

AUSTIN: Proactive Communications is the Key *Foundation Communities*

CASE STUDY IN BRIEF

- To earn the support of a community, developers need to communicate directly with neighbors early in the process. Involving them after a project is underway, or letting them hear about it circuitously, will engender negative feelings toward the project.
- Residents rightfully care about property values, and their efforts to keep out developers whose work runs counter to that concern is good for the affordable housing developers who do their jobs well.

The key to winning the support of communities for affordable housing projects is having a track record of good work, says Walter Moreau, executive director of Foundation Communities, a nonprofit developer in Austin, Texas.

In 2000 Foundation Communities sought to develop 160 units of affordable housing on 28 acres in a moderate-income community on the west side of Austin, one of the very first steps in their process was to approach the community. The developer met with neighborhood and business associations before even applying for tax credits and other funding.

“Our approach is that if we’re going to develop in a new part of town we want to be proactive and straightforward,” said Moreau.

“We made our presentation to the neighborhood group and we said that we were there for their input and hopefully their support,” he said. Because funding hadn’t been lined up yet, the group felt less threatened by the project, since it was clear that it wasn’t being rushed through. “They were polite and they voted to have their leaders check us out.”

Four neighborhood leaders then went on a tour of other Foundation Communities projects, and reported back to the group at the following month’s meeting that they felt the developer would build a community that could be a great neighbor. The group voted to endorse the project.

Earlier projects had been met with much more resistance from communities, said Moreau, but in this case Foundation Communities applied what it had learned in those situations and those lessons proved very useful. One key, he said, is to not try to sneak a project through the process and hope that the community won’t get wind of it until it’s too late to stop it, something some developers do, he said. “We want to make sure that people hear about the project from us, not from something in the mail or in a roundabout way.” That helps develop trust right from the beginning of the project, he said. “We always present ourselves in a professional, candid manner.”

“People that live nearby care about their property values, and that’s something we need to respect,” he said. “As an affordable housing advocate I don’t perceive that NIMBY concerns are all bad, because there are plenty of bad developers out there. If neighborhoods are engaged in trying to prevent bad affordable housing from happening and catching the developers that are sneaking that kind of project by them, that’s not a bad thing.”

In 1998 Foundation Communities faced significant opposition at a meeting with “150 community members on a 100 degree July evening” recalled Moreau. A neighborhood group had circulated a flier depicting the developer as tax credit buzzards circling the neighborhood, and encouraging residents to “pluck their feathers.” But the opponents asked direct questions and expressed their concerns, and Moreau was able to address them all. In the end the group voted to remain neutral on the project. “They said that if we did the things we said we were going to do they believed it wouldn’t affect their property values. They weren’t sure they could trust us that we would, but they admitted that they saw us doing good things elsewhere.”

“People can see our track record and trust that we will be true to our word about the quality, construction, design and ongoing property management,” said Moreau. “The developers who don’t have that kind of track record are the ones who try to sneak it by people and argue that their projects must be allowed to proceed because of fair housing laws.”

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