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NMTCs Finance Community Center for Affordable Housing Residents in Boston

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The Roxbury Tenants of Harvard (RTH) held a ribbon-cutting ceremony Oct. 30, 2014, to celebrate the opening of its new community center. For the multi-purpose, resident-controlled neighborhood that operates as a nonprofit corporation in the Mission Hill neighborhood of Boston, it was a significant achievement. "RTH is a densely packed community surrounded on all sides by large buildings and congested streets that present real dangers and obstacles to healthy living," said Karen Gately, executive director of RTH.

The RTH Community Center is a 28,000-square-foot facility with a full-size, indoor basketball court, wellness center, meeting rooms, youth lounge and a computer lab. The community center will primarily serve the residents of RTH properties. During the past 35 years, RTH has purchased and rehabilitated nearly 1,000 units of low- and moderate-income housing, including the 775-unit Mission Park development, all located within a few blocks of the new community center. "This facility is meant to improve the lives of the people of all ages and abilities living in the RTH community," said Gately.

The three-story development will be used intensively by many of RTH's 2,300 residents. The first floor of the property features a large entry foyer and a basketball court with stadium seating, which also serves as special event or meeting space for up to 700 people. RTH even started a youth basketball league last October. On the second floor,

there is a wellness center with state-of-the-art fitness equipment, group exercise/dance studio space, a group spinning room, a large conference room that seats up to 100 people that is also used for health workshops, and a small consultation room for a number of health specialists. On the third floor, there is a youth development center, a play room with a Wii, a ping pong table and game room, a movie area, a computer room, classroom space, a kitchenette, a baby-sitting area and a green roof.

Before opening the community center, there was only one multi-purpose community room for RTH residents, with a maximum capacity of roughly 100 people. Gately said that RTH can now expand the nonprofit's youth development program, after-school program, senior services, indoor recreation opportunities and host assemblies for larger gatherings. "For a kid, it is hard to grow up and live with very limited financial resources; for parents it is hard to manage all the competing demands on your limited time and money and create a lovely safe home and access to affordable recreational and health opportunities for your family," said Gately.

"There were few places for kids to play especially in bad weather," said Gately. "There wasn't a safe place for kids to go ... [Previously,] programs were oversubscribed and we needed a place to help our seniors combat social isolation." Gately said that the new center has something for the entire family; kids can play basketball or play in

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the game room while parents work out, socialize or meet with a health specialist. “Teens will have a place to hang out with their friends in a safe, welcoming environment. The center will support health and well-being, programs and services for residents of all ages and abilities. It is an important tool in the ongoing fight against rising levels of obesity and the many diseases that negatively affect quality of life,” said Gately.

Designing the Community Center

“From a design standpoint, the biggest challenge was fitting into the surrounding neighborhood,” said Peter Munkenbeck of Munkenbeck Consulting, which worked in coordination with RTH on the development of the new community center. Munkenbeck has also worked with RTH on a number of other development projects in the last 15 years. Munkenbeck said that three sides of the community center are surrounded by townhomes, so it was very important to be sensitive to the impact of the building on its neighbors. A set-back at the upper level and an extensive green roof soften the impact. Munkenbeck said that it was important to add an elevator in the community center to better connect RTH residents to the adjacent homes and to the Brigham and Women’s Hospital, which is a teaching hospital of Harvard Medical School.

Breaking Down the Investment

The \$10.7 million development of the community center was financed using a number of funding sources, including a \$2 million new markets tax credit (NMTC) equity investment from U.S. Bancorp Community Development Corporation (USBCDC). “All they had at the time [before the new community center was built] was a small community center building with an open floor plan,” said Laura Vowell, director of business development at USBCDC. “It was used for everything from dancing to exercise space for kids to a community meeting space. There was no place for sports at this facility. Before, kids had to go off-site [to play].” Vowell went on to say that this was a difficult site to build on because it was a “land-locked site” as a result of the rapid growth of the Harvard hospitals, which surround the neighborhood.

Massachusetts Housing Investment Corporation (MHIC) provided the \$6.3 million NMTC allocation. MHIC has



Photo: Courtesy of Massachusetts Housing Investment Corporation
The three-story development will be used intensively by many of Roxbury Tenants of Harvard’s 2,300 residents.

received \$737 million in NMTC allocations in 10 of the past 11 funding rounds, which has allowed the community development entity to finance 78 developments. “This was a way to enrich the lives of the residents,” said Andrea Daskalakis, chief investment officer at MHIC. “The project represents a 15-year effort for the residential board [of RTH]. They recognized the need for other programs to support the community.”

The development received \$4.8 million in sponsor equity and the Brigham and Women’s Hospital, which is located adjacent to the community center, provided a \$4.2 million capital contribution to the development of the community center. “The center is very pivotal to supporting all of RTH’s programs and their vision for the future for social programming and education,” said Jonathan Katz,

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president of Jonathan D. Katz Associates, which worked as a consultant on behalf of Brigham and Women's Hospital. "The community center really improves the residents' quality of life." ❖

RTH Community Center FINANCING

- \$6.3 million NMTC allocation from the Massachusetts Housing Investment Corporation
- \$4.8 million in sponsor equity
- \$4.2 million capital contribution from the Brigham and Women's Hospital
- \$2 million NMTC equity investment from U.S. Bancorp Community Development Corporation

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