

Various entities unite to help to help build bathrooms

By Joseph Pardington

Sometimes it takes a village to build a bathroom.

Federal, state, regional entities have recently come together in Pittsboro to build bathroom units for some of the area's poorest residents.

Taking the lead in this effort is the North Carolina Rural Communities Assistance Project (NRCAP), Inc., a state-wide non-profit agency based in Pittsboro. NRCAP provides assistance to low-income, rural communities on public health and environmental quality issues pertaining to water, wastewater, solid waste and affordable housing needs.

Through its Safe Housing Initiative (SHI) program, NRCAP seeks to eliminate the health and safety hazards posed by substandard housing in Chatham and Randolph counties.

To accomplish this, NRCAP receives funds from the United States Department of Agriculture's Rural Development Housing Preservation Grant program.

Other partners include the Joint Orange Chatham Community Action (JOCCA) Inc.'s Workforce Investment

Act, Central Carolina Community College's (CCCC) Continuing Education program, Regional Consolidated Services (RCS) and the environmental health departments of Chatham and Randolph counties.

Peter Kittany, the executive director of NRCAP, said: "The homeowners we work with in the SHI program are extremely low income, and the vast majority are elderly or disabled. Yet each day they still must face getting by without some of the most basic necessities that most of us take for granted, such as indoor plumbing. For many of the luckier residents in the county, it often comes as a shock to find out we still have neighbors that live in conditions of such severe poverty, having to haul water for drinking or bathing and still use outhouses."

Morris Casper was the instructor for the bathroom building course provided through the CCCC continuing education program. Casper worked closely with the students throughout the process. Casper recalled some of his students: "I had some kids who got really excited," he said. "They really didn't have any background in construction skills." These students were often "left to their own devices" at home. "To start and finish something was pretty amazing to some of them."

Of the 20 participants, five

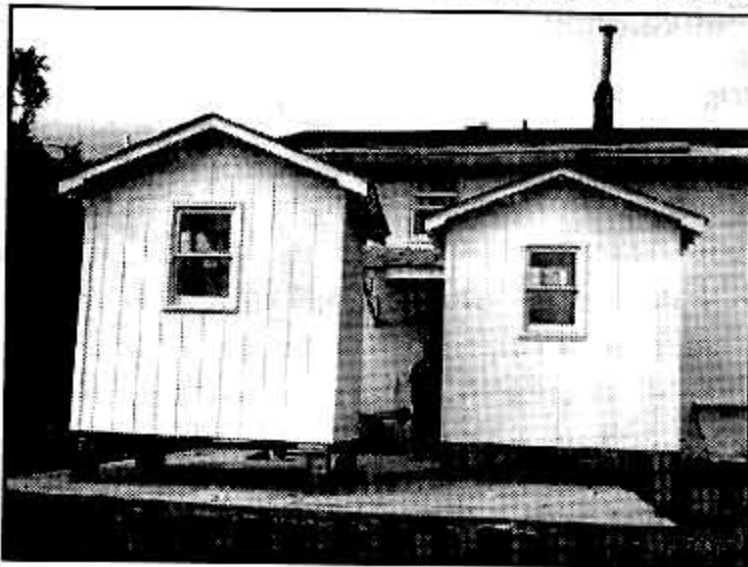
were there from beginning to end of the construction of the bathrooms. Casper recalled that he had some help from others, such as mentors of the participants.

Mike Wolf, NRCAP construction coordinator oversaw all aspects of construction.

They are always so thankful."

Gibson added: "So many people are being helped. It's not just the homeowners, it's the students—working together to achieve the same thing."

Casper added: "This was a course at CCCC, so they got credit for doing this." He also



Joseph Pardington photo

Help is on the way ...

Many groups helped build bathrooms in Chatham and Randolph counties. North Carolina Rural Communities Assistance Project, a Pittsboro-based non-profit, lead the way.

permitting and site preparation for the program. In addition to providing the bathroom units and housing upgrades, the USDA funds provide for the installation of septic systems and wells for the households.

Kittany said the program was a team effort. "It would be very hard to do without the partnerships," he said of the bathroom project. "Homeowners would not be able to afford it. It's all a matter of us coming together."

Pat Gibson, rural development manager of the USDA's rural development program, explained the funding process. In addition to loans and grant monies, housing preservation grant money was available for some of the homes, she said. It was a matter of pooling resources. It also helped to have "free labor from students."

Gibson explained the mission of her federal organization. "Our mission is to improve the quality of life for residents of rural areas," she said. "Chatham County is definitely a rural area. The recipients—we just make such a difference in their lives."

noted that cooperation was good in this time of downsizing. "So often agencies don't work together. It's easier to partner in Chatham than in other counties."

Kittany explained the need for teamwork. "As with many poverty programs, we have to pool our resources together—the funding, labor, programs—to get the basic needs met."

Another team member is Doug Dixon, weatherization director at JOCCA. Dixon recalled working with NRCAP on several jobs, bringing houses up to code for such things as insulation. "We work good together," Dixon said. Dixon also works to provide vents above stoves, smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors in every home.

Part of the problem, Gibson said, is that some homes were built without indoor plumbing. "They just came and plopped the houses down and left," she said. The residents of these homes were invariably poor and unable to afford to have a bathroom installed. A certificate of occupancy did not use to require water and sewer, she said.

The two bathrooms on display at JOCCA were of the same size—eight feet wide by eight feet deep by seven feet high. Each had a sink, commode, bathtub and a window.

Faye Hall, employment and training director of JOCCA, provides oversight for the Workforce Development Act programs, assisting individuals with employment, educational and training needs while also providing critical job placement services. Students enrolled in the program to build modular bathroom units learn basic building skills necessary for framing, plumbing and electrical work. Hall seemed content letting others talk about the project, but she did add: "It's been a learning process for the staff. Mike has just been great."