

Taking the LEED

YWCA's Supportive-housing Project Is All About Sustainability

By GEORGE O'BRIEN

It's called the 'Campus of Hope project,' a \$13 million initiative undertaken by the YWCA of Greater Springfield. Phase 1 was a new, state-of-the-art domestic-violence shelter and headquarters facility that attracts hundreds of visitors a year who want to try to replicate it in their community. Phase 2, now under construction, is a \$5.5 million supportive-housing project designed to transition women from domestic-violence shelters to safe, secure, longer-term living facilities. This facility will be LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified, meaning that when it comes to the walls, and the work that goes on inside them, the watchword is sustainability.

As she was leading the efforts to build a new domestic-violence shelter and headquarters for the YWCA of Western Massachusetts, and planning a \$5.5 million supportive-housing project that would go up next door, Mary Reardon Johnson says she was always mindful of "not building our daughters' headache." By that, she meant that she and others involved with these projects took great pains to make sure that both facilities were on rock-solid financial ground and would not be an economic burden for future generations of YWCA leaders. And it also meant that they would construct facilities that would stand the test of time — and lots of it.

In short, these facilities are about sustainability, said Johnson, long-time executive director of the YWCA — "economic, emotional, energy, and in all other ways."

This is especially true of the supportive-housing component now under construction. It is designed to provide temporary housing for young mothers and battered women and children who are exiting a domestic-violence shelter, said Johnson, and will give residents about 18 to 24 months to get back on their feet. And it will be the first such structure that anyone knows of (in this region, anyway) that will be LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified. That means that every step of design and construction is taken with the environment and sustainability in mind.

This includes everything from photovoltaic panels to generate electricity, to landscaping and shading to keep temperatures down; from the use of concrete made with recycled materials, to rubber flooring, which cuts down on noise and doesn't have to be cleaned and waxed with toxic materials, said Kerry Dietz, president of Dietz & Co. Architects and designer of the complex.

The drive for LEED certification provides a compelling synergy between the construction work on the supportive-housing project and the work that will go on inside its walls, said Johnson, again returning to the word 'sustainability.' But there's much more to it than that, she said, noting

that the LEED designation has made it easier to raise funds for phase 2 and gain buy-in from the community. And it is providing lessons in 'green' building that can be emulated by others.

Elaborating, she said that LEED certification will add anywhere from 2% to 6% to the final price tag for the project, but there will be long-term payback that will easily negate those expenses. It comes from the attention given such a building, and from the many kinds of lessons it offers to a host of constituencies, including future tenants of the complex.

"I think this is a teachable moment," said Johnson. "We're going to be showing women and children how to live responsibly."

Meanwhile, for Joan Lupa, president of Ludlow-based N.L. Construction, the general contractor for the Campus of Hope project, phase 2 is her first LEED-certified initiative, and it is providing her with her own learning experience.

"I'm learning a new way to build," she explained, noting that garnering the LEED designation requires new approaches and use of different materials with regard to everything from cutting boards and sheetrock (with an eye toward dramatic reduction in waste) to landscaping. "You have to re-educate yourself on everything — from how you put in insulation to even how you apply siding. It's challenging, but it's also very exciting and educational."

In this issue, *BusinessWest* takes an in-depth look at phase 2 of the YWCA's project, and why it is expected to be an inspiration for others as well as a blueprint for success.

Solid Foundation

Johnson recalls her first day as executive director of the YWCA. As she was settling into her office, she noticed that there were felt bags piled under desk. They would soon hold pieces from the agency's silver tea service.

The Board of Directors, she soon learned, was selling it in a desperate attempt to raise some cash quickly in order to meet payroll.

The anecdote, which Johnson has shared

countless times over the years, serves to show just how far the YWCA has come from its very humble beginnings and equally humble times during most all of its 140-year existence.

How the agency went from rented space above the McDonald's on Main Street in Springfield to the basement of a building on Maple Street, to the gleaming campus off Clough Street in the shadow of the old Diamond Match factory, is a well-chronicled and truly inspirational story that took decades to write.

A key chapter involved a visit Johnson took to a battered women's shelter in Jacksonville, Fla. It was taken in 1995 after a third murder involving a domestic-violence victim and the realization that the YWCA needed a different approach and a better model if it was going to effectively battle that problem.

To say that this visit changed Johnson's outlook, as well as the scope of her dreams, would be a huge understatement.

"When I saw it, I stood there and cried," she recalled. "I cried because it never occurred to me that women could have something so nice. Up until the design of our new facility, the definition of a battered women's shelter in Massachusetts was: a women's group stages enough bake sales so that they can afford to rent or buy the biggest house they could possibly afford and stick as many bunk beds in it as they can."

The visit to Jacksonville provided inspiration for what would eventually become the largest shelter for battered women and children in New England, with 48 beds, and the start of what would become a 6-acre campus.

Phase 1 was built with the help of a \$7 million capital campaign that did more than raise money, said Johnson. It also raised awareness of the YWCA and its multi-faceted mission within several constituencies, including the business community, that needed an education.

"Most men don't know the work that we do," she explained, adding that, while soliciting support, she and others witnessed some clear confusion between the YWCA and YMCA. "They had the wrong 'Y.' It was a real struggle."

