



Making Green Buildings Work

The Importance of Resident Engagement

Legends Park, Memphis, Tennessee
Developed by McCormack Baron Salazar

Photo by Bill Carson, Sunwheel
Energy + Sustainability /
McCormack Baron Salazar



Inset photos by Ronnie Boze Photography, Memphis, Tenn. Courtesy Sunwheel Energy / McCormack Baron Salazar

After a green affordable multifamily rental housing project is completed, either through new construction or renovation, will the expected energy and water cost savings actually be achieved?

To a large degree, the answer depends on the day-to-day actions of the residents and whether they are motivated to conserve, either by financial rewards (e.g., smaller utility bills) or other incentives.

Affordable housing developers and owners are employing different approaches these days in “resident engagement” – making their renter households aware of the green features in their apartments and buildings and trying to persuade them to adopt behaviors that cut

Resident engagement workshop in Memphis, Tenn. for residents of Legends Park and University Place HOPE VI, both developed by McCormack Baron Salazar, and for residents of Cleaborn Homes

their energy and water usage, reduce waste, and thereby maximize the performance of the properties. Admittedly, this is a tougher task at properties where the residents don't pay for their utilities.

In recent interviews and in speaker presentations at National Housing & Rehabilitation Association's *Preservation Through Energy Efficiency Road Show* on

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April 3 in Philadelphia, a few developers and owners explained what they are doing these days.

Education is Key

At a number of organizations, education is key to resident engagement. This is the case at McCormack Baron Salazar (MBS), a major developer/owner/manager of affordable and mixed-income multifamily rental housing, including HOPE VI and low-income housing tax credit communities.



Bill Carson

"We started our resident engagement program many years ago," says Bill Carson, president of Sunwheel Energy + Sustainability, the solar and sustainability affiliate company of McCormack Baron Salazar.

MBS' resident engagement efforts were sparked by an "aha" moment after completing two initial LEED-cer-

tified green neighborhoods. "We realized that the technologies in these communities could be as great as anything on the planet," says Carson, "but if our residents weren't aware of the green nature of the buildings that are their homes, and they didn't understand how saving water and energy would benefit themselves both financially, as well as from a broader perspective of things like health, that we would lose out on all of the benefits of the technologies and the green construction itself."

Central pieces of MBS' resident engagement program are:

- The *Go Green Residents Guide to Saving Resources*. This customized multi-page flyer, given to each new resident, identifies all of the green and sustainable features in their apartment and building (e.g. Energy Star appliances and windows, formaldehyde-free countertops and cabinets, solar-generated power for common areas); describes the benefits to the resident from going green (e.g., lower utility bills, a healthier

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Applegate & Thorne-Thomsen's broad transactional practice includes the representation of developers, tax credit syndicators, investors, lenders, public housing authorities and community development organizations in the development and financing of affordable housing and community development projects. Serving this broad base of clients affords us a unique understanding of the varied business and legal issues that are an integral part of these projects. In the multi-layered approach to housing and community development, our expertise includes:

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life); identifies ways to save money and reduce waste; explains what and how to recycle; and lists Web sites providing more information. MBS also hands out a separate flyer, with photos and text, identifying the green features in different rooms in an apartment, such as Energy Star appliances in the kitchen, a low-flush toilet in the bathroom, etc.

- *Orientation sessions.* As a new property approaches full lease-up, Carson hosts an on-site event for residents, usually in the evening in the community room, where he explains the green and sustainable features of the apartments and property and answers questions. “We generally give out reusable shopping bags, provide dinner using recyclable items, and do a demonstration on what can and cannot be recycled and how to separate your waste.” Carson says 20%-40% of a property’s residents typically attend, as well as MBS staff.

Formal Curriculum

Foundation Communities, a nonprofit developer/owner/manager based in Austin, Texas, is tackling resident engagement in a variety of ways. The organization manages 17 LIHTC properties with about 2,600 units. Ten of the properties have on-site learning centers.

The centerpiece is the *Saving Green* educational workshop for adults, held at the onsite learning centers, which was developed by Foundation Communities based on an online resident engagement toolkit created by Enterprise Community Partners.

The nonprofit’s workshop “basically focuses on how residents can save money on energy and water,” says Susan Peterson, green initiatives director at Foundation Communities. “And we also address things you can do to improve your indoor air quality and properly divert your waste through recycling.”

The *Saving Green* sessions were originally held as a stand-alone workshop. Now, however, this curriculum has been integrated into each of Foundation Communities’ adult education programs for residents (e.g., money



Susan Peterson

management, English as a Second Language). “We reach a lot more people by integrating it,” says Peterson.

