

Re-Building It Green

By Jennifer Somers, Local Initiatives Support Corporation/Bay Area

Unity Homes, a 94-unit limited equity coop located in the Bayview neighborhood of San Francisco, is about to undergo a major systems and amenities upgrade for its residents. But it's no ordinary rehab project. Using guidance from a new publication—entitled *Green Rehabilitation of Multifamily Rental Properties: A Resource Guide* (the Green Guide)—Unity Homes is about to get a “green” facelift.

The 34-year-old Unity Homes was originally financed using a HUD Section 236 insured mortgage and has a fixed operating budget from HUD. But operating costs—notably, utility costs—have been rising dramatically. As such, the rehab scope was designed to include a number of measures to improve energy efficiency. This includes replacing the heating systems with energy efficient forced-air models, and replacing the water heaters with new energy efficient models. All windows, appliances, and kitchen and bath fans will be ENERGY STAR rated.

The energy efficient and green recommendations don't stop there. The complex will be re-sided using durable cement siding that, in tandem with the new energy efficient windows, will improve the sealing of the building to help prevent energy loss. Low-mercury fluorescent bulbs will be used in all new and replacement lighting. The grounds will also receive a green treatment. Increased stormwater retention will be accomplished with retaining walls and hydro-seeding, and landscaping will include native plants and low water use irrigation.

In addition, given the large senior population as well as the large number of residents with children, special attention is being given to improving indoor air quality. All paints, sealants and adhesives will contain low levels or no Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs)—gases that are known to have both short and long term health impacts. If they can be accommodated within the project budget, green flooring and carpet will also be considered for the rehab.

What's So Hard About Green Rehab?

While the greening of new construction projects has started to take root, greening the vast existing affordable housing stock—estimated at well over 300,000 units in California alone—has proven to be more of a challenge. Rehab projects are already notoriously prone to cost-cutting measures; it's always tempting to think it possible to squeeze a bit more useful life out of existing building systems. In such circumstances, it is difficult to advocate for capital improvements that may represent a higher upfront cost than a non-green alternative. Rehab projects also typically spend less on



Unity Homes in San Francisco's Bayview neighborhood

design consultants who can help evaluate the benefits and risks of newer, green products and technologies. The goal of the Green Guide is to provide compelling information to tip decisions in favor of sound green alternatives where they are indeed feasible. The Unity Homes rehab project is one of the first projects to undergo a green rehab using the newly released Green Guide.

The Green Guide, a joint project of the Bay Area Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and Build It Green, a California based non-profit organization promoting healthy and energy efficient housing, was developed to help affordable housing owners and their consultants bring green building and energy efficiency into the upgrades of their properties. The guide provides recommendations for green and energy efficient upgrades for every system in a multifamily building, addressing the site conditions, landscaping, building construction, mechanical systems, and interiors of dwelling units. Each measure recommended in the guide has a cost and cost effectiveness key. Though the actual costs may vary considerably among projects and will depend on availability, the cost effectiveness key reflects the anticipated increase in greening costs over conventional practice. Aiming to be a user-friendly tool that developers can use in their decision-making processes, the guide is designed to be used in conjunction with an energy audit or building walkthrough that occurs at the outset of any rehab project.

“The Green Guide will provide invaluable assistance to affordable housing providers as they embark on the green rehab process,” said Madeline Fraser Cook, director of LISC's new Green Development Center, who introduced the new publication in San Francisco at the 2008 National Interagency Community Reinvestment Conference.

Green Connection at LISC

Bay Area LISC first got involved in the green movement six years ago through its Energy Action program, which provided funding, technical assistance, engineering services and energy audits to help hundreds of affordable housing sites become more energy efficient. Since then, the program has expanded into green building as well as energy efficiency and is housed under Bay Area LISC's Green Connection program umbrella.

