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INFRASTRUCTURE & ENVIRONMENT

Denver's Making Public Housing Desirable

Denver's newest development will promote healthy living, mass transit and energy efficiency. It also happens to be public housing.

BY ELIZABETH DAIGNEAU | JULY 2013



A rendering of the redevelopment of the South Lincoln neighborhood in Denver. *Mithun*

By the time Denver finishes its redevelopment of South Lincoln, a neighborhood near downtown, it will be “safe, holistic, livable,” says Kimball Crangle, senior developer at the Denver Housing Authority. “A place we all want to live.” That’s not typical language for public housing.

Indeed, the city’s plan to redevelop the 15-acre site, which is currently home to more than 200 distressed public housing units from the 1950s, comes with a lot of new features. Once it is completed in 2018, Mariposa, as the South Lincoln community has been rechristened,

will include up to 900 new public housing and market-rate units. The rejuvenated, mixed-income neighborhood will be walkable, transit-oriented, healthy and green.

“We let the community talk to us and tell us and guide us about what type of development makes sense for them,” says Crangle, referring to the comprehensive predevelopment outreach which drew from community feedback as well as a health impact assessment. “Instead of this ‘get me out of here’ attitude, there was a sense of pride in the neighborhood. Residents wanted to leverage its attributes while mitigating the spillover effects from South Lincoln’s obsolete housing and deep poverty.” To that end, a few standout features of the project are highlighted on this bird’s-eye view of South Lincoln.

Healthy Advice

The Tapiz apartments’ 100 units, which were completed last year, are designed for seniors and the disabled. The building, located on the site of an old brownfield, will also be home to community job training programs, including youth activities and art classes. A community

“health navigator” will be on site as well. This health liaison will work one-on-one with residents to help them get healthy. Tapiz residents, for example, have already taken a trip to Mt. Evans, a 14,000-plus foot mountain in the nearby Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. The trip was a reward to residents who walked the stairs a certain number of times and days, or the equivalent of climbing Mt. Evans.

Transportation

Key to the redevelopment of South Lincoln is its proximity to a light-rail stop at West 10th Avenue and Osage Street. About 65 percent of residents here don’t have access to a car, so transit is essential for getting to jobs, services and even the grocery store. Additionally, there is a bike-share station here. Scholarships are being offered to residents who cannot afford a bike-share membership. To further encourage cycling, substantial biking infrastructure is being built, including paths, racks and even housing units that include bike storage.

Built-In Efficiency

The buildings have all been designed to be 50 percent more efficient than current building codes mandate and be a minimum of LEED Gold. In addition to efficient light fixtures and insulation, each building is part of the very first operational graywater recycling system in Colorado. That is, graywater -- the effluent from showers and bathroom sinks -- will be reused in the community’s toilets. Units and houses will have what Crangle calls a “kill switch” that can easily power off appliances plugged into gray-colored sockets throughout the home. These energy efficiency and water usage systems will reduce consumption in the community by up to 40 percent.

Renewable and Reusable

“Sustainability is also core to our mission,” says Erin Christensen, a principal at Mithun, the architectural firm that created the project’s master plan. When finished, the Mariposa neighborhood hopes to get 85 percent of its power from renewable energy. All the buildings will have solar panels and geothermal heating and cooling to drive down utility costs. Plantings and rain gardens -- a first for Denver because of its strict water rights laws -- will be placed along the roadways to catch runoff before it goes into the sewer. The idea is to reduce runoff by 80 percent.

Diet and Exercise

During the planning, a health impact assessment revealed that 55 percent of South Lincoln’s residents were overweight. As a result, roadways will be narrowed to calm traffic and sidewalks widened to encourage walking and other activity. In the buildings, staircases will be located front and center to entice people to climb the steps instead of riding the elevator. “We call it ‘being healthy by accident,’” says Crangle. Community gardens will also be added to each block of the neighborhood. Personnel will be available to help residents learn how to garden, and a youth culinary academy will teach nutrition and offer job training.