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How to make your old condo building more eco-friendly

By Jill Chodorov



Condos produce some of the highest levels of carbon dioxide emissions in the United States each year, experts say.

Of course, constructing a building using sustainable energy sources is probably the most sensible way to go to try to reduce a carbon footprint. But what do you do if you're in an old building with antiquated infrastructure?

Several condo associations are introducing eco-friendly features as they retrofit their older buildings.

With every capital expenditure, association members at Van Ness East, a Northwest Washington condo building constructed in 1964, consider ways to incorporate environmentally friendly options. They started with a roof garden a decade ago and have since added solar panels to supplement hot water heating and permeable pavers to help reduce water runoff and allow for natural drainage.

"This community has had a commitment to sustainability and reducing our carbon footprint for a long time," said Patricia Russo, president of the Van Ness East Condo Association board. "We continue to look for more ways to make an impact."

"I am going to age in place here, and I want to live in a sustainable building," Russo added.

Harry Richter, president of High Rise Consulting and general manager of the nearly 60-year-old 4600 Connecticut Avenue NW, said the building “has reduced greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to 8.8 passenger cars driven for a full year or 99,446-mile drive by an average car or 4,669 gallons of gasoline consumer or 44,277 pounds of coal burned or 96 barrels of oil consumed.”

Richter said he began his efforts to reduce the carbon footprint at 4600 Connecticut by conducting an energy survey of the building in 2010.

Some of the energy efficiency improvements made at 4600 Connecticut include replacing older laundry machines with highly efficient models, installing solar thermal panels on the roof and swapping out inefficient lightbulbs for energy saving bulbs.

Richter, who originally approached 4600 Connecticut Avenue, Van Ness East and Boston House about implementing energy efficiency programs at their buildings, said that there were reservations about the idea.

“Some initially had concerns. What will it look like? How much will it cost?” Richter said. “That has completely gone away.”

To avoid upfront costs for a building, Richter partners with Nextility, a D.C.-based energy firm that customizes energy savings plans for businesses and buildings.

“Nextility is an investor that covers the upfront cost of installing the solar panels,” Richter said. “In exchange, the building receives clean thermal energy at a discount.”

“It has been a contributing factor to a future declining rate of increases in the HOA fees,” Russo said about the solar panels at Van Ness East.

Officials at Boston House, a 1950s condo building in Northwest Washington on Embassy Row near Dupont Circle, say they feel that the installation of solar power at their building has provided benefits beyond cost savings.

“This is ultimately what you want in a building,” said Robert Thomason, treasurer of the Boston House condo association. “We are serious about keeping HOA fees down and getting ahead of the curve for any energy or carbon emission regulations coming up.”

Residential buildings in Washington are required to submit an annual report to the D.C. Department of Environment regarding their energy use, Thomason said.

“It’s just a matter of time before the D.C. government uses this information to create new regulations,” Thomason said. “The government has to get serious about climate change. They know it. Anything that a building can do to start preparing is wise.”

According to the U.S. Green Building Council, commercial and residential buildings account for more than 39 percent of the carbon dioxide emissions in the United States each year. Other statistics show that buildings account for almost half of carbon dioxide emissions.

Most of these emissions come from the combustion of fossil fuels to provide heating, cooling and lighting, as well as appliances and electrical equipment.

Boston House is discussing the replacement of old chillers that are used for air conditioning. As part of this capital expenditure, the association is considering ways to incorporate energy efficiency and environmental impact into the updated infrastructure.

“We are happy to save money,” Thomason said. “But that is not why we are doing it. We want to be a good example to our peer group.”