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WHEDco going green

Max Mitchell

Thanks to a grant for green energy projects, the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation's \$1 million project to upgrade a major apartment building will soon be in full swing.

On Wednesday, December 1, the TD Charitable Foundation, which is part of TD Bank, awarded the non-profit housing group a \$100,000 grant that will allow WHEDco to begin renovating the antiquated Urban Horizons facility on 168th Street. The project will cut energy costs and reduce the building's carbon footprint.

WHEDco received one of 34 grants totaling \$1.7 million that the bank gave to innovative retrofitting projects across the country.

"This work is a testament to what is possible for the future of green affordable housing," said Mike Rayder, senior vice president at TD Charitable Foundation.

For the past few years WHEDco has been replacing small amenities throughout the building to bring down costs for the group and the tenants. So far WHEDco has attacked the 'low hanging fruit', which are relatively inexpensive to replace, but do not provide very large savings, such as replacing refrigerators, lights and windows.

With the latest grant, WHEDco will be able to kick-start the more costly projects, which include replacing the boilers with more energy efficient technology and installing a more secure ventilation system.

"Now we want to go after the items that pack the biggest punch," said Valerie Neng, sustainability manager for the group. "The project is unique in that we're trying to set an example of how large affordable housing buildings can and still go green."

The roughly 40,000-square-foot building was originally built as a hospital in the 1920s. WHEDco took over the property in 1996 after it had been abandoned for decades, and turned it into a 138-unit apartment building.

The group decided to look into way to lower the carbon footprint of the building after performing an energy-saving project on a different facility. In 2007, WHEDco performed an energy audit on the Urban Horizons building. Since then, the group worked to fix some of the issues, and has continue to raise funding for the bigger projects.

WHEDco officials expect that it won't take too long to start making back the money they will spend.

The group is expecting to reduce the energy, and water and sewer bills by an estimated \$164,448 in the first year, which means a roughly 28 percent cost reduction.

“One of the main reasons why WHEDco’s mission includes building green is that every dollar our low-income tenants save on utility bills means an extra dollar to spend on essentials such as food, clothing, education and health care,” said WHEDco president Nancy Biberman.

The grant comes at a crucial time for the group, as the state is planning to cut support for WHEDco, and similar groups, by about 50 percent. That means more than \$80,000 less in state money for Urban Horizons alone.

“The grant was a huge step forward,” Neng said. “It will help us continue to help low-income residents in the face of severe budget cuts.”