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GRAND RAPIDS – Lighthouse Communities Inc. is about to launch its fourth affordable housing apartment complex on the south side of Grand Rapids.

The Roosevelt Park Lofts development is indicative of the nonprofit organization’s mission. It is not just about creating housing opportunities. It is really all about neighborhoods and community revitalization.

Roosevelt Park Lofts

Plans for the \$4.5 million Roosevelt Park Lofts development presented to Grand Rapids city officials call for 21 loft-style apartments and 2,400 square feet of commercial space to be built in a structure in the 1300 block of Grandville Avenue SE. The building is more than 100 years old and was the original home of both Heckman Biscuit Co. and the Keebler Foods Co.

Lighthouse Communities Executive Director David Allen told MiBiz that the organization had been working on a variety of projects along Grandville Avenue for a couple of years. Company principals kept looking at the Heckman Building thinking it would make a “really cool apartment complex.” Finally Allen ran into a real estate agent who had just talked to the owner of the building about selling it, and the deal was done.



Lighthouse Communities Executive Director David Allen’s home has been renovated in much the same style as will the new Roosevelt Park Lofts development.

Mission

Lighthouse Communities is a nonprofit corporation that began operations about five years ago. Since then the organization has been responsible for more than 400 housing units and about \$25 million in development. During the current fiscal year, Allen expects to do \$12 million in development, to include approximately 300 units of housing, most of which will be built in Grand Rapids.

Affordable housing is only one of the organization’s tools. There is something very significant that separates Lighthouse Communities from most affordable housing organizations. It is the goal of community revitalization.

In some circumstances, that involves affordable housing. In other cases it involves loans to homeowners. Sometimes it is increasing the level of home ownership. The organization also is developing a micro-loan program for businesses and has added about 20,000 square feet of commercial businesses to the neighborhood.

"We aren't just about the house, or even just about the family in that house," said Allen. "We are about the whole neighborhood."

Boutique is best

The focus of affordable housing construction undertaken by Lighthouse Communities is on small projects, 24 units or less — boutique developments.

"We are looking for something that has really good aesthetic value that can be a catalyst for further change. We call it workforce housing, smaller developments that are more conducive to families," Allen said.

The Roosevelt Park project is one example. Another is the Avenue Apartments complex, 10 units of senior housing in the Madison Square neighborhood.

Built for the neighborhood

Lighthouse Communities is also building the Uptown Village development near Wealthy Street and Diamond Avenue. It is a neighborhood that many observers in Grand Rapids believe will become the next Heritage Hill, an upscale area near downtown Grand Rapids that was the result of a revitalization effort in the 1960s.

"It is on the verge of changing very fast. The housing stock is so rich and so beautiful," Allen said.

But not everyone living in that neighborhood now will be able to — or even desire to — own one of those renovated, upscale homes.

That is why the purpose of the Uptown Village project is to create 24 units of affordable housing, so that those who desire to rent will always have that opportunity.

It's all about Sustainability

Sustainability is very important to Lighthouse Communities. The organization doesn't use the standard contract package of light fixtures and supplies. At Uptown Village for instance, about 90 percent of the lighting is fluorescent.

The projects are built to last, to be sustainable. That is why no cheap cabinets are used. Lighthouse Communities makes sure that heavy-duty, modern cabinets are installed, something that will last for a long time. The organization also uses hardwood floors with as little carpet as possible.

"We could go with linoleum, but it isn't that much more expensive to go up to ceramic tile or laminate bamboo," said Allen.

Lighthouse Communities constructs energy efficient buildings, but they don't go all the way to U.S. Green Building Council Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification. Allen said he has found it doesn't make "good economic sense" for these projects.

"I sometimes have an issue with LEED. It is an important certification, but there are things you can do to be as energy efficient as possible without adding exponential costs."

Local architects, contractors, suppliers

“ It is huge, huge, huge for us to use all local contractors,” Allen said. “Rockford Construction is doing Roosevelt Park Lofts and Uptown Village. We love working with them because they have a commitment to our vision of working with local contractors.”

Often Lighthouse Communities will break down the bid packages so the smaller firms in the neighborhoods where the projects are being built can get involved.

The organization also tries to use local suppliers and local architects on all of the projects. Allen believes that the concept of “buy local” lends itself to sustainability.