

The Pinawa model: A village cares for its seniors

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This article is the first in a series looking at different housing options for seniors developed by other towns and villages. The aim of the series, brought to you by the *North Renfrew Times* and the town's Housing Advisory Committee, is to increase awareness of seniors' housing. This article was published in the *NRT* on April 17, 2015.

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The need for seniors' housing is increasing across Canada. Pinawa, a town of about 1,450 residents nestled along the Winnipeg River in Manitoba, has come up with an elegant and efficacious solution largely independent of government funding.

Built for employees of the Whiteshell Nuclear Research Establishment, Pinawa celebrated its 50th birthday in 2013. Ageing residents were looking for accommodation without snow to shovel and grass to cut, but finding retirement living meant having to leave their hometown and social network to go to other communities. Over the years various groups tried to develop seniors' housing in Pinawa, but governments were not forthcoming with funding and local people were reluctant to invest. Finally, in 2008-09, the winds changed and the result is the Ironwood, a well-designed and commodious suite residence in Pinawa privately funded through a for-profit corporation, Pinawa Ironwood Investment Limited.

The Ironwood has two components. The first comprises 24 units all on one floor, with a large common room, flower and vegetable gardens, and small exercise room. All suites include a patio and den; interior heated parking is available for a monthly fee. The smallest one-bedroom unit, of 860 square feet, currently rents for \$1,160 per month; the largest two-bedroom unit of 1,155 square feet rents for \$1,462, including heat, water, satellite TV and electricity.

The funding of the Ironwood rests on three legs. The first was an investment of \$1,000,000 by shareholders, who were mostly from the community. The second was a mortgage from a credit union, and the third was a deposit of \$40,000 made by the tenant of each suite. This deposit draws interest at a competitive rate (currently 3%), which is paid monthly and is enough to cover parking. The \$40,000 principal is returned to tenants when they leave.

The Ironwood's second component is a wing of 12 additional suites providing supportive housing. The Ironwood owns and operates the facility but admissions, meals and care are provided by the regional health authority. Supportive housing aims to provide an affordable option intermediate between independent living and a nursing home. Residents may be frail or have memory or mobility limitations but are able to care for themselves with some prompting or assistance. All meals are provided in the dining room, and a "companion" is on site 24/7 to ensure that residents take medications, come for meals and are generally in "good heart." The supportive units are about 550 square feet and include a separate bedroom and living area with microwave. A shared patio off the dining room gives residents a chance to tend plants, have outdoor meals and enjoy the sun in good weather.

Part of the capital funding for the supportive wing was provided in the form of a forgivable loan by the Manitoba Housing and Renewal Corporation to ensure affordable rents. Monthly rent is \$550 and the care package, which includes housekeeping and laundry, is \$738 per month.

How did it all begin?

Building on previous unsuccessful attempts, a group of townspeople, including a councillor and a representative of the Pinawa Community Development Corporation, formed a committee that asked for proposals from developers who had built seniors' housing complexes in rural Manitoba. Of the two developers that responded, Bridge Road Developments, who have an excellent track record building such facilities in southern Manitoba, had the more inviting bid. They are Mennonites from small-town Manitoba who had access to the Steinbach Credit Union, a feature of the west that makes doing business in this area much simpler than dealing with national banks.

Bridge Road and the local committee jointly held open meetings to familiarize residents with the concept and determine if it was possible to raise the necessary investment within the community. Hard work and community enthusiasm resulted in commitments for the \$1,000,000 that was needed. Several large investments meant that smaller investors with \$5,000 to \$10,000 could be included, giving a broad section of the community a stake in the Ironwood and still keeping the total number of investors below the 50 limit. Investors expect dividends from their stake in years to come.

The main motivation for most investors was that the town needed such a facility and many are happy to have it available for their own future use. Investors came from outside Pinawa as well, children and grandchildren who had grown up in this extraordinary small town.

The second question: Was there enough demand from potential tenants? Again, public meetings were held. The developer presented drawings and plans, and some 60% to 70% of the required number of tenants came up with a \$1,000 refundable deposit to be among the first residents.

With investment capital and tenants in place, the next step was to form a corporation to manage the investment funds. This intrepid group, which included a board of directors and an executive, took a deep breath and, with approval of shareholders, signed a contract with Bridge Road. The design, with particular concern for functional kitchens and adequate storage space for tenants, was quickly finalized, land was purchased and construction began.

Another ace Pinawa had in place was a strong team of retired project engineers who were on site during the building of Ironwood with a fine eye for the balance between budget bottom line and upgraded building features. Experts in finance and real estate also provided their time and skills pro bono. The building was completed in the spring of 2010.

The 45 shareholders of Pinawa Ironwood Investment Limited have a board of 10 directors including the executive. Shareholders meet annually to elect directors and approve a budget and project plan.

The result of the hard work and vision of some determined people is a fine facility, locally owned and managed, that is providing safe and spacious accommodation for many people who made their careers with Atomic Energy of Canada Limited. And yes, there is a mortgage with the Steinbach Credit Union!