

# Green Building Initiative Underway

By Kimberly Hayes

**BUILDING ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY**, culturally sensitive housing that can also spur job creation are among the benefits of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development's Rural Community Development Initiative, according to grant recipients. Funds totaling more than \$6.2 million were granted to 38 organizations, including several that directly and indirectly benefit tribes.

This initiative helps tribes and community-based development organizations promote economic growth in low-income, rural communities. Recipients must obtain matching funds. The grants are awarded to public or non-profit intermediary organizations in eligible rural areas, some of which then work with tribes.

The Board of Regents at the University of Wisconsin is receiving \$116,530 to continue the Green Affordable Housing in Indian Country Initiative with three federally recognized tribes in Wisconsin. The grant will help continue work already underway to create housing that is green, culturally relevant and affordable to construct and maintain.

UW is working with several Wisconsin tribes, including the Lac Courte Oreilles, St. Croix Ojibwa and the Sokaogon Community Development Office.

The project, also supported by a three-year grant from the Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment, incorporates training in green building methods and design techniques, said Sue Thering, a UW-Madison assistant professor of landscape architecture. Participants are taught how to work with materials like light straw clay, which can be adapted for Midwest temperatures to create highly energy-efficient structures. Learning about such techniques not only helps with the immediate housing need, but also creates skilled builders in the tribal community, which can open doors for job opportunities and stimulate economic growth in the communities, Thering said.

The USDA grant will partially fund teaching and training to allow an ongoing op-

portunity for growth. "Last year we offered a one-week hands-on training, with three tribes participating. Following that training, the St. Croix tribe built a model home. They then went over to help a second tribe build their model home. Now, the St. Croix will



**Head Start kids and moms on site.**

Photo by Sue Thering/University of Wisconsin-Madison

be hosting the next green building training session," Thering said.

"This whole green process is not about housing. It is about job training, building small businesses and real economic development possibilities," Thering said.

Tribal members who have the green building skills can also use them to build green housing off the reservation, so this training can also facilitate development of tribal construction companies.

UW works with the nonprofit Design Coalition, a nationally recognized firm of architects that design green affordable housing. They focus not only on housing but also on working with tribes on land use planning, Thering said. A lot of tribes are challenged with limited land to use. While they have development pressures, they do not want to disrupt culturally relevant areas or negatively impact the surrounding environment. Therefore, the University and Design Coalition work with tribes on not only what to build, but where to build it, Thering said.

Many tribes want to build housing that not only is green, but also can be used for multi-generational housing, Thering said.

The partners have incorporated that need into their designs, Thering said.

The UW training sessions have been very educational and informational, Lac Courte Oreilles Housing Authority Superintendent George Perry said. The building techniques that are taught make the homes more self-efficient by working with the passive solar resources and also by regulating the heat inside the house using a boiler system, he said.

Traditional Native American building techniques, which actually reflect green design components, are being incorporated into today's designs, Thering said. One designer found a traditional etching from the La Courte tribe, analyzed it and saw that most of the techniques, like using dried mosses, thermal mass in wood floors and fire pad heat, were already incorporated. All the designer had to do was add windows and point the structure

south.

Perry agrees that the techniques harken back to traditional Native American building styles. "The designs are from way back, and we are bringing them into the future," he said.

Thering hopes that this project will become a national model that other tribes and their partners can emulate. For those seeking grants to implement this type of project, Thering recommends getting the project going first and then applying for continuation grants.

"People want to give money to projects that are moving, on the ground, and working — that are making a difference," Thering said.

The pilot projects UW is doing started on a shoestring budget, but they are coming up with preliminary results. For the USDA grant, Thering said, it was helpful that the tribal chairmen were so supportive of the university's project. They sent in letters of support on official, embossed forms from the tribal council. This may have given the project an edge in the USDA competition, she said. ■