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Top Green Features for Affordable Housing

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Affordable Housing Finance. Earth Day 2014. By Christine Serlin

With state and local green building codes emerging and more financing tied to sustainability features, the affordable housing industry has become increasingly green.

In celebration of Earth Day on April 22, Affordable Housing Finance asked several leading developers about the green feature that is a must in all of their new developments. While it was hard for the developers to choose just one feature, the responses were varied from flooring and lighting to selecting a transit-oriented site.

1. Diverting Waste, Indoor Air Quality, and Renewable Energy

"A big priority for us is to divert waste from our landfills so we prioritize recycling construction waste, minimizing the pollution footprint of our construction sites, and making it super easy for our residents to recycle through signage, easy placement of bins, and education," says Susan Friedland, executive director of Berkeley, Calif.-based Satellite Affordable Housing Associates.

Friedland adds that indoor air quality and renewable energy through power purchase agreements or photovoltaic systems also are musts for the nonprofit's new projects.

2. LED Lighting

"We've been specifying LED lighting in nearly all new developments," says Darien Crimmin, vice president of energy and sustainability for Boston-based WinnCos. "Five years ago we started using LEDs with varying degrees of success. Back then, the only available LEDs were very expensive, and we had mixed results with light quality and fixture durability. Over the past few years, however, the LED industry has matured, prices have dropped, and the quality has increased."

3. No Carpet

"As a lifetime owner, we want durable flooring so we generally go with ceramic tile," says Walter Moreau, executive director of Austin, Texas-based Foundation Communities. "It's great for residents, too—no carpet means less trapped dust and allergens in their homes, which makes for healthier indoor air."

4. Transit-Oriented and Smoke-Free Properties

"There are two green features that are a must for our projects: transit adjacency and no smoking," says Jeff Oberdorfer, executive director of San Jose, Calif.-based First Community Housing.

First Community Housing's latest development, Salinas Gateway Senior Apartments in Salinas, Calif., is located across from local and regional transit hubs, and the nonprofit provides local transit passes for the residents, allowing them to travel throughout Monterey County.

5. Higher Insulation Values and Better Air Sealing

Les Bluestone, principal of New York's Blue Sea Development Co., says it's not cost prohibitive to add higher insulation values and better air sealing, and the return over time makes the most sense to him.

"We have recently completed a number of substantial occupied rehabs to large federally funded Sec. 236 buildings in New York City, and while we were able to greatly improve the

operating efficiencies by changing out the systems, windows, and repointing all the masonry, it was frustrating that we couldn't do much with increasing the insulation and air sealing," Bluestone says. "It drove home the fact that we really have only one chance at making the envelope the best it can be, and that's during initial construction."

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