



Uncommon Laundry Rooms

BY MICHAEL MARSDEN

A laundry room can be more than just a place to wash clothes. Some apartment owners are combining laundry facilities with fitness centers, media rooms and even child-care services to make these spaces anything but common.

The myths probably are rooted in some truths of the past, but today's common-area laundry rooms hardly resemble their dark, dingy ancestors of 30 years ago. Modern laundry rooms are clean and centrally located in high-traffic areas, and they often are combined with other amenities that turn the space into a community gathering place.

Better yet, they can save owners money because these modern laundry rooms use far less water and energy when compared to in-unit laundry use.

An increasing number of upscale, high-tech community centers that include a laundry function are appearing in apartment communities across the country. Owners are realizing they can use laundry rooms as attractive common areas in addition to maintaining an environmentally friendly building and reaping the benefits of a common-area laundry room's utility-cost savings.

In Cincinnati, the National Housing Trust—Enterprise Preservation Corp. (NHT/Enterprise) is in the process of converting a 703-unit affordable housing community from in-unit laundry equipment to common-area laundry rooms.

"We've looked at the numbers from many angles and come to the conclusion that, if done properly, we'll not only save a lot of money on the utilities—helping us to maintain the community's affordability—but we will create community common-areas that are appealing to the residents," said Scott Kline, Vice President of Acquisitions for NHT/Enterprise.

All-In-One Room

Gone are the days of the laundry room as an afterthought tucked in the dark corner of a basement. Apartment developers and owners are now considering residents' top concerns, such as safety, cleanliness, entertainment and convenience, as they plan the construction and rehab of their communities.

"The placement of the laundry rooms is important," Kline said. "Our goal is to make sure there are ample well-placed and well-trafficked community laundry facilities to help with resident satisfaction."

In addition to centrally located rooms, some owners and developers are incorporating laundry equipment into a larger, multipurpose community room. These community rooms may include anything from a fitness room or a media center to a computer room or even a child-care center, and are adjacent the laundry equipment.

The community room concept is convenient for residents, allowing them to keep an eye on their laundry while attending to other activities in the provided space.

There are several modifications that apartment owners can make to a more traditional common-area laundry room even if a multipurpose center is not the right fit for the community. Placing a common-area laundry room along a well-lit, heavy traffic area is the first step in making residents feel safe. Installing a lock on a windowed door and providing residents with keys or access cards will increase security when they use the facilities in the evening.

Another priority is cleanliness. Residents don't want to clean their laundry in an unsanitary space. It is a simple measure, but the laundry room needs to be cleaned regularly. The facilities also should be comfortable and well-ventilated.

Clean Savings

As construction and utility costs rise, apartment owners are paying attention to areas where they can trim the fat. Incorporating common-area laundry rooms is one way to decrease expenses and increase a community's bottom line.

Centralized rooms significantly reduce laundry-related construction costs. Developers can put more equipment in one room—housing all plumbing, drains, heating and venting requirements in a contained space.

Many communities use "laundry route-operators," companies that supply and maintain the laundry equipment in a community,

allowing owners to focus on other aspects of their businesses. In exchange for the equipment and ongoing maintenance, the route operators and management enter into an agreement to share the proceeds from the machines; each contract is different depending on the each community's needs.

In addition to the proceeds from the machines, common-area laundry rooms promote water conservation and energy efficiency, saving money through decreased utility bills. According to a 2002 study by the National Research Center in Boulder, Colo., apartment communities with in-unit machines used 3.3 times more water and five times more energy than communities using central laundry rooms.

The savings associated with community laundry rooms is not insignificant in apartment community environments; laundry ranks second highest in indoor water use after toilets.

The study demonstrated that when residents have access to in-unit machines they do more frequent, smaller loads. Providing common-area laundry rooms encourages residents to wash full loads of laundry instead of using a full cycle of water for a smaller load. Multiple machines also offer residents more convenience by allowing them to do all of their laundry at one time.

"NHT/Enterprise is looking at a situation in Cincinnati in which we have to keep the operating costs down to maintain the economic viability of the model we're working with," Kline said. "We think we're on to something with the incorporation of common-area laundry into our plans; we can save a lot of money by taking advantage of common-area laundry's conservation benefits versus in-unit laundry."

Following the green building and natural resource conservation trend, including well-planned common-area laundry rooms, is a simple way to implement eco-friendly design while maintaining resident satisfaction. The conservation benefits also will improve a community's bottom line.

If done correctly, residents will enjoy a comfortable area in which to do their laundry, and owners will increase profitability by reducing water and energy costs. ■

Michael Marsden is President of the Multi-housing Laundry Association. He can be reached at 503/236-4111 or marsden@coinmeter.com.

