

Trust marks anniversary

Clarke Land group

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For 10 years, Athens Land Trust has pursued two seemingly contradictory missions: providing affordable housing, and protecting rural land and green space.

Both are tied together by the methods the land trust uses, and by its philosophy.

"We feel that land is a community resource," land trust Development Director Nancy Stangle said.

Unique among the many local nonprofit agencies devoted to affordable housing or land preservation, Athens Land Trust works to permanently provide affordable housing by buying and fixing up houses in blighted neighborhoods, then reducing the price by selling the house while keeping the land in trust; and likewise fights sprawl by buying the development rights of rural farms or undeveloped areas.

The trust will mark its anniversary from 3-5 p.m. Sunday in the Classic Center, with music, food, a raffle and the election of new board members, as supporters look back on their accomplishments.

While Stangle and Housing Projects Director Heather Benham said they couldn't pick out their finest accomplishment, the trust has done much while working with partners such as the East Athens and Hancock Community development corporations, the Athens Housing Authority, and local and state governments since its work began in earnest in 1997.

Ground is expected to be broken soon on its most ambitious project, Fourth Street Village, a 120-unit residential complex where most of the apartments are reserved for people making less than 50 percent of the Athens median income, or about \$27,000 a year for a family of four.

On a smaller scale, Athens Land Trust has built or renovated seven houses in the East Athens, Rocksprings and Brooklyn neighborhoods, and hopes to finish seven more within the next year. It also participated in the Hands-on Athens program that fixed up an additional 250 houses. Combined with other improvements like community gardens, the increase in home ownership will help reduce crime and stabilize those areas, Benham said.

Athens Land Trust houses sell for \$50,000 to \$75,000, putting it within the range for low-income Athenians, Benham said.

"That helps the neighborhood in the long run because a homeowner is in that house," she said.

Stanelle Drive resident Angela Johnson said the land trust helped her escape from rented houses where she was frequently burglarized and her 9-year-old son suffered asthma attacks from mildew. Her new house, which she bought in August after a year of credit counseling, has hardwood floors and allergen-free paint, she said.

"Since we moved in this house, he really hasn't had any problems," she said.

The land trust also has bought or is close to buying easements on two farms in Oconee County and another in Clarke County, along with two parcels of open space that now are parks. It helped write the proposal for the county's green space program, and convinced commissioners and voters to spend \$2.5 million in sales tax money over the next six years to buy green space.

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