



Burlington high-rise gets facelift

Vermont's tallest building, a monolith of apartments sited on St. Paul Street in Burlington, usually attracts little attention.

This summer, motorists, pedestrians, boaters on [Lake Champlain](#) and even airplane passengers couldn't help but notice: Decker Towers is getting a makeover.

By the end of September (just shy of the public housing building's 40th birthday) the 124-foot high facade will sport new, thicker insulation and weatherproofing, a full complement of energy [efficient](#) windows and a powder-blue paint job.

The attention is well deserved, said John McDonald, the director of [asset management](#) at Burlington Housing Authority — the agency that manages this and other public housing for the elderly and people with disabilities.

In a climate that tests the integrity of ground-hugging dwellings, this 11-story high-rise has had more than its share of driving rain, unremitting ultraviolet light and the prying destruction of Vermont's long freeze-thaw cycles.

The building's exterior "envelope" had degraded, McDonald said: Cracks had widened, moisture had found its way into the insulation; window seals no longer protected the 160 residents from drafts.

"We've been nursing it through," McDonald said last week.

[Funding](#) for the \$1.2 million project was set aside over the past three years' maintenance budgets. An infusion of federal stimulus funding last year picked up the slack: It paid for overdue upgrades and repairs to plumbing.

Since April, work crews in "cherry-picker" lifts and elaborate, shape-shifting scaffolds have assembled a sturdier fix, one that McDonald said should stand firm for at least several more decades.

[Building materials](#) and methods have improved markedly since the 1970s.

At ground level, standing beside a cutaway mockup of a Decker Towers wall, McDonald explained the retrofit, step-by-step, as performed by Manchester, N.H.-based Exterior Designs Inc.:

- A thorough power-wash.
- Bolt-through reinforcement of existing stucco and insulation.
- Application of a waterproof membrane (a mustard-colored layer).
- New rigid insulation with moisture-removal channels.
- Fiberglass mesh layer (for added strength) and stucco base course.
- Textured, tinted stucco.
- Caulk for all seams.

The elaborate, staggered choreography for the rehab observed a temperamental range of drying rates for adhesives, sealants and mortars. It also shuffled in crane-borne crews from St. Albans Glass Co., tasked

with removing and replacing more than 550 windows.

Residents in each of the 513-square-foot apartments became more than spectators, and Holly Brown, an assistant **asset** manager with the housing authority, coordinated their entrances and exits. With on-site help from site manager Charles Bishop and contracted clerk of the works Gary Dion, **construction workers** installed (and removed, and re-installed) interior dust barriers; transferred pets to and from targeted apartments; shifted furniture in advance of window-installation; and negotiated traffic up and down the building's two elevators.

The disruptions to routine have been well worth the wait, resident David Patrick Call said last week.

"Thank God they're updating our building," he said.

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