

GREEN SCENE

Solar Boosts Energy Savings at Project

AFFORDABLE HOUSING FINANCE • April/May 2011

BY CHRISTINE SERLIN

TEMPLE, TEXAS—A public housing development serving seniors and disabled residents in this Central Texas city is getting a boost of energy from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

Temple Housing Authority's 100-unit Frances Graham Hall is undergoing a \$1.2 million energy-efficiency makeover thanks to an \$815,000 competitive grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Green Retrofit Program, \$263,025 from the housing authority, and an incentive rebate from the local utility.

Barbara Bozon, executive director of the Central Texas Housing Consortium, which includes the Temple Housing Authority and the Belton Housing Authority, says the housing authority pays all utilities at Frances Graham Hall and wanted to take control of its energy costs by adding sustainable solutions so it could maintain it as affordable housing for residents.

The biggest change for this seven-story high-rise development built in 1971 is the addition of 298 solar panels.

The Central Texas Housing Consortium selected Arlington, Va.-based GridPoint to implement the solar energy solution. The \$350,000 installation, which was paid in part by the \$121,975 incentive rebate from the local utility, was completed in August and is expected to provide 95,572 kilowatt hours annually.

The housing authority also made other energy-efficiency upgrades, including new chillers in the building, new common-area air conditioners, and white reflective roofing. Ceiling fans and fluorescent lightbulbs also are part of the makeover as well as lowflow showerheads and toilets to save on sewer and water costs.

Historically, the development's annual electricity costs have been around \$115,000.

The solar panels along with the other energy-efficiency upgrades will save the housing authority approximately 15 percent to 20 percent a year on electricity and around 49 percent on water and sewer.

"Everybody is very sensitive these days to utility and energy costs, particularly when you have an affordable housing authority whose dollars are so precious," says Jeff Ross, executive vice president of GridPoint. "The ability to be able to save on energy costs is a huge motivator."

Bozon adds: "It is good to know that we are reducing costs while using a green product."

Time to Go Solar?

Using solar energy can cut an owner's operating costs and provide some certainty around future rising utility costs. Also, according to GridPoint Executive Vice President Jeff Ross, there have been substantial year-over-year decreases in solar system costs and many rebate and incentive programs have been put in place nationwide.

"It's really an unprecedented time for federal, state, and local rebates and incentives for solar," Ross says.

If you're thinking about adding solar to a development, he says there are a few factors you should consider first.

The first factor is to look at how much you're spending on electricity annually and the amount of increases you've seen year to year. "There are certain parts of the country where it's higher than others," he says.

Second, Ross says to research the financial incentives that might be in your locality or state for adding solar. "Those have been a big driver for people looking at systems," he says.

And last, owners should think about how important it is to their current and future bottom lines to reduce energy expenditures to see if it makes financial sense. "If you're thinking about it, now is the time to take a look at it," he adds.