

Thursday, July 30, 2009

Nonprofit's project will seek energy independence

Buildings to provide their own water and electricity

by Lindsey Robbins | Staff Writer

Beyond LEED platinum: That is where the Alice Ferguson Foundation hopes to go with its Potomac River Habitat Study Complex project.

The environmental education organization in Accokeek operates the Hard Bargain Farm Environmental Center, teaching elementary and high school students about the working farm and the surrounding Potomac River Watershed.

Already known for its community outreach activities — including the annual Potomac Watershed Cleanup, Concert in the Woods, Theater in the Woods and the Spring Farm Festival — the nonprofit has taken its next step toward furthering environmental responsibility through participation in the Living Building Challenge.

The \$12 million project includes two new cabins, a remodeled overnight lodge and a day-use building that meet all of their own water and energy needs on-site, according to specifications from the Cascadia Region Green Building Council, a chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council. The council certifies projects in the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, program. Its highest rating is LEED platinum, but the new Living Buildings are expected to exceed this standard.

"We want to improve our surroundings instead of just make things less worse," said Karen Jensen Miles, the foundation's program director. "We want this place to be something people can come to and be inspired by. They can benefit from learning what goes into the Living Buildings."

Miles pictures buildings that use captured rainwater and composting toilets, have "living walls" to filter and channel roof runoff, are built with unfinished wood or metals that will weather naturally and include movable insulation panels and sun shading devices to give the buildings adaptability throughout the seasons.

The overnight lodge is already partially powered by solar panels that generate 30 percent of its electricity. Miles said the foundation still needs to determine energy usage for the building's varied users.

M Squared Architecture of Mine Hill, N.J., and Re: Vision Architecture of Philadelphia have partnered with Alice Ferguson on this project, which has about \$2.5 million toward design and development, Miles said.

The idea for joining the Living Building Challenge arose from the foundation's need to renovate its 33-year-old overnight lodge and need for a place visitors could go in inclement weather or just to eat lunch, Miles said. Out of the brainstorming came visions for the Moss and Grass Buildings. The latter will have a raised, three-story, tree house-like structure, with windows for viewing the outside.

"It will be like a magical place," Miles said.

Jason McLennan, CEO of Cascadia who created the Living Building Challenge, said the group has been watching the Alice Ferguson project with interest.

"Having no energy and no water bills ... is a smart investment for any nonprofit," McLennan said.

The foundation, established in the 1950s, has a \$2 million annual budget and employs 30 staff, said Elizabeth Campbell, deputy director of the foundation, which is named after the original owner of the main house.