

## CHARLOTTE: Setting a City-Wide Agenda

### CASE STUDY IN BRIEF

- Charlotte convened a broad stakeholders group, including representatives of groups not necessarily in favor of spending public funds on affordable housing, to draft the city's housing strategy.
- The group's work was based on data collected and analyzed by a non-partisan researcher, which earned the process a great deal of credibility.
- It was effective to highlight the fact that affordable housing is not just needed for very poor families, but also for working families such as firefighters and teachers.
- An important factor in winning over support for affordable housing developments lies in ensuring that existing affordable housing is well managed and looks good.

In Charlotte, North Carolina, the impetus for developing an affordable housing agenda came from the city itself, said Stanley Watkins, head of Charlotte's Neighborhood Development Department. Watkins addressed the City Council at an annual retreat in 1998, and said that something needed to be done about the gap between the city's supply of affordable housing, and the demand. While the council wasn't ready to take up the issue at that time, the conversation that began launched a multi-year process, which has resulted in major policy developments in the city.

The Neighborhood Development convened a 25-member Housing Strategy Stakeholders group to develop a strategy to increase the supply of low and moderate-income housing. The first step for that group, said Watkins, was educating community leaders about affordable

housing, by researching what other cities around the U.S. were doing to address the issue. The group came up with five strategies for the city to address: revise the city's planning, zoning, and building requirements to promote affordable housing; increase the leverage of city subsidy programs; revisit existing housing policies; increase education, outreach and advocacy; and highlight the role of affordable housing in revitalization. The group presented these points at a public hearing, and the city council adopted the strategies.

The next step was to draft recommendations, said Watkins, and another 25-member group, this time called the Affordable Housing Strategy Implementation Team, was formed to do so. The Team developed 11 specific recommendations, including establishing density bonuses, setting up a housing trust fund, and developing locational policies for affordable housing.

In November of 2001 the city council adopted five of the recommendations. The housing trust fund established at that time has had \$30 million committed to it thus far. A housing locational policy was adopted that includes a fair share formula in order to avoid over-concentration of new affordable, multi-family housing in neighborhoods. And a major effort has been undertaken to develop affordable housing along the city's new light-rail transit lines.

The key to the success of the two stakeholder groups, said Watkins, was their broad base and the inclusion of representatives from institutions that didn't necessarily agree that the city should be spending money on affordable housing. Their presence, he said, helped ensure that the strategies and recommendations drafted were reasonable and would be widely supported. "Everyone we approached about participating stepped up and did so, and they all hung on through the whole process."

Also critical to the widespread support the proposals had was that their work was all grounded in independent research. In order to ensure that the stakeholder groups were basing their work on accurate information about the housing problems in the city, the city contracted with a well-respected demographer to produce a report that would help participants get an accurate picture of

the affordable housing gap, said Watkins. “We wanted it to be from a credible source, and not just from a government agency or university. That helped us get a lot of buy-in from a lot of people.”

An important message generated by that research, said Watkins, was that affordable housing wasn’t just an issue for very poor households, but was a problem for firefighters, teachers, police, and other important members of the community. Also highlighted was the issue that many families were finding that their grown children couldn’t afford to live in Charlotte, and so were forced to live farther from their families than they would like to.

The groups’ efforts were well covered by local media, said Watkins, including newspapers and public-access cable television. City staff were regularly invited to speak to community and civic organizations about the work of the stakeholder groups, and the city made public all of the reports detailing the work of the groups.

At the same time, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing Partnership (CMHP) has been developing new affordable housing, said Pat Garrett, president of CMHP, and learned early on how important a successful track record is when it comes to winning support from communities. After their first few project were completed, she said, CMHP was able to tell residents concerned with the siting of affordable housing in their community to go visit some of the existing sites and see for themselves that their concerns about the quality or appearance of the housing were unfounded. “We try to have our apartments be better managed than most market-rate units,” she said. “Maybe there’s not as much brick, and maybe there’s not a pool, but it’s crucial for us to be able to say that our housing looks good and is exceptionally well managed.” Some residents and even some city council members who were initially opposed to CMHP projects were won over when they saw how well the developer’s existing projects were designed and maintained.

While it is too early to tell the effects of this work, Watkins points to the fact that voters approved a \$20 million affordable housing bond issue in 2002 by a wide margin as evidence of the fact that residents of Charlotte have embraced the city’s efforts to address the affordable housing challenges. The bond was promoted through a city-wide mailing of an informational brochure developed by the Chamber of Commerce. The city plans on conducting a market study in 2005, said Watkins, to help determine how well the newly adopted measures are addressing the need.

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