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'My own space': Salish Kootenai Housing Authority unveils 9 new homes on reservation

Nora Mabie
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The Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority held a dedication on Aug. 13, 2024, in Pablo for the new Gauthier Homesites. SHANNA MADISON, Missoulian

FLATHEAD RESERVATION — Several decades ago, then-Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority Director Bob Gauthier bought 20 acres outside Pablo on the Flathead Indian Reservation and gifted it to the tribes.

He had a vision that someday, the land would be developed for homeownership.

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes at the time conducted an environmental assessment on the property, surveyed the land, subdivided it into lots, and hired a civil engineering team to design infrastructure plans, like water and sewage. While those plans were drawn up, the project ultimately stalled because the cost of implementing the infrastructure was too high.

Communities nationwide face housing crises, and the problem is exacerbated in Indian Country, where people are forced to engage with slow and opaque government processes, where Termination Era policy contributes to widespread inequity and where limited federal funding does not come close to meeting massive infrastructure needs or community demand.

To develop on the 20 acres Gauthier bought, the tribes would need to build and pave a road and find ways to get water, sewage and electricity to the homesites.

When current Salish and Kootenai Housing Director Jody Cahoon Perez saw the engineering plans for the homesites, she thought, “OK, I’ll watch for money.”

That money came in 2021 with the American Rescue Plan Act, which allocated \$450 million for the Indian Housing Block Grant program to support affordable housing initiatives across Indian reservations nationwide.

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes were allocated more than \$3 million through **that initiative**, and the housing authority used some of the funds to develop critical infrastructure at the Gauthier Homesites. The housing authority secured a permit to build and pave a new road, it extended the sewer lines to reach the homesite and brought power lines in.

That work came to fruition on Tuesday when more than 100 housing leaders and community members gathered in Pablo for a dedication ceremony of the Gauthier Homesites, aptly named for the housing leader who bought the land many years ago.

The Gauthier Homesites include nine new three- and four-bedroom homes. Construction is expected to finish this fall, and families will move in shortly thereafter. The housing authority leveraged American Rescue Plan Act funds to subsidize mortgages on the homes, ensuring they remain affordable to the families who live there.

Families could apply to move into one of the homes and were rated on a scale that evaluated their credit score, whether they were in good standing with their landlord, and debt to income ratio, among other factors. Eligible families also participated in a mortgage trial payment program and attended the housing authority’s first-time homebuyer’s class as well as other financial and credit counseling services.



Executive Director of SKHA, Jody Cahoon Perez, speaks during the Gauthier Homesites housing dedication on Aug. 13, 2024, in Pablo.

SHANNA MADISON, Missoulian

“It’s taken us quite a few decades to get this far, but we’ve made it,” Cahoon Perez said to the crowd Tuesday. She called the project “an immense effort” made possible through collaboration with a number of tribal and federal partners.



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Often called the grandfather of Indian housing, Gauthier served as director of the Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority for 20 years. Gauthier was instrumental in the formation of the **Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act** of 1996, which offered tribes more options to expand housing programs. He and his wife, Myrna, serve as United Native American Housing Association administrators. And when Gauthier was director of the Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority, he oversaw the construction of more than 300 units across the reservation.

At the dedication on Tuesday, Gauthier said the project could not have been complete without the “outstanding” housing board and leaders as well as a tribal council that “was not afraid to step out and make tough decisions.”

Matt Howard and his family are among those who will move into the new homes. Howard has three children — ages 10, 4 and 2 — plus a baby on the way. He and his family previously lived in low-income housing and rented from the tribal housing authority. More than 100 people sit

on the Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority's waitlist. So when Howard and his family move into their new home, it will open a spot in low-income housing for another family in need.

Howard said he can't wait to move into the Gauthier home so "I can do whatever I want with my house."

"It's my own space for me and my kids to just exist," he said, smiling. "If I want to paint a wall, I can paint a wall. If I want a fire pit, I can have one."

Howard grew up in poverty and said he didn't live in a home owned by his parents.

"This means a lot," he said. "I didn't have this. Now, this is a new foundation for my family, for my kids to build off of."



Housing advocate Bob Gauthier speaks during the Gauthier Homesites housing dedication on Aug. 13, 2024, in Pablo. SHANNA MADISON, Missoulian



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