



Meghan E. Jones / Kent Reporter

Harrison House resident Dianne Willis shows off her newly remodeled apartment in the senior housing complex located in downtown Kent.

Harrison House work complete

Senior housing complex needed \$3.9 million in repairs, upgrades

By GRAHAM BLACK

Just 11 years after the city of Kent built Harrison House, it

was falling apart. The apartment house for low-income seniors had extensive dry rot and mold, and it needed millions of dollars in repairs.

City officials didn't want to ask Kent residents for more tax dollars for the public-housing project, and the 100 residents, most of whom are 80 years old and older, could not afford higher rents to pay for the work.

Three years later, the complex, at 615 W. Harrison St., has undergone a \$3.9 million renovation thanks to a public-private partnership between the King County Housing Authority and a private investment firm. The arrangement spared local taxpayers the bill and preserved needed housing for elderly resi-

HOUSE — page 5 ►

► HOUSE — page 4

dents of Kent.

In addition to a new roof and siding, the building sports new furniture, flooring and a new feel, said Building Supervisor Diane Willis, speaking in the remodeled dining room that used to have the unwanted ambiance of a cafeteria.

"The comment from most of the people living here has been that it seems like living in a fancy hotel," Willis said.

Resident Betty Anne Schelter

said she doesn't need many luxuries after growing up during the Great Depression, when goods were scarce and people made do with what they had.

Nonetheless, she enjoys her spacious apartment with friends nearby and having meals in the new dining room.

"The food is excellent. All you have to do is look around and see how fat everybody is," she joked. "We're just as happy as a pig in mud here."

At 89, she still drives and enjoys playing bridge and her

piano. The best thing about where she lives, Schelter said, is being in a community in which the residents keep each other company and look out for one another.

"There's always something going on," she said. "When anybody needs anything, there's always somebody nearby."

In addition to meals, the facility provides an exercise room, a library, a computer room and an on-site hair salon. A support-services coordinator helps residents with outreach and referrals to services in the area.

For Schelter, Harrison House provided an affordable and comfortable living arrangement when, after her husband died, she moved in three years ago from an apartment on Kent's East Hill.

When it was constructed in 1991, builders wrapped the complex in a watertight stucco exterior that trapped moisture in the walls. It was a common building technique at the time, as builders sought to improve energy efficiency by sealing structures tightly. King County

Housing Authority Deputy Director Dan Watson said.

"Moisture gets caught in the walls, and if water finds its way in, it can't find its way out," he said. "There are a lot of buildings from that era that have had similar problems."

The result was extensive mold and rot that required a new exterior. Balconies, windows and decks had to be replaced, as well. They also added new furniture in the common areas and carpeting in the 94 apartments.

By the time the degradation was discovered, the builder was no longer liable for the damages, so authorities needed to find a new source of money to keep Harrison House open, Watson said.

"Our goal was to undertake the repairs without adding any burden to the taxpayers of Kent," Watson said.

The Housing Authority contributed \$750,000, and the rest came from the private nonprofit National Equity Fund. The organization provides money for low-income housing projects in exchange for federal tax credits. Large investors, such as banks, furnish capital to the NEF projects and in return don't owe as much money for federal taxes.

NEF has directed nearly \$4.4 billion to 1,300 projects throughout the country since 1987.

In a statement, Kent Mayor Jim White praised the project.

"With the renovation of Harrison House, the King County Housing Authority has revitalized and ensured the future of this affordable senior community," White said.

Graham Black can be reached at graham.black@reporternewspapers.com or (253) 437-6012.