

## DALLAS: Streamlining the Process for Developers

### CASE STUDY IN BRIEF

- When advocates felt that city officials were being unresponsive to their concerns about affordable housing, they turned to the press and succeeded in generating a number of articles about the issue. This attention made the officials take notice and agree to meet with advocates.
- Advocates' decision to frame the issue as an economic one, rather than only a social justice one, proved successful in winning over allies. A wide range of stakeholders supported the effort to adopt city policies designed to foster affordable housing development, helping the mayor see that the issue was a worthwhile one to support.

For affordable housing advocates in Dallas, the campaign to get the city to implement a set of policies and regulations that streamlined the process of developing affordable housing began in 1998. That's when Don Williams, CEO of commercial real estate services and investment firm Trammel Crow and founder of the Foundation for Community Empowerment, and Jon Edmonds, president of that foundation, made it a priority to address the housing needs of poor households in the city.

The Foundation's goal was to revitalize what's known as the southern sector of Dallas, a struggling, underdeveloped set of communities that makes up 49% of the city geographically, but comprises only 16% of the city's tax base.

While developers and CDCs were interested in developing affordable housing in this area, the challenges of dealing with the city bureaucracy made such projects prohibitively complicated, lengthy and expensive. Williams and Edmonds began meeting with officials in the city's housing department as well as assistant city managers, in an effort to express their concerns about the city's regressive development policies.

For a year those meetings were fruitless, said Edmonds, and they were told that the issues would be looked into or that efforts were underway, but no progress was ever demonstrated. That's when the two, along with allies in the business sector, CDCs, neighborhood associations and others decided to take a different approach. They began contacting local media, and soon the Dallas Morning News had taken an interest in the issue, printing articles about the meetings the two had had, and the issues they were trying to address.

The articles spurred Mayor Ron Kirk to agree to meet with Edmonds and Williams to begin discussing how city policies could be changed to address their concerns. When Laura Miller was elected mayor and took office in February of 2002 she asked Williams to chair The Mayor's Taskforce on Affordable Workforce Housing, charged with developing recommendations to address the city's affordable housing needs.

The consulting firm McKinsey & Co. donated what Edmonds estimates to have been \$700,000 worth of work in developing a report for the Taskforce, laying out 33 recommendations for changes in the city's policies. Proposed changes included speeding up the time it took to turn over a lot for development from the current two and a half years to just 60 days. Other recommendations dealt with issues of utility hook-ups, street width requirements, regulations regarding alleys, and how the city coordinates the development process among agencies and departments. The changes, said Edmonds, would ultimately benefit all developers, not just those who build affordable housing.

The city council promptly adopted the report and its recommendations in September of 2002, and Mayor Miller appointed an implementation committee, to be chaired by Edmonds, to oversee implementation of the recommendations. In early 2004 the committee issued what a report on what Edmonds said have been "sweeping changes in practice and attitude in the city government. There have been big operational and policy changes, including a state law establishing a land

bank and passage of a bond issue to support affordable housing. We think we've gotten this ship turned around and going in the right direction."

The turnaround in the attitude of the mayor over the course of these few years was remarkable, said Edmonds. Miller was a city council member prior to becoming mayor, and was opposed to policies designed to promote affordable housing. When she spoke to a group of developers, civic leaders, lenders, and nonprofits at a housing summit in January of 2003 she admitted that before establishing the Taskforce she knew little about the issue and "didn't get it. Now I get it," she said. She has gone on to become a vocal proponent of the changes needed to promote the development of affordable housing.

Two messages accounted for the mayor's transformation, said Edmonds. First, she saw that the issue was a popular one. "She saw that it was a platform that lifted her up and also strengthened the city."

Second, advocates for the changes aggressively promoted the fact that the development of affordable housing was not just a social justice issue, but an economic one as well. McKinsey & Co.'s research for the Taskforce included detailed analysis of the economic impact of the development of affordable housing on unused land in Dallas, and showed that the return in terms of property taxes, jobs in the construction trades, and businesses that would form as a result of the new communities being built would be significant.

Edmonds added that Miller's participation in the U.S. Conference of Mayors played a role in convincing her that Dallas needed to take action. Many of the organization's reports highlighted the good work of some cities in promoting affordable housing, and also pointed out the cities that fell short.

There hasn't been any opposition to the work of the Taskforce and there have been no significant NIMBY battles either, said Edmonds, and so a public education campaign has so far been unnecessary. The press attention given to the effort has made people aware of what's going on, he said, but no paid advertisement or additional public relations efforts have happened.

As of March of 2003 3,700 units of affordable housing were under construction in the southern sector of Dallas, and Edmonds said that by the end of the year that number would be closer to six or seven thousand. Just three years ago no more than 50 affordable units were being built each year in that same area. Dallas still needs an additional 30,000 affordable housing units, said Edmonds, but attaining that goal in the next five years is so is possible, thanks to the changes that have come about from the work of the Taskforce.

\* \* \*

For more information, contact:

Jon Edmonds, President  
Foundation for Community Empowerment  
2001 Ross Avenue  
Suite 3350  
Dallas, TX 75201  
<http://www.fce-dallas.org/>  
jedmonds@fce-dallas.org

---

*The NeighborWorks® Symposium on Multifamily Excellence and  
The Campaign for Affordable Housing  
gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the  
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.*

---