

Rebirth of a Brandon *slum tenement*

In 1996, the Westman branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) helped shut down the slum tenement at 1202 Rosser Avenue in the heart of Brandon. Seven years later, they opened it up again. About all the refurbished building had in common with the old is the address, the brick exterior and the floor and roof framing. Everything else was new.

The closing of the 25-unit building occurred when CHMA Westman complained to the Department of Health, Building Inspectors and Fire Inspectors about the intolerable conditions in the apartment blocks at 1202 and 1280 Rosser Avenue. The caretaker at 1202 Rosser later quipped to **Glen Kruck**, Regional Manager of CMHA Westman, that the roof leaked so badly and brought down so much plaster that he began every work day by “sweeping the ceiling off the floor.”

The Department of Health closed both buildings, resulting in about 30 tenants becoming homeless. CMHA Westman found alternative accommodations for every one of them and moved them at no cost to the tenants.

'A social gamble'

The building sat vacant with its lower floors boarded up for several years until CHMA Westman decided to buy the building in January 2002 for \$47,000.

“We had this vision of developing it some day as housing, but we had no commitments of support from anyone at that point. You could call it a social gamble. We used every penny of our cash reserves,” said Kruck.

It is a gamble that appeared to pay off. In the summer of 2003, work crews were renovating the structure to provide 26 modern, affordable apartment suites, including 13 transitional units, to alleviate a local shortage, particularly in the rent range affordable to social assistance recipients. The building also contains two emergency shelter units and one supportive housing unit.

A March 2000 study released by the provincial Department of Family Services and Housing found out that half the people in Brandon receiving Employment and Income Assistance, who were renting in the private market, were paying rent at least \$41 a month higher than called for in assistance



The apartment block at 1202 Rosser Avenue in Brandon has been returned to its former grandeur and now provides housing to those in need.

program guidelines. Pressure on the local housing market had been growing since 1996, when Maple Leaf Foods opened its processing plant. Since then several big box stores located in the city and the Canadian Armed Forces moved an infantry battalion previously located in Winnipeg to the nearby Canadian Shilo Forces Base.

Kruck said the goal was to have a couple of floors of the renovated building occupied in October of 2003, with the project completed by December of that year. Tenants were to be mixed, with about half being mental health clients and the rest either working poor or people at risk of becoming homeless. The

CMHA planned to provide required counseling and supportive services on site.

Widespread support

This project was supported by a host of local, provincial and federal agencies and by CMHA Westman which secured a mortgage of \$384,233 to replenish its cash reserves for the purchase and pay renovation and project development costs. CMHA also made a cash contribution of \$32,697 for painting.

The funding line-up included Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program funding of \$504,000, which was cost shared between the federal and provincial governments and Human Resources Development Canada, which provided \$350,000 under its Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative, a key element of the federal response to homelessness. Manitoba's Neighborhood Housing Assistance program provided \$115,644.

CMHC also approved an interest-free Proposal Development Fund loan of \$35,000, which Kruck credited with jump-starting the project. He wrote a letter of appreciation to CMHC that stated: “Without CMHC's loan, none of this would have happened. This is one of the best and most efficient uses of tax money that I have ever seen.”

Kruck also had high words of praise for

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a group who might otherwise have gone unnoticed – work trainees from the Westbran Employment Development Centre who helped gut the building prior to renovation. CMHA says their labour contribution was worth \$87,000.

Stereotype busted

“We so often hear about people on social assistance who sit on their behinds all day watching television,” Kruck said. “There may be a few of those, but we didn’t see any evidence of it on our site. These people worked their buns off in the dead of winter in an unheated building doing some of the dirtiest work imaginable, removing 50 tons of plaster lathe. And they did it all for a living allowance, which was the equivalent of \$3.86 an hour.”

Westbran’s trainees and journeyman carpenters were also involved in the construction process. These workers had their living allowances enhanced by CMHA. Eventually, as they acquire skill and competence, they become CMHA employees, eligible to make \$8.25 an hour plus benefits. All low-income workers on the site were also potential future tenants of the building because they had experienced prolonged periods of unemployment and some had histories of homelessness.

Additional labour came from the Brandon Correctional Institute, where inmates working off weekend sentences reported to the work site for manual labour and then went home, instead of spending their weekend behind bars. The balance of the labour (60%), was provided by private contractors. ⚡

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Update on 1202 Rosser Avenue

The renovated building opened in July 2004 and enjoys 100% occupancy. It contains 14 one-bedroom units rented at the social allowance rate of \$253 plus hydro, nine rented at the regular market rate of \$340 plus hydro, and three two-bedroom units rented at \$480 plus hydro.

What is unique to this building is the inclusion of three emergency homeless units. These units are a haven for people who, as Kruck explains, are sometimes found literally “living under bridges, with no means of securing housing.” The units provide comfortable, secure, self-contained accommodations for up to two weeks. During this time, CMHA offers the services of a staff member to assist the individual or family in securing more permanent accommodations.

Kruck says the design of the emergency homeless units is unique to Manitoba, and possibly to Canada. “Most cities have shelters for the homeless, where staff is required 24/7 to protect people. That’s not the case in these units as they are self-contained. Best of all, the rents from the rest of the building pay for these three units, so we don’t have to charge anyone to stay in them.”

The work training portion of the pro-

gram was also a success. Of the 14 people who participated in the program through Westbran Employment Development Centre, seven secured jobs with other firms and two returned to school. Two workers became tenants of the building.

When asked whether this project changed the landscape of the surrounding neighbourhood, Kruck says, “This was a condemned building, now returned to its stately grandeur. With the entrance, marble floors and its 10-foot wide hallways, it is a beautiful building – with a modern security system.” But the improvements go beyond appearances. “There was a problem in the neighbourhood with people drinking behind the building. Since completion, there has definitely been a damper on some of that behaviour. The physical improvements are significant, but the quality of living in the neighbourhood has improved even more significantly.”

Kruck is pleased to announce that a small surplus in funds existing at year-end will be applied against the mortgage. “We will actually lower the rent for some of the units.” He is also happy to note that organizations in Dauphin and The Pas are looking at housing based upon CMHA’s model.

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