

Real Estate

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE DECEMBER 26, 2004

Arlington group helps to build a better world

By Gail Ravgiala
GLOBE STAFF

At the temple in Arlington where Peter Feinmann worships, the congregation often speaks of *tikkun olam*, a Hebrew expression that, roughly translated, means "make the world a better place." It sounds like a tall order, but the building contractor has joined forces with other local businessmen, tradesmen, and religious and civic leaders to make improvements one, or more precisely, two families at a time.

For the last 3½ years, the Housing Corporation of Arlington has quietly been acquiring two-family homes, renovating them, and offering the apartments at below-market rates to tenants in need of affordable rental housing.

In a town where the HCA says the median price for a house is \$499,000 and the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$1,361 a month, that need is pressing, said the Rev. John Mueller, a former president of the housing corporation and a member of its board of directors.

Mueller, pastor of Calvary Church, United Methodist in Arlington, says the effort to make affordable housing a priority for the town began with members of the interfaith community, who then turned to local government

ARLINGTON, Page H4

Helping to build a better world

► ARLINGTON
Continued from Page H1

leaders to address the issue. Using the existing housing corporation as a vehicle, they cooperated on a plan to purchase and rehabilitate two-family houses.

Such properties had been the backbone of the residential rental market for working families in Boston's older suburbs for nearly a century. As the real estate market heated up in the last decade, however, many two- and three-unit houses were converted into condominiums, which put pressure on an already tight rental market.

"We wanted to keep them as rental stock," says David Levy, director of the HCA. "These units represent intermediate options between public housing and market-priced apartments."

The highest demand, he says, is for two- or three-bedroom units, which the HCA rents for about \$950 to \$1,050 a month, plus utilities.

With the Arlington Board of Selectmen providing federal Community Development Block Grant funds, which are then used in combination with private loans, the HCA buys, renovates, and maintains the properties.

The small-scale approach is what makes the Arlington program unique, says Levy.

"Affordable housing projects usually involve eight- to 12-unit properties and federal tax credits. But in communities like Arlington where there is no land, expensive property, and limited funding, that wasn't possible."

In Melrose, the nonprofit Affordable Housing Corporation took its cues from the Arlington model, says corporation board member and treasurer Jim Oosterman. It purchased a three-family house earlier this year using a



GLOBE PHOTO/KENT DAYTON

More than 100 volunteers helped the Housing Corporation of Arlington renovate this house on Sherborn Street.

combination of grants and a below-market mortgage loan.

"From Arlington's success," says Oosterman, "we could see that smaller units could work." All three apartments are now rented as affordable units.

According to Levy, "We now own 14 houses," which are located throughout the town and provide housing for 28 families. Since the program's inception, it has served more than 100 individuals.

A recent acquisition on Acton Street, a three-story house built in the early 20th century, has an 800-square-foot, two-bedroom apartment on the first floor and a 1,200-square-foot, four-bedroom unit on the second and third floors. Renovations were completed in mid-December, and one family moved in in time for the holidays.

Contractors get paid for the work they do, but most, says Levy, perform "above and beyond the call of duty. . . . We couldn't do this without them."

Renovations usually include updated kitchens and baths, refinished hardwood floors, new energy-efficient windows, new electrical wiring and plumbing, and

fresh paint inside and out.

For the Acton Street project, Feinmann's company, Feinmann Remodeling Inc., lent the services of project manager Alex Leon to oversee the installation of new kitchens and bathrooms.

"We forgo our net profit," says Feinmann, whose crews also worked on an HCA project last summer on Sherborn Street. That project also involved more than 100 volunteer workers from the community, who stripped wallpaper, painted walls, and did landscaping.

Feinmann, whose company specializes in designing and building additions for upscale homes, says: "This is a nice balance between the fine things we provide for our clients and filling a higher need. There is satisfaction in letting others have some of the nicer things."

"It is so gratifying to see people who can now stay in town because of this program," Mueller says. He adds that it is a true community effort.

"There is a spirit of pitching in and doing whatever you can. Little by little, it all adds up."