



NOVOGRADAC

Journal of Tax Credits™

Insights On Affordable Housing, Community Development, Historic Preservation, Renewable Energy and Opportunity Zones

September 2021 ♦ Volume XII ♦ Issue IX

Published by Novogradac



EXCERPT FROM

THE **HISTORIC TAX CREDIT** ISSUE

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Implementing Green Building Practices with Historic Preservation Requires Complicated Balance

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An enduring challenge with historic tax credit- (HTC-)financed properties is a high-wire act of balancing green building practices with opportunities to restore, preserve, reconstruct and rehabilitate existing structures.



Image: Courtesy of Christian Phillips Photography
A look at the exterior of The Fairmont Creamery in Cleveland, a former creamery that Sustainable Community Associates used historic tax credits (HTCs) to develop into a 30-apartment building.

Though difficult, such challenges can also present opportunities for creative solutions.

Case in point: When Ohio's Sustainable Community Associates (SCA) set out to convert the Ohio Awning & Manufacturing Company building in Cleveland into housing, it found new insulation for the roof from an unlikely source—a mall that was being demolished.

SCA's Ben Ezinga, one of its three co-founders, said they were able to repurpose polyisocyanurate insulation, which does not biodegrade, and put 15 truckloads to use in what's now the Wagner Awning Building apartments. The insulation has a high R-value, which is the scale used to determine the efficiency of the product to retain heat.

"If you throw that stuff out, it sits in a landfill forever," Ezinga said. "The cool part is if you can find an old mall from the '80s that is being demolished at the right time, there's acres, usually, of insulation board."

Such solutions are necessary when working in a realm of community development that, insofar as green energy endeavors are concerned, is in a persistent tug of war between striving for contemporary efforts toward energy efficiency while preserving and maintaining what people treasure about historic structures.

A Balancing Act

Few know this tug of war as well as Cindy Hamilton, president of Heritage Consulting Group, which specializes in helping owners of historic properties to secure federal tax credit investments. She said government agencies tend to encourage retention and repair over replacement whenever possible.

"They understand the need for sustainability, but the project ultimately must meet the [U.S. Secretary of the Interior's] Standards," she said.

Hamilton said it's sometimes complicated to do both, including meeting the guidance used for rehabilitating historic buildings established by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.

Hamilton said the National Park Service has embraced the green movement within the confines of the Secretary's Standards.

"I think the National Park Service most certainly appreciates the importance of energy efficiency, but it's a balancing act," she said. "I think the National Park Service is also very pragmatic in its approach that the

greenest building is the one that's already built and in appreciating that traditional building materials are more durable than modern materials. I think the National Parks Service does have a very practical approach."



Image: Courtesy of Christian Phillips Photography
A view of the exterior of the Wagner Awning Building apartments in Cleveland, developed by Sustainable Community Associates using historic tax credits (HTCs). The property reused insulation from the roof of a mall that was being demolished.

Trial and Error

Striking balance can inspire innovative solutions, such as SCA's insulation reuse. Many greening opportunities have scale, from something as seemingly small as waste diversion to building wide energy efficient efforts for large properties.

"It's never a one-size-fits-all approach for historic buildings," Ezinga said.

Take the case of Crosstown Concourse in midtown Memphis, Tennessee, a 1.1-million-square-foot behemoth that was redeveloped in the 2010s using HTC equity. A distribution center for Sears' mail-order catalog business for more than six decades before a 20-plus-year vacant period, the structure is once again bustling as a vertical village, with 265 apartments along with a gym, performing arts theater, art galleries, restaurants and retail spaces, doctor and dentist offices and even a charter high school and craft brewery.

Crosstown Concourse is an impressive example of an HTC endeavor that has achieved LEED Platinum certification, said Laura Burns, the community impact compliance manager for the National Trust Community Investment Corporation. Burns said she sees many HTC projects strive to achieve LEED or other certifications—Ezinga said SCA strove to meet Enterprise Green Building Standards for the Wagner Awning building, for example—but find themselves looking for the right

balance between ensuring compliance with Secretary's Standards and energy efficiency goals.

In the case of Crosstown Concourse, Jim Prillaman, vice president at the Memphis engineering firm OGCB Inc., which took the lead on mechanical and engineering aspects of the redevelopment, said it was the accumulation of self-directed conservation efforts that earned the LEED Platinum certification rather than an aspirational striving for the mark.

