



Partners unite to break ground for the Reviviendo Family Housing project.

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Following Residents' Lead

Lawrence CommunityWorks' Project Is a Winner for Everyone

BY JANIS K. OPPELT

Residents of the North Common neighborhood of Lawrence, Massachusetts, are bursting with pride. As members of Lawrence CommunityWorks, a NeighborWorks® organization since 2001, they helped bring their neighborhood into focus, select an initial project, and applaud as the finished project won the 2004 HUD Secretary's Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation.

In September 2004, the National Trust for Historic Preservation presented the HUD Secretary's Award to CommunityWorks for its Reviviendo Family Housing project, a \$3.7 million affordable housing development that took close to four years to complete.

The Reviviendo project has had a tremendous impact on neighborhood pride, said the National Trust in announcing the award, in one of the oldest, and poorest cities in Massachusetts. The project also "set an example for other communities," the National Trust said, by combining affordable housing, historic

preservation, and green building technology.

"The whole community participated in making the project happen," said Lisa Kozol, CommunityWorks' director of housing development. "Their participation was a key to its success" and, now, there are "great families" living in the units. The project was completed in January 2004.

To create the Reviviendo Family Housing project, CommunityWorks renovated three 19th century, abandoned buildings and constructed one new building on a formerly trash-strewn, vacant parking lot. The result is 17 affordable, rental units, consisting of a combination of two-, three-, and four-bedrooms.

Changing With the Times

Although Lawrence CommunityWorks has been around in different forms for more than 17 years, its current identity started to take shape only in 1999. The board of directors at the time decided it wanted to create a "new, more robust organization" to help Lawrence residents, according to Deputy Director



Kristen Harol. The board's plan would go hand in hand with city and state government officials' plans to revitalize the city's historic mills (and retrofit them for new industries), improve the infrastructure, and clean up local brownfields.

The board also decided to start from scratch in achieving its goals, and hired a new management team whose mission was to create a resident-focused community development organization. Although real-estate development would occur under the new plan, it would be an offshoot of community organizing, and residents would decide what they wanted to happen.

"Our belief is that you can't just decide to do a project and then go out and get people to support it," said Harol, "which happens in many environments. You have to go out first and talk to people, and figure out what they want, and build the project around that."

In just five years, membership in CommunityWorks has grown to about 900 residents, who have joined through many different "doors," according to Harol. The doors, in turn, lead back to numerous community-enrichment programs offered by CommunityWorks.

According to Harol, CommunityWorks' principal organizing strategy has been its NeighborCircles, which adhere to a "very open-ended approach."

"We don't have an agenda that we want to get people aligned with," she said. "It's the responsibility

of staff to build the network. They figure out how residents can work together, and then residents determine what they want to do. Then, we try and help them do what they want."

In the case of NeighborCircles, eight to 10 families come together three times over the course of a month for dinner and conversation. They get to know each other, under the leadership of a trained resident facilitator, talk about the neighborhood or the city, and decide as a group if there's something they can do together to help the community. Those who decide to address an issue then receive technical assistance and support from CommunityWorks.

Rewarded for Renovation – and Innovation

It was, in fact, residents who decided that the North Common neighborhood would be the "new" organization's first target area. With their help, CommunityWorks staff and board developed a comprehensive strategy that included what came to be the Reviviendo project.

Residents worked with and supported CommunityWorks staff throughout the long journey from land and building acquisition, through construction and renovation, to the ribbon-cutting ceremony. They also attended a series of public hearings on funding, site control and approvals.

Even countless postponements of some of the hearings didn't dampen residents' support. In fact, each time a hearing was rescheduled, said Lisa Kozol, the number in attendance grew. Residents even gave the project its name – Reviviendo, which means "rebirth" in Spanish.

All of the Reviviendo units now are rented, with three going to formerly homeless families who make less than 30 percent of the average median income. The others are rented to families who make between 30 and 50 percent of the median.

To achieve its goal, CommunityWorks used a creative mix of public and private financing. The mix included HUD HOME funds and an initial \$85,000 capital grant from NeighborWorks® America, as well as subsequent grants. Other contributors included the city of Lawrence, CEDAC, Department of Housing and Community Development Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Federal Home Loan Bank Board Affordable Housing Program, Lawrence Savings Bank, The Life

The modular units (top) provide five two-bedroom apartments, while retaining the neighborhood's character. Rehab converted an historic home into three-bedroom apartments.

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Initiative, MassHousing, Massachusetts Housing and Investment Corporation, and Massachusetts Historical Commission.

As with all historic renovation, CommunityWorks knew that retaining the character of the buildings would be painstaking work, and hired Bruce Hampton, AIA, LEED, to oversee the project. Hampton, a co-partner in Elton and Hampton Architects of Allston, Massachusetts, specializes in green building techniques. (For more information, www.eltonhamptonarchitects.com.)

Going for the Green – and Healthy

“We used healthy, green-building specifications throughout all four buildings,” said Hampton. “We did as much, and probably more, than one usually does in an affordable housing project. One of the first things we focus on is energy efficiency, so we don’t burden the people living there with additional utility costs.”

Over time, the green-building approach saves a “lot of money,” he says, and, therefore, is a very good investment.

“By using good-quality, energy-efficient techniques, including double-pane, glazed windows and cellulose wall insulation [made of recyclables], in

the building, the heating system could be smaller, so the ‘green’ materials don’t really cost more in the long term,” said Hampton. “It’s good for the environment and people’s pocketbooks.”

In addition to focusing on energy-efficient features, Hampton also used healthy indoor materials, which have been proven to reduce health problems, particularly asthma. Wall-to-wall carpet, for example, which retains dust mites, is a good example of what not to use if you care about tenants’ health.

According to Hampton, “The old Victorians of Reviviendo were built really well. For example, we discovered old wood flooring under many layers and, instead of putting carpet down, we stripped the floors back to the original and covered them with polyurethane instead of wall-to-wall carpet. Not only are wood floors healthier, they are more durable than vinyl or carpet.”

Actions such as these fulfilled CommunityWorks’ decision to make its project healthy for tenants as well as environmentally sustainable for the long-term.

‘Everyone Can Take Pride’

As Marilyn Fenollosa, the National Trust’s senior program officer and regional attorney, said, “By eliminating the blighted buildings, and providing quality housing, Reviviendo has enhanced the quality of life for all who live and work in the area. The creation of affordable housing in historic structures was the essence of this project. The appreciation for and commitment to the historic fabric of the neighborhood enabled the preservation of structures that would otherwise have been demolished as blight.

“Instead of taking the easy way out and creating a giant project,” she said that, CommunityWorks “redeveloped within the existing housing stock, maintaining streetscapes and neighborhood integrity. They focused on resident safety, attractiveness, and sustainability. Everyone can take pride in the Reviviendo project.” ■

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A Jackson Terrace bathroom in the making. COURTESY LAWRENCE COMMUNITYWORKS