An underused office tower that has long been considered an eyesore in Lakewood, Colorado, will soon be transformed into 152 units of affordable housing thanks to Metro West Housing Solutions (MWHS).

The property, to be called Fifty Eight Hundred, will feature a courtyard and underground parking. Fifty-four units will be in the existing office tower, while the rest will be built in a new four-story building just to the west.

“It’s going to be gorgeous. It’s going to be exciting,” says Tami Fischer, Executive Director/CEO of MWHS. “It’s going to be a community where people want to live.”

The effort marks yet another milestone for MWHS, which has transitioned over the past 15 years from a traditional housing authority to an agency that added a focus on design and development.

“We were a very conservative housing authority,” Fischer says. “We realized that for housing authorities to survive and thrive, we needed to be more than what a traditional housing authority was.”

Founded in 1974 as the Lakewood Housing Authority, the organization initially focused on addressing the Lakewood City Council’s concern that the community had a shortage of affordable housing.

Back then, the housing authority primarily managed the provision of affordable housing, including Section 8, for individuals and families in Lakewood. However, in the late 1990s, the organization began evolving into a developer, property manager and provider of supportive services.

“The old model of public housing [in Lakewood] was scattered housing throughout the community,” Fischer says. “We wanted to create housing based on how our world had become.”

MWHS decided to sell its public housing properties and put that money toward more efficient housing in better locations for families. Using that approach, the organization has built eight times the number of properties previously in its portfolio.
Now managing its own properties, MWHS felt it needed to rebrand for its name to better reflect the authority’s mission. In 2008, MWHS purchased an office building, the Lakewood Housing Authority name was retired and Metro West Housing Solutions was born.

“Metro West Housing Solutions has created beautiful affordable housing options for our residents,” says Adam Paul, Mayor of Lakewood. “The choices cover a fantastic range from Willow Glen that incorporates a historical home and Lamar Station Crossing that is half a block from a light rail station to CityScape that is in downtown Lakewood. Providing these kinds of options is truly invaluable to our community, and we are proud that such a strong and vibrant housing authority is serving our city.”

MODERN AFFORDABLE HOUSING

According to Fischer, the people of Lakewood, Denver and the surrounding communities wanted more choices in terms of where they lived and their access to public transportation.

“We thought it was important to offer [light rail access] to our families,” Fischer says. “Transportation, child care—all of that is very expensive. If we can help them eliminate one of these expenses, perhaps by not having a car and using the light rail, it’s going to make families have a better opportunity to become self-sufficient.”

The organization also wanted to ensure its properties would fit in with the surrounding neighborhoods and buck the common stereotypes of what affordable housing looks like. Over the years, MWHS has faced some pushback while attempting to incorporate properties into some locations in the Denver metro area.

“Often, neighborhoods don’t want affordable housing [to come in],” Fischer says. “You have to look around and see what is currently being built and make sure what you’re building is just at the level—if not better—of [market-rate properties]. That’s our goal.”

MWHS’s increased focus on quality architecture has led to one of its properties, CityScape at Belmar, winning national awards for its design. The senior apartment community features the edgy architecture associated with many modern luxury apartments.

“We always do focus groups at our properties,” Fischer says. “They said, ‘We know we’re old. We don’t want to be reminded when we walk in our building that we’re old.’ We love it. It’s new, modern and exciting.”

FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY

In addition to a focus on modern architecture
for newer properties, MWHS works to make its properties sustainable. Multiple properties have received LEED® certifications.

In fact, after rebranding in 2008, the organization hired a Sustainability Manager to help make sure its buildings, such as the LEED® Gold-certified Lamar Station Crossing, were environmentally friendly.

"[Sustainability] was something we really wanted to focus on," Fischer says. "We didn’t want to just focus on our new buildings but also on all of our older properties—even our office building—to make sure we were being more than just environmentally conscious."

Fischer says MWHS takes LEED® requirements into consideration while developing new properties. All light fixtures, appliances and flooring material are chosen carefully to meet these requirements, and the MWHS team works with residents to educate them on sustainable practices, such as recycling.

Lamar Station Crossing was built along the Regional Transportation District’s West Rail Line. All apartments have Energy Star appliances, including washers, dryers and dishwashers. Much of this was made possible thanks to the tax credits, including one for $19 million, MWHS was able to secure.

"[Tax credits] are critical to keeping our company thriving and continuing to grow," Fischer says. "Our investors want to invest in our property because we have a history of performing or outperforming expectations."

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