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EXCERPT

Decreased Competition from Home Ownership in Increasing Interest Rate Environment

Interest rates and home prices have continued to rise, while existing home sales decline, making a case for strong and stable demand for multifamily rentals.

Page 31

How ESG Investing, CRA Regulation Intersect

Investors can find significant overlap between environmental, social and governance investing and Community Reinvestment Act requirements.

Page 33

THE Valuation ISSUE

Veteran Supportive Housing Absorption Lags Behind LIHTC Developments, Despite Demand

Multiple factors affect absorption rates at developments with set-asides for VASH and PBV units for persons experiencing homelessness.

Page 36

Valuation Laws Vary by State, In Some Cases Creating a Disincentive for LIHTC Development or Renovation

How states assess property taxes can significantly incentivize or deter LIHTC development.

Page 40



HISTORIC TAX CREDIT TOOL BOX 🌿

Window Replacement in HTC Projects-General Electric Fort Wayne Electric Works, A Case Study



CINDY HAMILTON, HERITAGE CONSULTING GROUP

For any developer who frequently uses the historic tax credit (HTC), window replacement is seen as one of the more important and challenging components of the review process.

As one of the most visually identifiable features of any building, windows play an integral role in the building's overall design and functionality. At historic industrial complexes, for example, large multilight steel windows with smaller operable sections highlight what are often more traditionally simple brick or concrete buildings. In an HTC project, retention of the

historic appearance of these windows is paramount to the completion of a successful rehabilitation.

In any project that will feature replacement of historic windows, a number of questions from the developer's side need to be answered:

- Are the windows in poor enough condition to justify replacement?
- Can the existing windows be repaired and reused?

Image: Courtesy of Heritage Consulting Group

Windows throughout the General Electric complex were replaced with custom manufactured aluminum-framed windows to match the historic windows.

- How will windows impact energy efficiency?
- And, perhaps most importantly, if replacement is warranted, can a manufacturer provide an accurate match in size, appearance and dimensions, as required by the National Park Service (NPS)?

HTC projects, therefore, can often require significant technical expertise when it comes to window replacement. Perhaps no better example of the lengths project teams have to go through to justify window replacement and ensure the NPS approves their new window is the General Electric (West Campus) complex in Fort Wayne, Indiana. As the HTC project comes to a close on all 10 buildings in the former factory complex, the significance of proper window replacement highlights the plant's transformation into a mixed-use hub.

General Electric Fort Wayne Electric Works

Few companies rise to the historical significance of the impact General Electric (GE) has had on the history of the United States. Akin to the various impacts of Bell Telephone, Walmart and McDonald's, General Electric is synonymous with the growth and impact of electricity in American's daily lives. Following Thomas Edison's invention of the light bulb in 1879, the electrical industry, including manufacturing enterprises that specialized in electrical equipment, opened across the country. The Fort Wayne plant serves as an excellent example of this. With its earliest building dating to circa 1893, the plant was built to develop arc light bulbs. GE acquired the facility shortly thereafter.

Throughout its approximately 120 years in operation, GE expanded to include more than 15 buildings across both the east and west campus. Its impact on the local community was as impressive as its overall size. By 1929, at the company's peak, for example, nearly 10,000 people were employed at the plant.

Window Replacement

In 2017, the ambitious process began of rehabilitating the nearly 600,000 square feet of former factory space

strewn across 10 buildings on 15 acres. As developer Ancora puts the finishing touches on the project, it will serve a multitude of uses, including residential, commercial office space, institutional, restaurant and retail. The project has been received as highly transformative, not only reinvigorating the Fort Wayne community, but also serving as an exemplary model for the potential rehabilitation of similarly large former industrial complexes across the country.

HTCs played an integral role in the feasibility of the project, ensuring that each building, as well as new construction, could be completed. Using the HTCs, however, requires review and approval of numerous scope items by both the Indiana State Historic Preservation Office and the NPS. Included among the review items is window replacement.

A number of the buildings on the GE campus featured a combination of double- and triple-hung steel counter-balanced windows. The triple-hung windows were particularly problematic as these windows were set within "mammoth" openings, as recalled by window specialist Sam Wharton, who surveyed the windows throughout the complex. As he noted, these windows were most commonly in banks of three, each window with nine individual panels of glazing and the panes set back in three different planes. As such, it would be challenging to match and meet wind load requirements.

In his time on-site, Wharton scaled the individual buildings, both at the interior and on lifts at the exterior, to accurately record the deteriorated condition and to measure each window opening and detail. As Wharton noted, "the windows featured such narrow sightlines, which are hard to replicate with modern, insulated glazing. Accurate measurements of the individual sections of the window were necessary to ensure that any new windows would be deemed an appropriate match by the NPS."

To make matters worse, any replacement window would need to be custom manufactured, as no manufacturer had created a product that matched

either the appearance or glazing alignment, let alone both.

Working with Skyline Windows, based out of the Bronx, New York, Wharton was able to configure an aluminum-framed replacement that closely replicated the overall appearance of the historic.

“The final design concept was both creative and accurate,” Wharton said. The new windows not only incorporated distinctive multipaned appearance of the double- and triple-hung systems, but also included the setback planes of each row of glazing.

“Most importantly, the window was approved by the NPS,” Wharton said.

Conclusion

The GE campus’s window replacement speaks wonders to the transformation of the complex and serves as one of the most visually prominent features of the former factory. For any building type, windows are commonly seen as character-defining features and their replacement is closely watched in the review

process. As buildings dating to the mid-20th century period are now considered historic and eligible to use HTCs, different window types, such as curtain wall systems, are creating new and unique challenges for the industry.

Regardless of the size of the project or type of building, the challenges with window replacement in the HTC incentive necessitate early action to offset issues with the construction schedule, be it as a result of the review, manufacturing or shipping process. With an amplified focus on windows, it has never been more important for developers planning to use HTCs to strategize their window scope early in the process.

At the GE campus, Wharton and the project team were involved early in the process and had minimal issues with timing as a result. The challenges overcome by the team further serve to illustrate the hurdles project teams must overcome to replace historic windows, as well as the creativity it requires to create an appropriate replacement. When completed, the result can make the entire project stand out. ❖

Cindy Hamilton is president of Heritage Consulting Group.

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