

Building Support for Affordable Housing: Perspectives from the Field

by Mindy Ault | October 2015

INTRODUCTION

The development of affordable housing is a complicated process with lots of moving pieces that often involves gaining community approval. In April 2015, developers and others attending our Solutions for Housing Communications convening in Seattle told us that one of the biggest hurdles they face is garnering public support for affordable housing developments. Accordingly, the purpose of this brief is to offer expert advice to help developers and advocates with the community engagement process.

For this report, we consulted with Arthur Sullivan, Program Manager for A Regional Coalition for Housing (ARCH) in Washington state. ARCH is a consortium of 16 jurisdictions that collaborate to address affordable housing issues in the east King County, WA region. A large part of ARCH's role is to assist these jurisdictions with development and regulation of housing policy and to coordinate financial support for affordable housing development. Prior to working with ARCH, Sullivan was a senior manager with BRIDGE Housing in San Francisco and a planner with EIP Associates, an environmental consulting and urban planning firm in northern California. With his experience as a developer, combined with his current position with ARCH, Sullivan has developed considerable expertise in successfully addressing community opposition to affordable housing. Some key strategies that he shared with us are outlined in this report.



Garnering Community Support Can be Daunting

Recently the National Housing Conference conducted an informal survey among members of our Restoring Neighborhoods Working Groups—including affordable housing developers and advocates—to better understand the types of community opposition they face to proposed projects and how they have met these challenges. A large majority—82 percent—of survey respondents indicated that the most commonly encountered opposition to proposed affordable housing developments is who the residents will be—what kinds of people the development will bring to the community. Sullivan pointed out that in his experience, when community members say that their concern is about whom the residents will be, the unease is actually over “what they think the residents will trigger,” noting that in some cases this translates to concerns about crime and safety, and in some cases, the worry is about neighborhood property values. A second major concern—cited by 59 percent of respondents—was centered around public safety and crime issues. Additionally, nearly 90 percent of survey respondents stated that single-family homeowners are more likely than any other group to object to affordable housing development in their communities.



Seven Effective Strategies for Countering Community Opposition

1

Understand the community's values and address them.

Sullivan emphasized first and foremost that a developer must truly understand a community's values and should then evaluate his or her strategy within the context of those values. Community values can include safety, community and personal stability, and personal accountability.

A developer can, and should, tailor his or her presentation of the proposed development to incorporate the standards of the community. If safety is a strong community value, for example, the developer can highlight security features of the proposed development, or describe the possibility of new residents participating in a Community Watch program. Sullivan pointed out that “people want their values to be understood and to be involved in decisions regarding their communities.” Communicating ideas in a way that is reflective of local values can go a long way toward gaining the support of neighbors and decision makers.

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2

Invite community members to the discussion before decisions are made.

Convening a community early in the planning process and listening to what people have to say is a way of demonstrating an authentic intention

to form a partnership with that community, rather than imposing a plan on them. It is also important to note that being overly prepared can work against a developer. Where proposing a generalized idea and requesting input from the community suggests transparency and openness, presenting a highly developed plan that is already in place can have the exact opposite effect. **Reaching out to community members in the spirit of enlisting their input on a project requires that the developer approach them not as a salesman with an objective but as a collaborator at the beginning stage of a proposal.**

Sullivan discussed a case where “neighbors had been encroached upon before with a multifamily project” and were firmly against a proposed affordable housing development. He indicated that in the early-stage meeting held to engage community members, one of the very first questions was whether plans had already been drafted for the proposed project. The developer was able to truthfully answer, “No, we’re here to listen. We haven’t drawn up plans yet.” And with that acknowledgment and display of respect for community members’ input, “the whole attitude [of the group] changed: the discussion became more open, and topics turned to

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specific issues and ways they could be addressed rather than just a negative response to the general project concept.”

Part of engaging the community early, Sullivan cautioned, is to “try to do enough of the community engagement before you have invested too much or settled into a specific design.”

Be careful to not get to a point where you cannot walk away from the project should you not get the community support needed to proceed, or if it becomes too costly to modify designs to incorporate community input. Sullivan indicated that this can be difficult for developers when they have already invested resources in a project, but ensuring community support—or at least the absence of strong opposition—is essential for a successful development process. Just as the feasibility period is used by developers to understand the physical constraints of a property, it should also be used to gain a clear understanding of community issues and address them directly.

