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Mar 9

Q&A: Mark Alexander, President and CEO of Urban Builders Collaborative By Jodi LaMarco

MGB caught up with Mark Alexander, President and CEO of Urban Builders Collaborative, to discuss affordable green housing.



What does Urban Builders Collaborative do?

We are a real estate firm based in New York and we specialize in the development and construction of mixed-use and mixed-income developments, all of which have a residential component. Our focus is on emerging market communities or improving neighborhoods in New York City. In particular, we focus on neighborhoods that have experienced significant blight in the past and are currently undergoing a renaissance that began in the mid-1990s. One of our goals is to ensure that the long-term residents in these communities have an opportunity to benefit from the improvements going on in their neighborhoods. Neighborhood residents are typically given preference to about 50 percent of our lower cost units.

Can you talk about a few of your projects?

In our very first project in Clinton Hill Brooklyn, we did a small project with 16 condo units. Eight units were set aside for middle-income households at reduced prices, with a 50 percent preference given to community residents. I believe six of the eight ended up being sold to existing residents or people who were employed in the immediate neighborhood. We're very proud of that. All of our buildings are sustainable, green developments. We didn't feel that it was economically viable to apply for a LEED rating for the building in Brooklyn due to its size. However, we do feel it would have been a LEED certified project because of its density, location, amenities, and design.

Our second project on East 124th Street in Harlem is a much larger project that we're doing in collaboration with Jonathan Rose Companies. The project is 185 units; 92 will be market rate, 55 will be rented to middle-income households, and 37 units will be rented to low-income households. That's a rental. In that project we are planning on being certified as a LEED-Silver project. We're also going to certify the project under the Enterprise Green Communities standards, and we have applied for funding and qualification under the NYSERDA program.

The third project that we're doing is called the Sienna Hobbs Development. That project is also in East Harlem and is even larger- about 350 units with two separate locations. One building is a new construction that will contain 250 to 275 units on east 102 Street. The second is a gut-rehab of five tenement buildings on East 100th Street that will contain approximately 75 units. That project will be about 80 percent low-income and 20 percent middle-income. We're doing that in collaboration with Phipps houses, which is a large not-for-profit community. We're helping to conceptualize and win the project at an RFP that was issued by the city in early 2007. We're also aiming for LEED-Silver on that project. All of these developments are within walking distance of public and mass transit and they're all mid to high density. We're also meeting a whole host of the LEED criteria in the design and specification of energy efficient equipment, buying of materials within a 500 mile radius, and use of renewable or recycled materials. So, there's a whole host of approaches that we're taking to ensure that these developments are as green as possible.

Do you see these types of LEED projects picking up steam?

In the past, folks believed affordable housing could not be really truly green. We are trying to show that not only can it be done, it can be done beyond simply LEED certification by achieving higher levels of

LEED certification like LEED-Silver and eventually maybe LEED-Gold. For now, we think LEED-Silver is the right target.

There is absolutely value to the Albanese and other the other luxury developers of the world, trailblazing new technologies and new approaches. They can afford to try those things because of the type of project that they're working on. So, my hats are off to them for trailblazing new and better approaches. At the same time, our little project in Brooklyn—a very small scale 16-unit project—I believe we did a fabulous job there proving that we could do a sustainable green project. It has a bike room, bamboo floors, energy efficient roofing and recycled roof surfaces, energy star appliances, and all kinds of measures that five or six years ago wouldn't have even been on the radar screen. We wouldn't have even attempted it because it wasn't something that the industry was necessarily focused on yet. But two or three years ago, when we were envisioning this process, we did begin to look at these kinds of things. Although we may not get certified, I think our project holds up very well if it were to be compared to projects that did get LEED certification. It's been fun trying to put the puzzle together, and at the same time, ensure that the project is economically viable.

HPV—the city's housing agency—has embraced the goal that all of their projects would meet certain green sustainability criteria. So I think you'll see a lot more of this in the next few years as this current mayor's administration pushes the envelope on what is achievable with respect to sustainable development in green affordable housing.

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