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what's up

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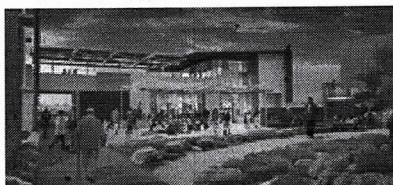
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Green-design contest brings progressive housing to El Paso

By Cheri Pearson



The Housing Authority of the City of El Paso (HACEP), one of the largest in the nation, shelters more than 40,000 low-income El Pasoans and has a waiting list of 14,000 people. Many will have to wait years to get a home, and many are seniors.

A recently held architecture competition is the fruit of an effort to wrest more federal dollars for HACEP and put El Paso on the cutting edge of low-cost, green-friendly housing. The results will soon be visible in a housing unit near the County Coliseum – it's called the Paisano Green Community Project.

"We wanted to build something different," said Gerry Cichon, CEO of HACEP. "We have done Energy Star but not Platinum. We came up with a contest."

The call was put out around the world. It could be found on Architecture Room, an international website that features other competitions from Canada, Greece, the UK, China and more.

The press release called for "the most talented architects to deliver bold, new, and exciting designs." It outlined that "HACEP's goal is to create a spectacular international-quality integrated affordable housing development showing the latest and highest-quality sustainable design practices that minimize the environmental impact of its operations."

HACEP held its breath and was pleasantly relieved to see viable submissions within the tight 30-day timeframe.

"They had to burn the midnight oil to put together the quality of work they did," Cichon said.

And the Winner Is...

HACEP wanted the jury panel to include impartial, top architects. Francois Levy, a Master Architect and Lecturer at UT Austin, and Robert Herman, a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, volunteered their time to help secure the best design for El Paso.

Ultimately, the panel chose Workshop8 from Boulder, Colo.

"There were several compelling entries to the competition. A few were visually arresting, but did not necessarily bear up to close scrutiny," Levy wrote in an e-mail. "Workshop8 had a compelling design that avoided fatal flaws, was humanistic in scale and appealing, created great outdoor spaces, and was achievable within the budget."

The winning design will transform the vacant 46-unit Paisano Green Community in Central El Paso into an LEED Platinum, 64-unit green community for 150 people, mainly low-income elderly and disabled residents.

"The great thing about this design is that it is able to take the community surrounding it, which is predominantly commercial, and create a very safe and livable sanctuary for the elderly and disabled," Cichon said.

On April 28, the HACEP Board of Commissioners unanimously approved Workshop8's design.

"I am blown away," said Commissioner Lynn Coyle at the presentation.

She expressed a strong interest in going the full extent of net-zero, which means the



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building would produce as much energy, if not more, than it uses on an annual basis.

Net-zero is the wave of the future; the goal of the Department of Energy and major agencies is "to make net-zero energy the standard for building design and operation over the next 20 years."

Of the winning Workshop8 design, Cichon said: "We are very confident it will be net-zero. We have the money to make that a reality."

Knocking on Doors

Ah, the money. Much of the pot for the estimated \$10.3-million revamp of the Paisano Community comes from the U.S. government and is the result of a concerted effort by HACEP and the City of El Paso.

The federal government put out a NOFA (Notice of Funding) in 2009, but it was drafted in a way that HACEP did not apply. Cichon flew to Washington to knock on doors. He enlisted the help of Mayor John Cook and Congressman Silvestre Reyes in a concerted effort to have the NOFA revised. The information he and other housing authorities provided assisted in additional funds offered competitively.

In September of 2009, HUD announced \$300 million in Recovery Act Grants was being allocated to 36 public housing authorities across the United States to create green public housing. HACEP was the only one in Texas to receive \$8.25 million dollars. It had put together a successful application that included a loan of \$500,000 from the City of El Paso for additional leverage.

Uncharted Waters

The money will be well spent. Some of the innovative design features include wind turbines, roof-top solar panels and gardens, solar chimneys, permeable paving materials, filtered air and water retention-and-reuse designs.

The walls have structural insulated panels that will provide better noise insulation and reduce the cost of heating and cooling, while the watering system is underground to reduce evaporation.

One distinctive feature of the design is an expansive canopy wall that connects the units. It will provide shade during the summer and block the winter winds. LEED lights will add an aesthetically pleasing look to the wall. The PV panels on the roof are essential to the net-zero design.

"This is the valley of the sun, one of the best places in the U.S. to take advantage of all that free energy," said Workshop8 architect JV DeSousa.

The use of both fly ash and IceStone are considered excellent environmental choices – using them reduces landfill waste. Chemically, fly ash is a pozzolan like the volcanic ash that was used to build famed Ancient Roman structures that are still standing 2,000 years later. IceStone Countertops are made of recycled glass and heat resistant like stone. Both these features are utilized in the design.

"We had a working session today," said Workshop 8 architect Joseph Vigil. "HACEP said they want to see this on the cover of Architectural Digest. As an architect, that is exciting to hear and definitely not something you hear from a housing authority.

"That is why we wanted to work on this project. HACEP is venturing out into uncharted waters and taking sustainability goals to heart."

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