In addition to the Green Guide, LISC's Green Connection program offers myriad resources to foster the development of green affordable housing. Another guide recently updated by the Green Connection program is the *Green Operations and Maintenance Toolkit and Buyer's Guide* (Green O&M Toolkit). The guide was written specifically for property managers and maintenance staff and looks for simple ways to make a property green, such as unit turnovers. The Green O&M Toolkit provides an overview of green building and the ways green building practices can affect the health and safety of both residents and workers. It gives operations and maintenance staff guidance on using non-toxic cleaning products, paint, flooring and carpet, lighting and paper goods as well as information on where to purchase these products.

Bay Area LISC also operates a Green Loan Fund, which offers a preferred financing package for affordable housing projects that demonstrate the use of a qualified green building metric. GreenPoint Rated, designed by Build It Green, is the verification system used for the Green Loan Fund. This system takes into account energy efficiency, resource conservation, indoor air quality, water conservation, and community-related factors in evaluating a building's "greenness." It is a particularly applicable rating system for green building in California as it takes into account local climate conditions, material costs and availability. In addition, because of the flexibility of the program and its limited number of pre-requisites, it provides an accessible point of entry for greening, which is important for non-profit owners that may not have a lot of experience with green development. GreenPoint Rated requires that projects exceed California's Title-24 energy code by 15 percent and thus sets an appropriate minimum energy efficiency bar.

In addition, to help expand the green capacity of the field, Bay Area LISC offers hands-on technical assistance and peer network meetings, including the Green Affordable Housing Coalition co-facilitated by Build It Green. The peer network meetings aim to provide a forum for information sharing, as peer knowledge-transfer can help overcome some of the barriers to greening. These include viewing green elements as project "add-ons" rather than truly integrating them into a project, a lack of green experience on the part of the project team and perceptions that greening will cost too much.

Institutionalizing Green

Bay Area LISC has been working hard to seek inroads for integrating green building and energy efficiency into HUD financed properties. The Green Guide has been well received

by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Office of Affordable Housing Preservation and their Mark to Market Green Initiative Pilot Program. This initiative is a trailblazing HUD program that incentivizes owners and purchasers of properties within HUD's Section 8 multifamily property portfolio to "go green" in rehabs and operations. This program incentivizes building owner participation by reducing the standard upfront owner contribution in a rehab project from 20 percent to as low as 3 percent if the project meets select green building criteria.

In addition, earlier this year Congressman Ed Perlmutter of Colorado introduced the Green Resources for Energy Efficient Neighborhoods (G.R.E.E.N.) Act, which provides a number of measures to facilitate green building and energy efficiency strategies. Among other measures, the legislation would require Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to finance energy efficient mortgages, and would provide extra incentives for buildings that comply with standards such as LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) or GreenPoint Rated. It would also create a Residential Energy Efficient Block Grant Program, which, in a manner similar to the Community Development Block Grant program, would provide grants for local communities and states to incorporate energy efficient measures into new and existing single and multifamily housing units. The legislation would also integrate some considerations for energy efficient improvements into the Community Reinvestment Act. The legislation is already seeing some push-back from homebuilders and others, but if passed, it will go far in creating federal incentives for building and rehabbing affordable housing using green principles.

Conclusion

LISC recently launched its Green Development Center (GDC), a national program to support green design, construction and management principles in low and moderate income neighborhoods. Madeline Fraser Cook, a national expert in providing technical assistance to community based organizations on building green sustainable neighborhoods, is the head of the new center and will be providing guidance on greening to all of LISC's twenty-nine local offices. In addition to supporting green building, the GDC will assist in integrating sustainable development principles across the community economic development field. Additional focus areas will include green jobs and retailing, youth development, and joint work with LISC's Smart Growth program.

But for Bay Area LISC, green rehab will continue to be a critical focus area. Stephanie Forbes, Executive Director of Bay Area LISC says, "While we continue to promote and support green in new construction, our priority is to green existing affordable housing as it is a tangible way to help reduce the environmental impact of buildings while simultaneously improving the indoor environment and quality of life for low-income residents."

To access the Green Guide and other resources, please visit www.bayarealisc.org 