

Kenai project provides needed housing to area elderly

By Bill Hess
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A \$2.1 million dollar housing project for the elderly is under construction in Kenai and is expected to open for its new occupants this spring. When completed, it will contain 24 apartments, four community areas, and will incorporate design elements to aid the handicapped.

John Monfor, the executive director of the Kenai Native Association, Incorporated, claims there is a dire need for elderly housing in the area. "A lot of elders right now are living in substandard housing," he explains. "There is a two-story complex for them in Kenai, but it is not enough, and senior citizens cannot navigate the stairs there. Alaska's boom/bust syndrome creates great rental fluctuations, hard for those on fixed incomes to bear. KNA is handling the construction contract, put out by the Cook Inlet Housing Authority, in a joint venture with Lynn Construction of Kenai.

Half of the funds are federal, allocated through the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and half from state appropriations. Although the project is under Native direction, and is expected to have a high Native occupancy, it is open to community senior citizens of all groups.

The housing is being built on a five-acre tract in KNA's 4300-acre Wildwood complex, where the corporation also operates 155 apartments. Once the project is completed, it will not be a true profit-making venture for KNA, but Monfor says corporate leaders thought it was important anyway.

"We want to provide for some of the needs the Alaska Native Claims Act did not make provisions for," Monfor explains. "Such as care and housing of the elderly." Yet Monfor notes the housing project will still blend with corporate profit-making goals. "It will bring more people to live out here," he notes, "we are trying to build a little community here, and with more people here, it is better for business."

As an urban, rather than a village corporation, KNA received no money under ANCSA, but did receive 23,040 acres of land. The Wildwood project is one enterprise the corporation hopes to turn substantial profits from for its stockholders.

Max Dolchok, the executive director of CIHA, stresses that the housing is not only being built with the needs of the elders in mind, but with their input. A steering committee was formed at the outset, and the views of the future residents were sought. From this information, final decisions on design, color and tiling were reached.

Roland Lynn, of Lynn Construction, notes that the 24

apartment structure is being built in four connected sections, each with its own community room. Large skylights will allow sunlight to brighten up the interiors. There are also rooms for craft work, such as ceramics and Native arts.

"This structure is designed and is being built to the same standards and quality as commercial buildings, rather than your ordinary residential unit," Lynn notes. Instead of nails, screws are used to set sheet-rock in place. "The screws won't pull out like nails sometimes will," Lynn explains. Sixteen inch floor joints will make the structure more rigid than ordinary apartment complexes, and high quality materials should create a more durable roof.

Hallways are built wide enough to accommodate foot and wheelchair traffic at the same time. There are no barriers to impede their travels. Doorways are wider, and five

foot clearance is given community sinks on three sides, to accommodate those in wheelchairs. In addition, three of the apartments are being specially equipped for the handicapped.

CIHA officials claim that while all this drives the cost up, it is necessary to truly meet the needs of the elderly in a way which insures their comfort and makes life more enjoyable during their final years. They also expect it to result in lower maintenance costs as time sets in and the apartments age.

Lynn says the interior of the building should be done by late March, and that residents should be able to move in soon afterward. Landscaping should be completed before the end of July.

Renters will pay 25% of their adjusted income. Those 62 years of age and older, and disabled persons of all ages, are eligible.



PHOTO BY BILL HESS

A carpenter works on one of the skylights in the Kenai elders' apartment unit now under construction.