Brewer energy-efficient apartments slated for April opening

By Nok-Noi Ricker, BDN Staff  

BREWER, Maine — The Village Centre apartments are being built to such strict standards of energy efficiency that the builders expect some tenants will not have to turn on their heat next winter.

“There is no heating system — no boiler — in the building. The super insulation, air-sealed units, triple-pane windows, have made it so tight and energy efficient the units are heated up to a point,” Kyra Walker, Community Housing of Maine chief operating officer, said Thursday.

Each apartment has supplemental baseboard electric heating. The heating unit in the one-bedroom apartment is just 2 feet long, Walker said, adding that “the thought is residents might not have to use that at all.”

By adding extra-thick, well-insulated walls and roof, recessed triple-pane windows, an energy recovery ventilation system, and LED bulbs and solar power, the Village Centre complex qualifies as one of the largest passive-certified housing projects in the United States.

“Our hope is that this model is replicated,” Ben Walter, architect for CWS Architects of Portland, said Wednesday while giving a tour of the 48-unit affordable housing complex under construction at the former location of the State Street School. It is expected to open for occupancy in April.

Passive-certified buildings must meet strict efficiency standards developed in Germany that minimize heat loss in the winter and the amount of heat gained during warmer months.

“We have it designed for the coldest day, but we expect it won’t get used that much because of the passive engineering,” Erin Cooperrider, Community Housing of Maine development director, said of the electric heating.

The $9.5 million project is a partnership between Community Housing of Maine, MaineHousing, the Northern New England Housing Investment Fund, TD Bank and the City of Brewer.

The first passive housing project in the U.S. was recently completed in Oregon, but it is much smaller than the 54,400-square-foot development in Brewer, and “this is the only one in a really cold climate,” Walter said.

The three-story building at 266 Center St. has 21 one-bedroom apartments, 17 two-bedroom apartments and 10 three-bedroom apartments, as well as a community gathering area with kitchen, an outdoor playground, barbecue area and residents’ garden.
Each floor also has a laundry room, and there is office space for tenants on the first floor, an indoor play area for children on the second floor and a library/media room with computers for tenants to use on the third floor.


“When we started this, we considered LEED certification, then thought, ‘Is there a way to do it better?’” she said.

“This is a different standard,” Walter said. “It will be very, very green.”

The cost to add the extra efficient features to meet the passive housing standards was “about three percent,” Cooperrider said.

“It wasn’t much compared to the overall cost, but it was an increase,” she said. “Part of the reason we did this project is so we can have real operating data.”

The new parking lot, which will have a walkway connecting to Highland Avenue, is big enough to be used for events at neighboring Doyle Field.

“I think the people in the area will be happy to get cars off the sides of the streets [during sporting events],” said D’arcy Main-Boyington, economic development director.

Village Centre residents will have to meet income eligibility requirements to qualify for the affordable housing, Cooperrider said.

“We call it workforce housing for low to moderate incomes,” she said.

The income maximums range from $25,980 for one person to $37,080 for a four-person household and $43,020 for a family of six.

Rent for a one bedroom apartment is up to $690 a month, two bedrooms are up to $830 and three bedroom apartments are up to $959. Heat and hot water are included, but residents are responsible for their own electric bills.

Around 50 people have already submitted applications through Preservation Management (https://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.preservationmanagement.com/rental/property/village-centere&s=1455405310448000&usg=AFQjCNEN4cwYnRshvDjgXgywY0Nv7pg), who is handling the apartment rental requests.

Wright-Ryan Construction of Portland has been working seven days a week to meet the construction deadline.