



National Housing
& Rehabilitation
Association

1400 16th St. NW
Suite 420
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 939-1750
Fax (202) 265-4435
www.housingonline.com

HOWARD COHEN: BE NIMBLE AND DIVERSIFY

By Marty Bell

Under the leadership of Chief Executive Officer Howard Cohen, the current activities of Beacon Communities LLC is a spectrum of the opportunities available to developers committed to creating and maintaining affordable housing: New construction of affordable and mixed-income rental and for-sale developments; historic rehabilitation; HOPE VI redevelopment of public housing; affordable housing preservation; acquisition of workforce housing; developments utilizing stimulus funds; and special needs housing, all spread out over 7 states. Last week, Beacon Communities, in cooperation with the Boston Housing Authority, commenced construction on the first phase of the redevelopment of Old Colony, a 875 unit public housing development in South Boston, utilizing ARRA funds, tax credits, MassHousing financing, and other local and state assistance.



“This is the fourth or fifth economic downturn I’ve been through,” says Cohen, a veteran of 40 some years in this industry. “My approach is survival. I never consider myself able to outsmart the markets. So you need to be nimble enough to move among different segments. If acquisition is too hot, it’s an opportunity to do some new construction. We face a lot of rules and regulations, so our portfolio is not terribly liquid, not easy to sell. So you need to have the diversity to get through the tougher times.”

A native of Chicago and graduate of Washington University in St. Louis and Harvard Law (which brought him to the Boston area), Cohen moved between the public and private sector, always with a focus on community development. He began his career working with community groups at the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, then made his local mark in the mid-1970s as a part of the reform administration of the Cambridge Housing Authority. “It is hard to believe in hindsight, but in the seventies, Cambridge

was a down and out community with a corrupt housing authority and properties that had horrendous physical and social problems,” he says. “And now it is one of the most successful communities in America with one of the best housing authorities in the country.”

He served in Governor Michael Dukakis’s administration as general counsel of the Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency and also spent fifteen years in private practice representing developers of mixed-income and affordable housing. Part of his practice focused on representing developers who wanted to build affordable housing in suburban areas utilizing the state’s Comprehensive Permit law under which local denials of permits for affordable housing development can be appealed to a state board.

In 1995, following his recurring urge to “see if I could do it myself rather than advising others on how to do it,” he settled in at Beacon Communities.

On October 18, Howard Cohen’s career will be celebrated when he is honored with the National Housing & Rehabilitation Association’s 6th Annual Vision Award, which is being held in conjunction with the organization’s Fall Developers Forum in Boston.

A highlight of Cohen’s tenure at Beacon Communities and a prime example of the company’s ingenuity, and social commitment under his watch, is the Treehouse development in Easthampton, Massachusetts, a special needs development pairing families with foster and adopted children with seniors.

“At the time, Harvey Spence, who my boss at the Cambridge Housing Authority, was the head of the Department of Social Services. He was approached by a woman named Judy Cockerton who had a vision to provide homes for foster children. We started with 12 units devoted to families willing to take in children who often would otherwise have been sent to an institution or siblings who would otherwise be separated and forty eight apartments for seniors who could serve as “foster” grandparents.” Recently, Beacon started construction of thirty three mixed-income, near net zero energy efficient, single family homes that it hopes will be purchased by families interested in living in a child centered community.

“Initially the educational community gulped. After all, we were intentionally bringing troubled kids into the school system. But Easthampton mayor Michael A. Tautznik was supportive and reasoned with them that helping families willing to take in challenged kids was the reason people got into education in the first place.”

“We don’t have the capacity to do this kind of special needs affordable housing community for everyone. But we hope to show that when you do a project like this it changes the entire vision of what can be accomplished. We hope to encourage others to do something like this.”

“I’m a firm believer in community groups taking greater control of their lives and mobilizing local forces to improve their own quality of life.”

To that end, Cohen, a resident of Newton, devotes much of his time away from the office to Hebrew Senior Life, a not-for-profit senior housing, health care, educational and research organization affiliated with the Harvard Medical School that serves 5,000 elders per year with 2,200 employees. “There we are looking to turn away from our historic commitment to bricks and mortar,” Cohen says, “And towards providing the services seniors need to remain in their homes.”

“Our goal at Beacon Communities is always to try to find interesting and important projects with the expectation that financial success will flow from quality work,” Howard Cohen says.

Beacon Communities owns and manages approximately 9,000 apartments primarily in the New England and Mid-Atlantic states.