

LOS ANGELES: Winning a Housing Trust Fund *Housing LA*

CASE STUDY IN BRIEF

- Launched in 1998, the \$375,000 Housing LA campaign set out to win a housing trust fund for the city. In 2002, the newly elected mayor proposed such a fund, with \$100 million per year in dedicated revenue.
- The campaign was successful, in part, because of its long-range planning and ability to sustain itself during the entire process.
- Seizing the opportunity presented by the upcoming elections, and anticipated turnover of the mayor's office and most of the city council seats, allowed the campaign to focus its message on candidates for these offices.
- Not focusing on where funds would come from allowed the campaign to bring in many more allies, since it avoided disagreements about what resources would be tapped for the funding.
- Offering tours of slums and of well-built and -managed affordable housing developments was an effective tool in winning support from candidates.

After a four year campaign, affordable housing advocates in Los Angeles won a huge victory in January 2002, when Mayor James Hahn announced a proposal for a housing trust fund. To be funded with \$100 million of public funds each year, the fund would be one of the largest in the nation. The mayor credited the campaign run by Housing LA for bringing the issue to the fore and making officials take action on providing a funding stream to produce affordable housing.

The campaign began in 1998, with research on trust funds and the development of a broad-based coalition. The breadth of Housing LA's membership, explained Executive Director Jan Breidenbach, was critical to generating support from city leaders. The steering committee was chaired by the Cardinal of the Los Angeles Archdiocese, and the head of the Los Angeles labor movement. The committee included representatives from tenants' groups, environmental organizations, and the business community, among others.

The most important decision for the campaign, said Breidenbach, was one of timing. Because of term limits, the mayor and half of the city council would be turning over in the 2001 elections, and a decision was made to target candidates leading up to the election, and then aim to have a trust fund in place by six months after the new officials took office.

"We decided we would create a buzz during the election cycle," she said. "We felt that with new people coming in, candidates are much more accessible than incumbents." This strategy also allowed the campaign to be very focused, and only concentrate on council districts where elections were being held.

Also decided upon early was the goal of winning \$100 million for the fund annually. "You can make a campaign like this about a dollar amount, or about a source of funds, or about a number of units you want to produce, but you can't make it about all of them," said Breidenbach. Focusing on the dollar amount provided less opportunity for divisiveness among potential supporters, decided campaign leaders, since the issue of where funds would come from was not at the fore of the discussion. "We figured we'd be dead in the water if we focused on sources, because we'd just engender opposition." That strategy proved successful, said Breidenbach, as evidenced by the fact that the campaign had no opposition. The campaign did include a list of sources that would generate the revenue, but did not make these the core issue.

"We made these decisions up front, and then calculated our message to meet our strategic goals and timeline," said Breidenbach.

The message was about the presence of a housing crisis, and wasn't unique in and of itself, she said. The campaign took the message directly to 42 candidates for council and mayor, asking each of the candidates to fill out a survey and compiling a voters' guide concerning their responses on housing issues. "The City of Los Angeles plays a critical role in affordable housing," read the introduction to the guide. "Since the City plays such a large role in housing, voters need to know where the candidates for mayor stand on key housing issues." The guide listed candidates' positions on issues ranging from funding for the housing trust fund to the prosecution of slumlords, and was distributed to about 10,000 members of the coalition's organizations.

Every candidate took the campaign up on its offer of a 'housing tour,' that included visits to neighborhood slums, as well as to affordable housing units. "Visiting the slums impacted them more than the affordable housing," said Breidenbach. "They had to walk through hallways where they would see rats and that would stink of urine. If you're at all a caring person, that does something to you." The message following the tours was "a trust fund is a solution. Provide the funds, and we can fix this. Nobody's in favor of slum housing, so emphasizing it was the right strategy."

The campaign also held candidate forums, and participated in other organizations' forums, asking housing questions. By the end of the campaign, every candidate for council and mayor had gone on record in support of the housing trust fund proposal. When Mayor Hahn took office, he mentioned only three issues in his 11-minute inaugural address – one of them was the housing trust fund.

Following the election, the campaign organized weekly lobby visits of five to ten individuals from different constituencies, such as tenants, labor or religious groups. These people would visit council members' offices and remind them to support the trust fund.

While Mayor Hahn had expressed support for the trust fund during his campaign and in his inaugural address, that support didn't immediately translate into action. Hahn's administration was indeed working on a plan for a trust fund, but was not including advocates in the process. In order to persuade him to do so, Housing LA held a press conference with key supporters, including some council members, and organized a march and rally at city hall. Hahn finally invited campaign leaders to his office to discuss the plan he had been developing, and assured them they would be kept in the loop and solicited for input. After the mayor's proposal was released, Housing LA leaders were invited to participate in the process of crafting the fund.

Press coverage of the campaign was positive, said Breidenbach, with a handful of articles about Housing LA's efforts in the city's major newspapers. When a new publisher came to the *LA Times* in the middle of the campaign, he agreed to go on a housing tour, and a very supportive editorial that mentioned Housing LA by name followed. Some local papers published op-ed pieces in support of the campaign, and a few local talk shows invited leaders to be on the shows. The campaign had no media budget though, and didn't focus on getting coverage since the targets were so specific.

Housing LA's \$375,000 budget was raised from local foundations and a bank, and went almost entirely for staff time to run the campaign.

* * *

For more information, contact:

Housing LA / Southern California Association of Non-Profit Housing
3345 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 1005
Los Angeles, CA 90010-1810
213-480-1249
<http://www.scanph.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.*
