

Yonkers municipal housing to receive 'green' upgrades

By **Bridget McCusker** - July 12, 2021



Through a collaboration among the public, private and nonprofit sectors, municipal housing properties in Yonkers will receive a "green" upgrade.

In late June, Groundwork Hudson Valley, a nonprofit focused on creating sustainable environmental change in urban neighborhoods, announced that it would collaborate with the Municipal Housing Authority for the City of Yonkers (MHACY) and New Rochelle-based landscape architecture firm Mark K. Morrison to build and contribute to the planning of green infrastructure at four Yonkers housing complexes.

"We are thrilled to have the preeminent environmental partner in the Hudson Valley assisting us in making our properties environmentally friendly," said Wilson Kimball, president and CEO of MHACY. "Making this even more special is that Yonkers youth who are part of the Green Team will learn about the environment as well as engage our residents in the planning of this project."



Ross F. Calcagno Homes

The plans will promote "environmental and climate resiliency" in the landscapes of the Ross F. Calcagno Homes, Joseph F. Loehr Court, Kris Kristensen Homes and Msgr. Cajetan J. Troy Manor, all part of MHACY.

Its Rental Assistance Demonstration Program spurred the internal renovations of roughly 1,700 housing units within the system over the past three years, with over 1,300 completed in 2020. Units at the Calcagno Homes and Loehr Court are set to be completed this

year.

In February, the housing authority reported that a comprehensive study of the effects of adding green infrastructure within 10 Yonkers public housing complexes had been completed.

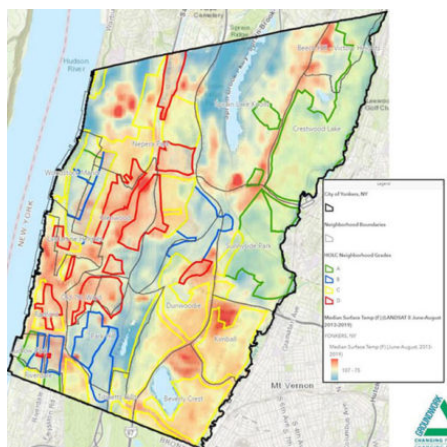
The priorities of that plan included upgrading rainwater collection systems and using environmentally friendly methods to cool the areas around and including housing units on the properties.

The four housing sites in the current project were already underway at the time of the study, but similar principles are being included in the new plans.

Groundwork Hudson Valley has contributed to the project by conducting site visits and soliciting community feedback.

Groundwork's Green Team, a program that hires teenagers enrolled in Yonkers public schools for environmental jobs, will contribute to the improvements.

The Green Team will plant trees and build bioswales, a type of stormwater runoff channel, to reduce extreme heat and flooding complications stemming from global temperature rise and climate change.



Yonkers heat map.

Brigitte Griswold, executive director of Groundwork Hudson Valley, noted that the effects of climate change are more pronounced in the "heat islands" of historically redlined neighborhoods, where a lack of environmental infrastructure, such as vegetation, creates an area where heat is easily captured and retained. Redlining is a discriminatory practice in which neighborhoods were considered by the federal government and financial institutions to be poor financial risks and thus denied certain services given to other neighborhoods.

"This work is part of Groundwork's broader Climate Safe Neighborhoods partnership, which directly correlates climate risks such as extreme heat and flooding to historically redlined neighborhoods," Griswold said.

"Though redlining was outlawed decades ago, its impacts are still felt today. The vast majority of MHACY properties are located in these historically redlined areas, which means MHACY residents are more vulnerable to climate risks than residents in other areas of the city that have less asphalt and more tree canopy. By incorporating green infrastructure solutions into the existing plans, we hope to abate these risks and help address this environmental injustice."

Mark K. Morrison Landscape Architecture often completes work for New York City Housing Authority Projects, but recently became involved with the city of Yonkers by winning a proposal for a feasibility study to connect southern Yonkers to the northwest woods of Van Cortlandt Park for the ongoing Yonkers Greenway project.

Prior to that, the firm had redesigned the decorative pool at Untermeyer Park and Gardens to make it into a wading pool, for which the mosaics are currently being redone, according to Anne Vaterlaus,

director of design at Mark K. Morrison. The hope is that it will be open to the public in the next year or two.

In regard to the MHACY environmental design projects, Vaterlaus detailed how they plan to revamp the outdoor spaces.

"A goal is to provide some community gardens for the residents, mostly for herbs so that they can grow and use them for cooking, encourage them to be outside and have the ability to plant things and socialize that way," Vaterlaus said.

"And in a lot of these sites we're also working toward making seating areas that are comfortable, in the shade, areas for socializing that aren't just playgrounds for kids — areas for adults to be outside and socialize."

"Another big impetus is stormwater mitigation," she said. "Yonkers has very shallow bedrock and it's extremely hilly, so there's a lot of water that rushes down the hills and erodes land and the soil. Wherever possible, we're trying to put in green infrastructure on the sites to capture the stormwater and keep it on site, and try to do some grading so that wherever possible the water will be held in these bioretentive areas."

Aside from benefiting residents of the homes, the changes will also reduce pollution caused by stormwater runoff into the Hudson, Saw Mill, Sprain and Bronx rivers.

Another highlight of the work being completed is a memorial garden at the Calcagno Homes that will honor DMX, the late rapper and songwriter who lived in the complex in his early life.

According to Vaterlaus, implementation will be relatively rapid, with plans set to be submitted and approved this summer for plantings to be completed in the fall.



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