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Lottery picks buyers of below-market-priced housing in Philipstown

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PHILIPSTOWN - Ryan Van Tassel, 2, got some chocolate-covered cookies yesterday and lots of friendly attention.

His mom, Kristin Van Tassel, got much more. She was number one in a housing lottery that gave her the chance to purchase a brand-new, two-bedroom, two-and-a-half bath townhouse valued at \$400,000 for \$285,000.

Fifty-eight prospective homebuyers competed for 10 below-market-priced townhouses in the Quarry Pond development on Route 9 in the North Highlands section of Philipstown.

The nonprofit group, Community Housing Innovations, conducted the drawing at Philipstown Town Hall to determine who would be able to purchase the new homes. The lottery featured a preference system that awarded four points for volunteer firefighters, police officers and emergency responders; three points for town or village workers; two points for teachers and school district staffers; and one point for town residents.

To qualify, families must also earn less than \$100,000 a year.

"If it wasn't for this, we would be moving out of this town," Van Tassel said, citing high property taxes and housing costs. She is a stay-at-home mother while her husband, John, runs a contracting business, J.V. Construction. Both are lifelong Philipstown residents, Haldane High School graduates and volunteers with the North Highlands fire company. She is the department's secretary-treasurer and a 15-year member.

When she heard her name called first yesterday, she shouted joyfully and quickly sent her husband a text message.

The couple has been living in a home in North Highlands, but paying \$14,000 a year in property taxes has become too much for them, she said. The annual taxes on the townhouse are expected to be \$3,600 before any exemptions, and the purchase price will allow her to remain home. The couple also has an older son, Kevin, 5.

Adjacent to these townhouses are 68 luxury ones, Glassbury Court at Cold Spring, for adults 55 and older.

When built, these will feature amenities such as cherry and maple cabinets and main-level master suites. They are expected to sell for at least \$500,000.

Developer Wilder Balter Partners of Elmsford designed the project with eco-friendly construction. It is one of the first communities in the Hudson Valley with Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, Green Building Rating and Energy Star construction. and as such is expected to save homeowners 30 percent on energy costs and also reduce water consumption.

The Van Tassels hope to live near another firefighter, Nick Budney, a New York City police officer and five-year North Highlands corps member. He is living with his parents, but is engaged to marry Claudia Dellarmi, a hotel manager who has lived in Cold Spring for 12 years.

"There is no way we'd be staying in town if we didn't get this," said Budney, whose family has lived in Philipstown for generations and whose great-aunt, Betty Budney, is a Philipstown councilwoman and whose uncle is Supervisor William Mazzuca.

Though lottery winners could get only 10 of these homes, nearly 60 names were chosen yesterday in case the families are unable to close on the sale by summer 2009, said Alexander Roberts, executive director of Community Housing.

Buying a home "brings a lot of joy and responsibility," he told the group.

"And some pain," added developer William Balter, remarking that his firm worked on the project for five years and others tried before him for at least a decade.

His efforts, he said, worked out because of a public-private partnership.

Mazzuca said the town and Wilder Balter shared common goals and worked with a community committee.

"We wanted to provide housing for seniors and moderately priced affordable housing for our first responders and town workers, and also be energy efficient," Mazzuca said. "This is a success."

The 80-acre site had been an active quarry mine, but litigation on possible expansion of the mining operation and numerous development projects stretched over three decades.

A recent proposal called for 37 single-family houses and would have required substantial rock blasting nearby.

The initial townhouses will be completed by spring. Others will come within a year, said Balter. In addition to the homes, there will be a recreation center for property owners on 40 acres with another 40 acres having a town park, walking trails, a gazebo and a seven-acre lake.