Long before the domestic-violence shelter was completed, Johnson and others realized that another service component would be needed — a supportive-housing complex that would serve as a transitional facility and enable the Y to provide assistance to more individuals and families.

"Last year alone, we had to deny five out of six requests for shelter because there was simply no room," Johnson explained, adding that there are few supportive-housing options in Western Mass. for women leaving shelters, and as a result, many domestic-abuse victims return to their abusers, often repeatedly. "This facility will give women 18 to 24 months to get back on their feet, while at the

same time making room in our shelter for women in imminent danger.”

While the supportive-housing component made clear sense, taking it to the drawing board and then off it would be lengthy, quite challenging undertaking that involved a number of iterations and potential funding avenues, said Johnson, noting that discussions about such a facility first began in the mid-'90s. The YWCA's success with phase 1 made it somewhat easier to raise money and convince the business community and other constituencies of the need for phase 2, but still, there have been hurdles.

These include the economic downturn, which made it much more difficult for the YWCA to sell the \$5 million in tax credits it was awarded to help build phase 2. Those hired to sell the credits advised Johnson and others to wait until the conditions improved, but they opted for a different, more aggressive route.

“At the height of the use of tax credits, people were getting more than a dollar for each dollar in the credits,” Dietz explained. “When things hit bottom, if you could even find a buyer, people were getting about 65 cents on the dollar. The loss of about 40% of your funding potential has the ability to kill a deal.”

Strong LEEDership

But it didn't kill this one.

“We wanted to go forward, but I was advised to wait, unless I wanted to sell them myself — which I did, which was quite a coup,” said Johnson, noting that they were sold to Berkshire Bank, which financed phase 1, and the YWCA was able to eventually break ground earlier this year.

What is groundbreaking about this project, however, is not only that is being built, but *how* it is being built, Johnson continued, adding that LEED certification became a strong selling point for a project that had many other attributes (especially the fact that it is serving a high-risk population), but needed an additional boost.

“That became the straw for a lot of people,” she noted. “You sell the project, and then say, ‘oh, by the way, it's also LEED-certified. That made it that much easier to sell.’”

But before adding that selling point, YWCA had to be convinced that LEED wasn't simply the proverbial ‘right thing to do,’ but also a smart business decision. And they had to be convinced that LEED was practical, given the population that would live in the apartments.

“We beat the hell out of things,” Johnson, “so to have toilets with two buttons, one for a half flush, the other for a full flush — well, I thought that wasn't going to work. Most of the people we serve would hire an electrician before they change a lightbulb.”

Eventually, though, Dietz and others were able to make the compelling argument was LEED was practical, that the construction would be durable, and that this not only the right thing to do, but something that should be expected from an organization as progressive as the YWCA.

And as she talked about the plans on the blue-



From left, Kerry Dietz, Mary Reardon Johnson, and Joan Lupa, all believe LEED designation was a must for the YWCA's supportive housing project.

prints, Dietz said the apartments within the supportive-housing component — 28 in all, eight congregate, six studios, nine two-bedroom, and five three-bedroom — are minimal, by design. They are being created to provide safety and a chance for women to continue healing (literally and figuratively) while also obtaining an education, securing employment, and strengthening relationship and parenting skills. But they are also designed to inspire people to want something more and better.

And at the same time, they are designed to achieve what is known as the ‘LEED for Homes Silver Certification’ level. Explaining what all that means, Dietz said every phase of the design and building processes must follow strict standards for environmentally sustainable construction set by the U.S. Green Building Council.

For a project to attain LEED certification, it must amass enough points through a rating system that addresses six major areas:

- Sustainable sites;
- Water efficiency;
- Energy and atmosphere;
- Materials and resources;
- Indoor environmental quality; and
- Innovation and design process.

These areas are covered in everything from those two-button toilets to the photovoltaic panels to the fact that storm water is managed on site.

And also in things such as the rubber flooring, which, says Dietz, provides ample evidence that ‘green’ and ‘durability’ are not mutually exclusive terms, and that ‘green’ doesn't mean a building that people can't afford to maintain.

“This flooring is very different, and it offers a lot of bang for the buck,” she explained. “It's more durable than vinyl, it reduces noise — and kids make a lot of noise — and it doesn't require waxing and stripping, which greatly enhances air quality. Overall, it's a very smart choice.”

Meanwhile, a big focus of LEED is waste reduction and proper disposal of waste materials, said

Lupa, noting that, while her company, like all others, has a vested interest in wasting as little material as possible, LEED certification sets the bar high.

“It changes how you do things, how you order things,” she explained. “By making those changes, you can reduce waste by 50%.”

And then there's that synergy between the construction process and the work being done by the YWCA, with the common denominator of sustainability.

“We think of everything holistically,” said Johnson, “in terms of its impact on the organization, our community, and on the people we serve. And part of the equation is generations — how is this going to impact our daughters.”

Finishing Touches

Johnson told *BusinessWest* that, by her estimate, more than 500 people have toured the domestic-violence shelter and headquarters building since it opened five years ago.

“Hardly a month goes by when someone doesn't come for a visit,” she said, adding that ‘tour guide’ has become an unofficial yet welcome addition to her job description.

She expects to have even more of those duties when the supportive-housing component opens its doors late next year. That's because it will likely become a model to be emulated — a model for helping young women achieve independence, a model for green building, and a model for sustainability on many levels.

And not “our daughters' headache.” ■

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