

Senior citizen complex rises above the rest

By Pat Prince
Staff Writer

Leona Murphy won the lottery and was in the mood to celebrate her good fortune. No, she didn't win \$50 million, but she lucked out in the drawing for one of the brand-new one-bedroom apartments at the newly renovated Neill High-Rise, where she's lived for 17 years.

"I love it," said Murphy, 82, as she sipped punch and chatted with her fellow residents and their guests at the open house held in the spacious new community room. "They have really done a fantastic job."

"They" are the folks at the St. Paul Public Housing Agency, who were bursting with pride this week as they displayed their \$2 million modernization project at the 29-year-old brick apartment building in the mansion-packed Cathedral Hill neighborhood.

The renovation was an effort to attract and retain residents in a fiercely competitive rental market for seniors and to fit in with the historic district. In the process, it has set a new standard for public housing, representing a major departure from the "modest but adequate" guideline traditionally followed by providers of federally subsidized housing.

The building at 325 Laurel Av. has "the most up-to-date and modern improvements we've made anywhere, and we hope to bring other units up to this standard," said John Gutzman, the agency's executive director. Earlier this year his agency was named one of the country's two best large public housing



Staff Photo by Richard Sennott

Leona Murphy has a view of the Cathedral of St. Paul from her fourth-floor apartment in the renovated Neill High-Rise.

High rise continued on page 3B

High rise Continued from page 1B

authorities by the federal housing office. "This is the standard of our high-rises now and in the future," Gutzman said.

When the federal government began building subsidized high-rises for the elderly in the 1950s, there were few other choices for those with low or moderate incomes. But housing options for seniors proliferated in the 1980s in the Twin Cities and many other major metropolitan areas. With its abundance of nonprofit agencies and foundations, the Twin Cities, in particular, experienced a boom in subsidized housing and programs to help seniors stay in their own homes, experts say.

Over the past few years, many public housing agencies have found fewer seniors interested in their facilities, which have increasingly become home to mentally ill or physically handicapped adults. While the St. Paul agency maintains nearly 99 percent occupancy in its 16 high-rises, staying that way keeps it busy.

And so, the once-dowdy seven-story brick building boasts a new "modern/pseudo-Victorian" exterior, a sunny expanded community room with ornamented latticework and

woodwork and a new beauty salon and laundry room. All 66 efficiency apartments, tiny rooms that nobody wanted to rent, were doubled in size and transformed into sparkling new apartments like Murphy's. All 112 units got spiffed up with a fresh coat of paint and new kitchen appliances, light fixtures and floor coverings.

Although public housing agencies are basically charged by the federal government with the task of managing properties, the St. Paul agency offers an increasing number of services to its residents.

Residents pay 30 percent of their annual income, which must be below \$26,600 for a single person, for rent. For that, at Neill and several other of the agency's 16 high-rises, they get weekly visits from a full-service postal van, a grocery shuttle bus, milk delivery, bookmobiles, social workers and barber and beauty salon services, resident caretakers and resident councils, which are actively involved in decisionmaking.

"I tell people they'd be paying \$600 to \$800 a month to get the services and quality of housing we offer," said Carol Roeller, the agency's rental marketing specialist. "In fact, some

residents move out to live with a son or daughter and come back."

If so, they're bucking the trend, experts say. Public housing authority managers across the country report that elderly residents who can move out do so and that those with other options don't move in because they perceive public projects as housing for young people with disabilities, said Chris Hornig, special legal counsel to the Washington-based Council of Larger Public Housing Agencies.

"If there are other kinds of housing available for low-income elderly, once young people start moving in, the elderly leave, and then more leave," said Hornig, who said there are high-rises in Seattle originally intended for seniors now occupied up to 90 percent by disabled young people.

About 70 percent of the residents of St. Paul's public housing high-rises are elderly, while the rest are handicapped or disabled. In Minneapolis, seniors account for about 54 percent of the residents in the 42 high-rises owned and managed by the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority.

The numbers of seniors applying to move in has dropped considerably in both cities in recent years. The elderly make up about half the waiting list

for St. Paul's apartments. In Minneapolis, they make up as little as 9 percent.

"We're not replacing our seniors with seniors," said Tom Hoch, deputy executive director of the Minneapolis authority. "St. Paul will experience the same thing. They lag behind us, but they will, invariably, because of the changing needs of seniors and the need for housing by nonseniors."

Gutzman suspects that Hoch is right. But, he said, "We still want to have a large inventory of housing, maybe a majority of our housing, that is populated by seniors and felt to be desirable by seniors. I don't want to diminish the importance of senior housing in our mission. It's a matter of history and tradition. This is how housing authorities began and were funded, and I think we still perform a very important service to low-income seniors.

"I'm happy that society appears to have taken care of seniors in the way it has. They're healthier, wealthier and have more housing choices, but I think we will, and will have to be, an important housing option for seniors for many, many years. And we want to stay competitive and attract seniors."