The nonprofit also has a printed six-page *Saving Green* packet that is given to residents that covers the same materials as in the workshop.

According to Peterson, the nonprofit’s educational efforts and advice focus on things that residents can control, such as specific behaviors to save on energy costs. “In the area of energy, the most important ones are thermostat settings and vampire loads,” she says. To mitigate vampire loads, for example, staff advise residents to plug their televisions, computers, and other high usage devices into power strips and to turn the power strips off when the devices are not in use. Older television sets, for instance, still draw electricity when in standby mode if plugged directly into an outlet.

Foundation Communities also provides free home energy audits to residents upon request. These assess current energy consumption and advise the resident on how to reduce usage.

With the assistance of several grants, the nonprofit is testing the use of home energy monitoring systems that have been installed in 105 apartments at three properties. The residents, who have been given a tablet and a Wi-Fi connection, can use the tablet to go to a Web site and view real-time data on their actual energy consumption at any given moment. The pilot is intended to determine whether residents will modify their behavior to reduce energy usage if they are aware of their actual consumption.

Finally, Foundation Communities is partnering with another local nonprofit to develop a new environmental education curriculum for children in grades K through 5 that will be incorporated into the nonprofit’s after-school and summer school programs. It will be tested this summer at one learning center before being rolled out to other properties.

Important Elements

Rosa Ortiz, of Enterprise Community Partners, said that senior residents by their nature are most inclined to engage in conserving behaviors, and the best way to get buy in from families is by engaging their kids.

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Ortiz and Linda Mandolini, president of Eden Housing, a nonprofit developer/owner based in Hayward, Calif., said crucial for success is recognizing and celebrating residents for their achievements, at resident meetings or other events. For example, this could be publicly honoring the resident at a property that cuts their energy usage the most in the past month.

"It's important to thank people and recognize their success," says Mandolini. She also cited the importance of property maintenance staff in engaging residents and promoting energy and water conservation. "They're my chief cheerleaders," she says.

Mandolini stressed the importance of specific, visible actions that show residents that owners and managers listen, care, and want to help. For example, at one apartment complex the manager was getting three to four calls weekly from residents complaining that their apartments were cold. Eden Housing added insulation to the buildings and these service calls stopped.

Pilot Program Competition

Enterprise Community Partners is involved in an experiment underway in Chicago to test the use of financial rewards to promote greater resident engagement in conservation practices.

Seven affordable multifamily properties – containing 14 buildings, 503 apartments, and more than 750 residents – are participating in the pilot, called the Chicago Neighborhood Energy Challenge. Each month awards are given to the individual residents that have cut their electric or gas usage the most. In addition, at the end of the year-long year competition grants will be awarded to the buildings with the greatest savings compared to their prior usage (\$25,000 for first place, \$7,500 for second place, and \$3,500 for third place), as well as cash awards of between \$100 and \$200 to the top individuals overall.

Ortiz said the 30 workshops held so far have attracted about half of all the residents at the seven properties. Participating residents must consent to the release of

their utility bills. Residents can go to a Web site to track how they and their building are currently faring in the competition versus the other buildings and residents.

Ortiz indicated that some of the lessons learned so far have been that a competition needs to be made fun for residents, and there must be opportunities provided for residents to talk to one another about their experiences.

Instilling a Corporate Culture

Carson and Mandolini emphasized that the importance of energy and water conservation, reduced waste, and sustainability needs to be engrained as a core value throughout a company or organization and valued and practiced by all employees from the top on down.

"The culture of your organization is going to drive how your company engages with staff and residents," says Carson.

At McCormack Baron Salazar, Carson brought about instilling values in the corporate culture by creating a company

"green team" and signing up the firm to participate in a contest for St. Louis area companies that recognizes those improving the most after one year in their headquarters office in reducing waste, conserving energy and water, and helping the environment. Among the changes made at MBS' corporate office were switching from paper plates, Styrofoam cups, and plastic utensils to regular plates, cups, glasses, and silverware, as well as purchasing recycled paper and establishing a comprehensive recycling program. MBS won in its category the first two years of the contest and continues to participate.

The company has developed a separate *Go Green* guide for employees, and is now developing scripts for brief videos for new residents and employees.

Carson said "internalizing" green and sustainability into the corporate culture at MBS has caused a cascading of benefits down the line to the property level.

Housing officials, however, noted that resident engagement is a field that is challenging and ever-changing.

"Resident engagement isn't easy," says Ortiz. "It's something you have to always review." **TCA**

**Senior residents
by their nature
are most inclined
to engage in
conserving
behaviors.**