3

Ask questions to determine why opponents object to the development.

Sullivan suggested that often an effective way of hearing and involving community members entails not only inviting them to discuss their concerns, but also asking them, sometimes repeatedly, why these matters are worrisome as a way of getting to the root causes. A concern over a high-density development, for instance, could end up actually being about wanting to prevent through traffic on streets that are currently not highly used. Likewise, a concern about overcrowding could have more to do with a desire to maintain open spaces in a neighborhood. **Often, there are solutions to be found when the root of a concern is revealed and it is different from the surface objection.**

4

When Possible, Convene Multiple Small Groups of Community Members

Sullivan’s experience has led him to be a strong proponent of convening small groups during the initial stages of the process, as opposed to holding large community meetings. **In a small group, it is easier to connect with community members and to allow more of them to be heard.** There is also less danger of the kind of snowballing dissent that can develop among crowds of detractors, and more room for at least one potential “supporter (who’s) willing to stand up and say, ‘Let’s be open.’” When people believe their negative opinion is shared by many others, they tend to be much more willing to express it. Convening a large group of community members increases the likelihood that there will be more of those opposed to the development proposal in attendance. Conversely, convening a smaller group—and proactively inviting people who represent a mix of perspectives—can decrease the chances of factions arising and gives all parties the opportunity to be heard, as well as to be exposed to opinions different from their own.

5

Strategically Target Outreach Efforts to Influence the Undecided

According to Sullivan, in a typical community meeting about 60 percent of the community will be undecided, 20 percent will be against the proposed development, and 20 percent will be more supportive. **It is unlikely that a developer can convince the 20 percent who are against the project to support it, but he or she has a real chance of swaying the 60 percent on the fence.** If the community’s concerns are addressed in a direct manner, if community members feel they are legitimately accounted for in the decision-making process, and if solutions are proposed and considered, it is possible for that undecided 60 percent to be won over to a position of support.



6

Sometimes it's wise to let the most critical opponent dominate the discussion.

It may seem counterintuitive to grant the loudest challenger a forum at a convening meant to gain community support. But there are times when this can be a beneficial strategy, particularly when there is known opposition to a project. Sullivan observed that **allowing the most critical opponent to be heard demonstrates a willingness to listen to and address the concerns of even the most fervent opposition.** This receptivity, according to Sullivan, might well be viewed sympathetically by the rest of the group, most notably the 60 percent on the fence who may be convinced that the proposed development is reasonable. Giving the challenger a platform also provides the developer a way to hear concerns and rebut them publicly wherever possible. And in the rebuttals, there is a chance for the developer to (a) demonstrate that he or she has really heard community members' concerns, and (b) identify a way of incorporating those concerns into a solution that works for current community members as well as those advocating for affordable housing.

7

Address concerns at the community level before presenting the project to a council of local decision makers.

If conflict is anticipated, Sullivan advised that the process of mediating it should initially take place at the neighborhood group level, and not at formal hearings in front of the city or town council. He noted,

A lot of groups aren't inclined to do early outreach beyond formally required hearings, but this is one reason why it's important: If there's a lot of outcry, let it happen first in a community setting that you can manage. Public hearings are required to follow formal procedures and are overseen by council members. The first interaction with the community is often the most contentious. If a council oversees that interaction, contention can make it more difficult to gain their support. This is compounded in smaller communities where a modest number of votes or one angry neighborhood can impact an election outcome.

If there is significant disagreement between what the developer wants to do and what the community will allow, it is unlikely that elected officials will take an active stand against the wishes of their constituents. And without the support of city council members, the project is unlikely to be allowed to proceed.

Conclusion

Community opposition to affordable housing is a reality for developers and advocates, but it does not have to be an insurmountable obstacle. Engaging community members in small groups early in the planning process, and listening to and addressing their values and concerns, are key to working with communities that express opposition to a proposed development.

While developers and affordable housing advocates will certainly not win every battle or succeed with every project idea, an intentional strategy for community engagement can go a long way toward countering opposition and winning over a majority before a project is presented to local decision makers. When community members are on board with the proposal—or at least not actively opposing it—there is a much better chance of gaining approval from local officials.

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