

# Still the American Dream?

Events educate first-time homebuyers, real estate community

BY LAYLA FARMER  
THE CHRONICLE

Fair and affordable housing was the topic of conversation last Thursday at the Lawrence Joel Veterans Memorial Coliseum.

Housing professionals from across the state gathered for "The State of Fair and Affordable Housing 2011" summit, and later the "American Dream Weekend Affordable Housing Expo."

The summit, now in its seventh year, is designed to educate housing professionals about changes in the industry and encourage communication and collaboration among the various sectors of the professional housing community, explained Wanda Allen-Abraha, director of the Human Relations Commission / Human Relations Department for the City of Winston-Salem, which organizes the annual event.

"We got started because we noticed there was this huge communication gap between housing professionals in Winston-Salem," Allen-Abraha said. "Nobody really knew what the other ones were doing, but yet we were all working towards the same common goal."

Mayor Allen Joines makes an appearance at the event every year.

"Certainly, we want to make sure that all of our citizens have accessibility to affordability as well as being treated fairly in the housing market," he said of his motivation to attend. "I always try to support it because it's something that's important to me, to make sure that our citizens are being treated fairly."

N.C. Housing Coalition Executive Director Chris Estes served as moderator for the summit's panel discussion, which included input from D. Ritchie Brooks, director of Community and Business Development for the City of Winston-Salem, Keir Morton-Manley, program director for the N.C. Housing Finance Agency (HFA) and David Youngblood, FHEO director for the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

The panelists discussed changes in the fair housing market and the challenges their respective agencies face in trying to secure affordable housing for their clients. Estes said federal budget cuts have not been kind to organizations that work to ensure affordable housing for all.

"Part of our frustration and tragedy is seeing housing programs and funding cut at the national level, just at the time when it's needed the most," Estes said.

Morton-Manley said some potential homeowners are what she calls "buyer shy" and may require some coaxing because of the housing crisis and all the negative press the housing market has received in recent years.

Brooks said foreclosures can often be prevented if agencies take steps to insure a potential buyer is indeed ready to take the plunge before helping them get into a home.

"Everybody's not ready for homeownership when they think they want a home, so it's very important for us to educate folks on the responsibilities of owning a home," he stated.

This was the first year that summit was held on the same day as the Affordable Housing Expo. Now in its eighth year, the Expo, which



Above: Piedmont Federal's J. Robert Sanders Jr., center, receives a special recognition honor from Wanda Allen-Abraha and Mayor Allen Joines.

Right: Dr. Anthony Wade (left) and Willie Ratchford.



Chris Estes

is staged by the Winston-Salem Regional Association of Realtors (WSRAR) brought together realtors, loan officers and housing agencies to educate first-time homebuyers about the process of purchasing a home.

"It's the only time of the year that all these people are under one roof, so it's a great time to come out," said Heather Miller, marketing director for WSRAR. "It's a one stop learning process."

Allen Tate Realtor Carolyn Woodard attended the summit for the third time this year.

"I always like to try to find avenues for first time homebuyers to become homeowners and coming to the summit keeps me abreast of changes in the industry," she said. "It allows me to be educated as well as making the potential home buyer more aware of assistance that is out there and how to go about getting that assistance."

Willie Ratchford, executive director of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Community Relations Committee, and Dr. Anthony Wade, Greensboro's Human Relations director, come to the summit every year. Both of their respective commissions sponsor the event.

"The importance of this summit is that it highlights inclusionary business practices, which allow for all individuals to be able to enjoy the American Dream," commented Wade, who has attended the summit since he moved to Greensboro in 2007. "Certainly, Winston-Salem has been a leader in this area for many years. This summit is a clear indication of the strong collaboration between the city and the business community to continue to work together to ensure that quality of life for all Winston-Salem residents is second to none."



Panelist Keir Morton-Manley makes a point during the discussion.

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