A: Some people might tell you that it's great because property is now cheaper, so solely from a Habitat perspective, we've probably been able to acquire more, but across the board from a policy standpoint, I don't think there's any sort of benefit. I think it's a tragedy for middle-class neighborhoods that face foreclosures. It's been a tragedy for lower-income neighborhoods that have had an increase in foreclosures and a more desperate need for revitalization.

Q: How has your funding been affected by the economic upheaval?

A: We're holding our own. I would say that if we were in a better economy, we'd probably be able to raise 15 to 20 percent more money. ... In the past, you might go to 10 companies and get one donation, whereas now you go to 20 companies and get one donation.

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To volunteer:

If you'd like to volunteer with Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake during the week of Oct. 4 to 9, you'll need sponsors. Volunteers who want to work Oct. 5, the day former President Jimmy Carter will be in town, must raise \$1,000. Those working other days in the week are asked to raise \$500.

The fundraising deadline is Sept. 10.

Details can be found at habitatchesapeake.org/cartervolunteer.