Copious work went into the planning stages of Crosstown Concourse. With such a massive space, Prillaman said the development team, "needed to figure out what the challenges are, what the opportunities are and work up from there."

Dr. Todd Richardson, president of Crosstown Concourse, said getting the right energy and building management systems in place on the front end was "super helpful" in being able to operate.

"I've seen it time and time again where people won't think about it as a campus and once you miss that step on the front end, you've really shot yourself in the foot for energy savings," Richardson said. "Once you make that mistake on the front end, you can never unwind it."

Among the discarded ideas that the development team tried on the front end to green the building were a chilling fountain to help dehumidify the space as well as pulling outside air through a cool, existing basement.

Though the latter concept was rejected, it inspired the team to further consider how outside air flows into the building. The Crosstown Concourse casts a large shadow in the hot Memphis sun, leading to the idea to put its air intakes on the shaded side of the building.

"It didn't cost us anything, but it will make the air a little cooler," Prillaman said.

Air flow was just one area in which Crosstown Concourse attempted to contemporize the old structure with modern, green efforts. Richardson said measures were taken during construction to crush and recycle 52 million pounds of concrete, scrap metal and rebar. All of

the 3,200 windows needed to be replaced, an effort that carried an \$8 million price tag, but delivered greater energy efficiency. Half of the building's electricity is offset by renewable sources, curbing more than 8 million pounds of carbon emissions. Developers also installed low-flow fixtures, water-efficient landscaping and other wastewater technologies to reduce water use.

Opportunities Aplenty

There are many stages in the redevelopment cycle where green solutions present themselves.

Concrete was preserved when SCA tackled its redevelopment of The Fairmont Creamery Building in Cleveland, turning a structure that previously delivered milk, ice cream, eggs, butter and more to its neighborhood into a 30-apartment building. Ezinga said most of the 120,000 square feet were concrete floors and walls because of the need to keep the creamery's goods cool.

"The embodied carbon of that much concrete was incredible to us," he said. "We thought, 'We've got to use this.' There's no way to tear it down. It's going to sit there forever."

Ezinga said it hit the Enterprise standards through low-flow water fixtures, Energy Star or better appliances and mechanical functions as well as high-efficiency heating and cooling.

In its work on the former Mueller Electric Building in Cleveland—the factory where the alligator battery clip was invented—Ezinga said SCA turned a complicated situation to its advantage. The building's roof and floors needed to be rebuilt after decades of neglect. After receiving approval from the state, SCA used that as an opportunity create an interior courtyard in the middle of the structure.

Value Added

Funds saved from energy savings can find their way back into the community, said Bradley Wilford, vice president of Cushman & Wakefield's Commercial Advisors, which provides real estate advisory services and was part of the Crosstown Concourse development team. He said reducing the costs of overhead operations



Image: Courtesy of Christian Phillips Photography
A view of the exterior of the Wagner Awning Building apartments in Cleveland, developed by Sustainable Community Associates using historic tax credits (HTCs).

doesn't just benefit the community on an environmental level, but also benefits the community monetarily.

"When dealing with the Church Health center, who's a tenant, I can give them a refund check for their energy usage. That's a big deal," Wilford said. "That money goes back into their mission. Part of that monetary savings is helping the community that I live in, so it's very beneficial to me to make sure the operating costs are lower, that we push costs down as much as we can."

In the Future

While creativity could be boundless, Burns said she thinks additional relief could come from a regulatory perspective.

"The Secretary's Standards can unintentionally deter energy efficiency," she said. "Allowing more room for interpretation of the guidelines in response to energy efficiency upgrades may help."

Wilford said he has lobbied in pursuit of legislative change and thinks code enforcement could provide help on the front end for potential HTC developments.

Some change may come on the local level, which is where Ezinga said the deepest and most important work of green building practices comes.

"Every city in the country has now started to catch on to this," he said. "Historic tax credits are supporting naturally more sustainable neighborhoods and that leads to a higher quality of life for folks, too. Investments made in these old neighborhoods by HTCs—benefits for businesses, residents and the climate that are benefits that aren't always appreciated the time, but over time, more of these things are coming online. This is the way development has to be done in the future." ♦

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ISSN 2152-646X

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