

Retrofitting with tenants in place

Poorly managed tenant engagement for retrofit projects involving multi-unit residential buildings can impact schedules, budgets and project outcomes. Early, well-planned tenant engagement can ensure projects are on schedule and on budget.

Best practice

Local governments can make it a requirement for complex projects to have a tenant liaison as the direct point of contact for tenants. The liaison will understand and address tenant concerns and communicate these to the construction crew, and will work directly with tenants to accommodate special needs and scheduling throughout the project. If issues are not identified and addressed early in the retrofit process, costs can be 5% to 20% higher than budgeted, particularly if significant interior work is required.



“Anticipating project roadblocks will help minimize cost overruns, prevent delays, reduce tenant anxiety and result in a more pleasant experience for all stakeholders.”

— Sharon Pitamber,
New City Contracting

Intervention

Grandview Terrace is a social housing complex in Vancouver with townhouses and an eight-storey multi-unit residential building. In 2017, the multi-unit building underwent a deep energy retrofit of its envelope and mechanical and electrical equipment. The envelope replacement was mainly external, but mechanical work and window replacement required significant access to the suites. Tenants were not displaced but the contractor was still required to notify them in advance to schedule

the interior work. To manage and minimize impacts of tenant disruptions, New City Contracting appointed a point person from its own team to act as a tenant liaison.

The tenant liaison worked directly with tenants throughout construction to keep them informed about the process, sequence of activities and timelines, and to minimize impacts on tenant schedules and disruptions from noise. Ultimately, the objective of the tenant liaison was to facilitate access to the units; they identified several successful strategies:

- Get to know the culture of the building and understand tenant needs and use of their spaces.
- Accommodate tenants with sensitivities and special needs without impacting project timelines. For example, New City Contracting prepared a weekly schedule that included additional backup units if a tenant could not accommodate access on the scheduled day.
- Develop understanding of the tenants’ concerns and develop proactive strategies to address potential challenges.
- Facilitate communication between the tenants and construction crew to ensure timely and accurate exchange of information.

The tenant liaison approach can also relieve building managers of having to deal with construction issues, leaving them to focus on their day-to-day responsibilities to the building and residents. That separation of duties can be particularly important in buildings that have a history of tenant conflicts, where tenants can be resistant to allowing the building manager to enter their units.

Results

According to the contractor, comparable projects tend to exceed schedules and cost estimates due to disruptions and changes, but the Grandview Terrace retrofit was completed on time and under budget. Perhaps more importantly, the tenants and building manager were happy throughout the process and with the outcome.

As a result of the successful experience at Grandview Terrace, BC Housing now requires a tenant liaison on every retrofit project it undertakes. Sharon Pitamber, who piloted this initiative at Grandview Terrace for New City Contracting, cautions that this role needs someone with high emotional intelligence combined with construction experience and evidence of stress management skills, particularly when the building is home to vulnerable populations.

Recommendations

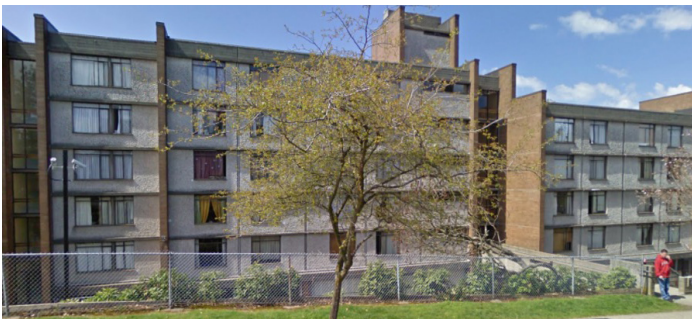
Retrofits with tenants in place should incorporate a tenant liaison who proactively integrates continual, consistent tenant relations for the duration of the project by:

- **Including tenant impacts in the project scope** – Tenant liaison attends all project-related meetings to ensure the impacts on tenants are being considered throughout the project. Tenant concerns are also incorporated into how and when the initial building

inspections are carried out; these are typically just focused on retrofit requirements.

- **Engaging tenants throughout the project** – Tenant liaison updates tenants on project progress. At the outset of the project the tenant liaison hosts a town hall meeting to introduce the project to tenants. It is critical to make this a welcoming event that includes catering as an incentive to attend and where every question is addressed seriously. This is the tenant liaison's opportunity to set realistic expectations about tenant impacts during construction.
- **Ongoing tenant support** – Tenant liaison is the conduit between the contracting company and the tenants. Contact information of the tenant liaison is provided to all tenants for ongoing enquiries. As always, tradespeople should greet tenants cordially and answer simple questions, but direct more complicated questions to the tenant liaison for follow-up.
- **Documenting tenant concerns** – Tenant liaison keeps records of resident complaints and concerns to communicate to project stakeholders and develop a resolution.

The backgrounder *Training up for deep retrofits* outlines skills needed for these kinds of projects, including the soft skills needed to work with tenants and other stakeholders.



Tenants remained in their homes as the Grandview Terrace social housing complex in Vancouver underwent renovations. (Left: before retrofits; right: after retrofits)



Madi Kennedy
December 2020

pembina.org

 pembina.org/subscription
email updates

 twitter.com/pembina

 facebook.com/pembina.institute