

FIELD NOTE

From house to home

Beautifying affordable housing builds tenants' pride

Like many cities, Winnipeg is facing a housing crisis. “You can’t pick up a copy of our local newspaper without reading about homelessness or the need for low-cost, affordable housing,” says Robert Foster, 2025-26 president of the Rotary Club of Winnipeg West. A desire to do something led Foster and his club to the Westminster Housing Society and the beginning of a fruitful partnership.

Since 1995, the affordable housing charity has built up a portfolio of 26 homes and buildings (more than 100 units altogether) in Winnipeg’s West Broadway neighbourhood. Westminster tends to rehabilitate existing buildings rather than develop new ones, and with limited resources, it must prioritize critical structural needs such as plumbing, insulation, and energy efficiency — all while navigating the complexities of funding, financing, and regulation.

Where Rotary members learned they could contribute most was in aesthetic and quality-of-life improvements like fencing and landscaping. These projects may be smaller scale, but they’re deeply meaningful. “Winnipeg West recognized that they could contribute to helping residents feel proud about where they live,” says Brian Pincott, the charity’s board chair.

In early 2025, Foster attended a meeting in the common area of a Westminster property and saw that the carpeted floor needed to be replaced. He arranged for the club to fund a new tile floor, and he and fellow club members, including Kelly Ryback, completed the replacement. Ryback, who spent summers and weekends working for the family flooring business, is new to Rotary, so he appreciated the vote of confidence from club members who let him direct the installation.

That building also has an outdoor common area with a picnic table, chil-

dren’s swing set, and garden that had become overgrown with weeds. Winnipeg West and several other Rotary clubs in the city secured donations, and then volunteers from the clubs and the Westminster Tenants Association were able last summer to weed, plant new perennials and shrubbery, and upgrade the furniture. They also undertook similar landscaping work and replaced a fence at another Westminster property last fall.

Although his term as club president ends on 30 June, Foster hopes that Winnipeg West will continue working with Westminster. He has a long-term dream in mind. “It may take a few years to put money aside for a down payment and the rehabilitation costs for Westminster to buy another house,” Foster says, “but that house would be a Rotary house.”

In the meantime, Foster expects the club will repair another fence this summer. There’s also a plan to replace deteriorating walkways and add garden

pathways with paving blocks that Ryback sourced from a demolition site. “I look for creative, cost-effective solutions,” he says. The pavers came for the low price of digging them up, hauling them away, and storing them this past winter.

Motivating the Winnipeg West club is what the improvements have meant in the day-to-day lives of residents, who are just as involved and committed to the work.

Case in point: While the Rotary volunteers were doing some prep work at the green space last year, a Westminster tenant who lives across the street at another property came by. Foster and the volunteers asked if there was anything in particular she wanted to see planted. Five blueberry bushes and a crab apple tree, she replied. They went with her selections and on planting day, she was ecstatic. “The look on her face made it all worth it,” Foster says. And in return, the grateful Westminster tenant promised him, “I’ll be baking you a blueberry pie.” — JOE ENGLEMAN



Cultivating collaboration are (clockwise from top left) Amanda Enns of the West Broadway Community Organization and Winnipeg-area Rotarians Kish Modha, Terry Dick, and Frank Cosway.

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