

JOSEPH BYERS



Hearing from the People

Lessons at the intersection of sustainability and social justice

By Tom Byers and Trang D. Tu

During the past four years we have worked with some of our nation's finest architects and planners on projects to improve the prospects of low-income families while also advancing the health of the environment. Some of those projects were monumental, like Gulf Coast recovery after Katrina, while others were local in scale, such as the redevelopment of Seattle's High Point public housing project. Those experiences taught us that projects designed from the top-down or "outside-in" are far less likely to be successful than those that engage the people whose lives will be directly affected.

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ABOVE: Seasonal laborers in the Skagit Valley. The Seattle Archdiocesan Housing Authority and Mithun collaborated to develop a better model of housing for these workers which resulted in green seasonal housing. LEFT AND RIGHT: Renderings of green seasonal housing for farm workers in the Skagit Valley. These various housing types are designed to give families privacy. The prototypes will be redesigned at the end of the season with input from residents.

One example of that direct engagement is the on-going effort to create new "green seasonal housing" to replace the 60-year-old farm labor camps in the Skagit Valley of Washington State. Led by the Seattle Archdiocesan Housing Authority (AHA) and Mithun Architects, the project team began their planning with site visits to the camps and held focus groups with farm worker advocates and growers. Acting on that advice, the team designed the units to meet the needs of farm worker families, who now outnumber single men among seasonal workers. The designs

provide privacy for parents and include outdoor shower heads to let workers rinse off before entering the unit.

To address financial concerns, the design team has created a relatively low-cost modular unit that can be re-sold and moved to another location if demand for seasonal labor declines. Green features hold down operating costs. The "bright green" model uses solar panels to power the units when occupied and return power to the grid during the rest of the year.

With generous support from Enterprise Community Partners, Puget Sound Energy, and a local family foundation, the team is working to build prototypes on two farms in time for farm workers to move in next spring. When the season ends, the designs will be refined per the advice of the farm workers and growers, making the prototype more useful for farms and orchards throughout the state. ■

Tom Byers and Trang Tu are currently working on the Green Seasonal Housing Demonstration Project in Skagit County. Tom is a founding partner at Cedar River Group and served as Deputy Mayor of Seattle from 1998-2001. From 2003-2006 he served as coordinator of the Washington State Farmworker Housing Trust. Trang is the founder of Trang D. Tu consulting and was deeply involved in the effort to rebuild the Vietnamese community in New Orleans' following Hurricane Katrina.



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