‘Keys Cottages’ spark optimism

BY TIMOTHY O’HARA
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Affordable housing received a large show of support Thursday, as elected, community and business leaders came out en masse for the opening of the first of four new workforce homes under construction on Big Pine Key.

The Florida Keys Community Land Trust opened the first of eight new “Keys Cottages” on Thursday and allowed the officials and the public to tour them. The Land Trust also held a ribbon-cutting ceremony and a home blessing by Father “Jets” Medina of St. Peter Catholic Church on Big Pine Key.

The Land Trust expects to have its Monroe County government-issued certificate of occupancy and select tenants for the unit by the end of the month, said Maggie Whitcomb, who founded the Land Trust after Hurricane Irma devastated the greater Big Pine Key area.

Thursday was the first time Whitcomb spoke with the public and the press since undertaking the start of the Land Trust. Whitcomb and her husband, Richard, were busy Thursday shaking hands and thanking the elected officials, contractors and others who have made their idea a reality.

“I want to thank you for putting this idea in my head and giving me the strength to continue,” Whitcomb said. “I want to thank my husband. Oh, that man is a saint. ... I only learned what a land trust was on Oct. 23. ... A lot of people helped pull this off yet but we are close. The biggest stars in this are the locals.”

The group is already making plans to break ground on five larger three-bedroom, two-bath units in Big Pine Key.

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work for how we develop an airport, generation to generation,” acting airports director T.J. Henderson told the commission. “We’re definitely overdue to complete a new master plan update.”

The master plan update, which took two years to complete, provides the short, medium and long-term development plans to meet future aviation needs. It is available for review on the County website at www.monroecounty-fl.gov/Airports.

The Master Plan Update included three technical review committee meetings, followed by three public hearings. The commission-approved, updated Master Plan now will be sent to the Federal Aviation Administration for approval and subsequent implementation.

Key West International Airport is expecting passenger traffic to increase at an average growth rate of 2.4 percent annually in the next 20 years. It is expected that in 2035, the airport will be at or near capacity that changed in September (with Hurricane Irma),” Henderson said. “We still grew by 3 percent in 2017.”

Key West International Airport has expanded its service in recent years, with United Airlines conducting daily flights to Chicago and American Airlines recently starting direct service between Key West and Dallas.

The update includes plans for a terminal expansion project in the six to 10 year time frame. The expansion will include a new departure lounge, with more space for passengers and concessions, and new connections to jet bridges that will increase passenger safety, Henderson said. The plan also includes a project to rework traffic patterns leading to the departure area.

Future projects in the Master Plan Update also will continue the airport’s commitment to account for sea level rise. The recent runway improvement project elevated the runway by 6 inches.

The county is currently looking to hire a new airports director and Henderson is filling in as

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Pine Key and could have those complete by the end of the year.

The nonprofit group has focused its efforts on Big Pine Key, one of the hardest-hit areas by Hurricane Irma. The opening comes roughly a month before the anniversary of Irma. Thursday's ribbon-cutting ceremony turned into a community gathering, giving people a reason to celebrate an accomplishment and some optimism since the storm.

The home is in the Avenues neighborhood, which was one of the hardest areas hit in the storm. Many homes there are still under construction or have been leveled and people are still living out of RVs.

The homes are similar to the "Katrina Cottages" built in Louisiana and Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The homes are kit houses and assembled on site, but without the need for a large crane or other heavy equipment. These “Keys Cottages” are constructed to help streamline the assembly process.

The land trust has closed or is closing on nearly 20 properties as future housing sites.

The Whitcombs donated $1 million to the trust and are working on securing another $1 million. The group has partnered with the Ocean Reef Community Foundation Fund, the Coldwell Banker Schmitt Charity Foundation and other groups.

The Whitcombs, who live in Atlanta, have been coming to the Florida Keys for years and purchased a home on Big Torch Key prior to Hurricane Irma. They were so moved by the plight of Keys' residents in the wake of the storm, they started the land trust.