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## ECO-FRIENDLY RETIREMENT: "GRAY IS THE NEW GREEN"

It is said that in times of financial misfortune, innovation and creativity are just a few of the positive byproducts that can emerge from an otherwise challenging situation. During the Great Depression, our country developed some of the most significant economic programs of the 20th Century, several of which are still in existence today. As a necessity for many, Americans came to understand the importance of conserving and recycling as much as they could from what little they had.

As we shift into the 21st Century, many technological advances and developments may have prevented another depression from occurring, but other parallels remain. The American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009 — generally referred to as the "stimulus bill" — is already called by some the "New Deal 2.0" and, yes, a website sharing the same name has already been created in order to dissect and analyze the current financial crisis from the various perspectives of our country's leading thinkers. The "Green Movement" has renewed American interest in conservation and sustainability, and it is important to remember that some of the most enthusiastic champions of that movement are the seniors who lived through the Depression Era as children. In fact, the National Senior Conservation Corps (NSCC) was recently launched in 2008 to help senior citizens "green up" their lives and the communities in which they live. The organization's history began in 2002 with a group of retired Yale University professors who wanted to make their retirement community "greener," and similar groups are unfolding in other communities across the country.

In several recent articles on "green retirement," Querencia at Barton Creek (Austin, TX) was lauded for the commitment by its residents to form a task force with the sole purpose of maximizing the community's energy efficiency in as many ways as possible. After little more than a year since opening, some of the energy task force's suggestions were incorporated into the everyday operations of the community — e.g., the indoor swimming pool is now heated using solar panels and films (which also serve a dual role by tinting the complex's surrounding windows) and an investment in renewable wind energy was made through the participation in a green power program offered by the local energy supplier. CSD Architects, project designer for SQLC's Querencia and other communities, installed an all-metal roof at Querencia to reflect the sun's UV rays, which is one way to keep a building cool under the hot Texas sun. Along with the installation of motion detectors and timers on the lighting systems to reduce waste, these are just a few of the relatively inexpensive actions taken by the community to reach its goal of reducing energy costs by 15%. Senior Quality Lifestyles Corporation (SQLC), Querencia's not-for-profit sponsor, is in the process of marketing two other new CCRCs in Texas that incorporate elements of environmental design due, in part, to the positive feedback they have received from their Austin community.

Other architectural firms are incorporating similar design changes into their new and existing communities on a voluntary basis. One of Dorsky, Hodgson, Parrish, and Yue (DHPY) Architects' Chicago clients, Montgomery Place (IL), recently installed a Green Roof garden for their residents. This involved replacing the existing roofing material with sod, grass, and other vegetation built right into the surface of the building.

Not only does it provide beautiful views of the city, but it helps to moderate indoor building temperature extremes by absorbing and retaining the worst of the heat during the day — keeping the community cool during the daytime and warm at night in a natural way. SFCs Inc. has recently completed extensive research on the impact of on-site renewable energy systems in new campus settings. For example, in the Midwest where wind energy power capabilities are many, a \$1.2 million investment in four wind turbines can produce a cost savings of \$146,000 per year in electrical energy expenses (at the current cost of electricity) and has a total payback period of 7 to 10 years. Ziegler will continue to monitor the work of these and other firms who have also incorporated elements of green design into their senior living projects.

While many of these environmental advances are voluntary, other providers are beginning to follow the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Certification program when planning a new community. The LEED program focuses on nine key performance areas from start to finish of the entire construction process. These areas include: Innovation in Design, Materials & Resources, Water Efficiency, and Indoor Environmental Quality (which is especially important since the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that Americans spend around 90% of their day indoors, a statistic likely to increase for seniors in higher levels of care like assisted living or skilled nursing). In fact, DHPY Architects was the first to develop a LEED-certified Green House for seniors in Michigan, making this community a truly green Green House!

One community that has taken environmental creativity to a deliciously new level is Cedar Crest Village (NJ), an Erickson retirement community. With the help of a resident who is a retired chemical engineer, the CCRC now fills its three on-campus buses with biodiesel fuel consisting entirely of used cooking oil from the community's kitchens. The oil must first be refined through a processing system — which cost \$18,000 to set up — but with a partial federal subsidy to help offset the cost, an average fuel savings of \$1,200 per month, and an improvement of nearly three miles per gallon per bus, this eco-friendly switch to biodiesel fuel will pay for itself in less than two years. While carefully managing expenses is a top priority for many senior living providers, Cedar Crest's energy-savings initiative is just one example of spending in the short-run in order to ensure future cost savings in the long-run.

Environmental sustainability is a long-term solution for any organization wishing to improve its bottom line, as well as the health and well-being of the community and residents. While it can take substantial investments of time, money, and a commitment to change inefficient practices in order to accomplish this objective, there are other inexpensive, yet effective steps that a community can take to significantly lower their overall energy usage and costs. Sometimes, sponsors need only look within their own communities to find the support they need!

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