



Foundation Communities plans to make 1,800 affordable apartments more energy efficient with only \$1,000 per unit of its own money at properties like Spring Terrace in Austin, Texas.

Foundation Returns to Green Basics

BY BENDIX ANDERSON

AUSTIN, TEXAS

Contractors for Foundation Communities are getting out their caulking guns—the nonprofit plans to make 1,800 of the affordable apartments it owns and manages more energy efficient.

Once the largest private producer of solar power in the Austin area, Foundation Communities has a reputation as a cutting-edge green developer.

But this time, the nonprofit will focus on conservation basics like caulking holes that let in drafts and installing water-saving fixtures.

“It’s mostly unglamorous stuff,” says Walter Moreau, executive director of Foundation Communities.

But this unglamorous work should save the apartments at least 10 percent on their utility bills, he adds.

Foundation Communities will pay for the work with \$1.8 million of its own money. How far can the nonprofit stretch \$1,000 per apartment? Pretty far with a little help from local conservation rebate and grant programs.

For example, the developer’s 11 affordable housing communities in Austin will receive a snowstorm of blown, loose insulation in their attics this spring. Local utility company TXU Energy will rebate the cost of \$36 to \$85 per square foot.

TXU also rebates the cost of installing spray-on radiant barriers in the attics and caulking tiny holes and gaps that let untreated air into living spaces.

The local utility company also chipped in to give each household three

free compact fluorescent lightbulbs (CFLs).

Austin’s water utility already has paid to replace all the toilets in 11 communities. Without the grants, the nonprofit might not have been able to afford the hardware since low-flow toilets can cost several hundred dollars apiece. Many of the buildings in question are submetered for water and electric, which means the savings from expensive efficient CFLs and fixtures flow past the landlord to the residents.

The utilities that serve Austin have some of the more generous rebate programs in Texas, experts say. But Foundation Communities also found funding in North Texas for its three communities near Dallas to provide residents with CFLs.

These three projects also are receiving a grant from Encore Energy Systems to stop air infiltration (i.e. drafts).

Foundation Communities has a long history of building energy-efficient buildings. About a third of the developer’s 2,200 apartments already have some green design features, from CFLs to photovoltaics.

For example, at Southwest Trails, developed eight years ago, Foundation included heavier insulation than required by the building code and water-saving fixtures such as low-flow toilets. But even at this community, there’s still room for improvement, starting with the flooring.

“We used carpeting,” says Moreau. Unfortunately, wall-to-wall carpeting not only shows wear and tear and is expensive to replace, but it also traps dust and chemicals, making the air harder to breathe for residents with allergies or asthma.

The developer plans to replace the carpets in its apartments with ceramic tile. The tile is a few dollars more per square foot compared with other types of hard flooring. But ceramic tile will be cheaper for the nonprofit in the long run because it can last for decades, says Moreau. ■