

## **Communications as a Strategic Tool for Affordable Housing Campaigns**

### **The NeighborWorks® Symposium on Multifamily Excellence**

Successful Communications with Middle-Income Communities  
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In the case studies provided for this session, I was able to confirm many of the issues and solutions that my company faces every day in promoting “affordable” housing communities. As a Community Outreach Specialist, I find that relationships are the best way to form strong alliances with the communities in which we are developing affordable housing. Briefly, these are:

- Work closely with community organizations, local area churches, business owners, and school districts. When you are working with the community, you need to educate them on the term “affordable” and help them understand the benefits that this can provide to the homeowner as well as to the community. Here are a few examples of the benefits to the employers: If houses that are affordable are located near the job site, employees will have easier access to their workplace, and they will be closer to their children and their daily lives. Examples to the school districts would be more students; families are closer and more participation by the parents is possible since they are close by.
- Make sure to deliver on your promises. Communities look for tangible things that you provide to them. For example: If you are nine months away from a school event and you promise them sponsorship dollars, then you finish your project in six months and the school never hears from you again, that is what they remember. Make sure to set up follow-up meetings with the community.
- Find a way to stay in contact with your relationships after the project is complete even if by way of other community relationships. Setting up quality relationships between the local area businesses and the schools or churches, where productive results continue to happen, lays the groundwork for a positive image for the developer. For example: If there is a local business that is introduced to the nearest church and this business begins to participate in their festivals, contributes money, sends volunteers to church events, etc., this relationship began with the introduction and therefore your company will be remembered.

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- Leave something of historical value to your community, so that the next time you come around to build you will be not only remembered but welcomed. For example: If the school is trying to build a playground or needs new equipment, find a way to raise the funds for the playground and have a plaque donated that bears the name of the developer/builder.

Whatever you communicate to your new community:

- Be Honest
- Be Fair
- Don't Over Commit
- Be Generous to the Community
- Stay in Touch

**Austin: Proactive Communications is the Key – *Foundation Communities*** was right on target. It discussed the importance of quality work, communicated early with the community, was honest with the community, made sure that the community knew that the project had not been funded, and “asked for permission” to build in their community. This case study shows a great deal of what a developer should do when entering a community.

As a developer/builder, it is important to do all of the above and be careful NOT to do the following:

- Make promises to the community that you cannot or do not intend on keeping. For example: Work closely with the schools only during build time, become active with the local organizations until your community is sold out, etc.
- Cause an unsafe (construction) environment around local area schools and child facilities. This can make you seem insensitive to the community.
- Only show up at the “scheduled” meetings in the community. You should establish long-term relationships and carry them out.
- Use the term “affordable” without explaining to the community what the term actually means, and the benefits to homeowners.

### **Minneapolis: Building Relationships, Building Housing – *Central Community Housing Trust***

This case study said a great deal about “relationship building.” People at times have an ill-conceived notion about certain terms (such as “affordable”); therefore, a definition of the term can help them understand the benefits to a new community. When working on relationships with communities, stay clear of the following:

- Be sure not to be condescending to your audience.

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- Make sure that they understand the issues, especially the positives and the potential for economic development that can come from a new community that will be built in their neighborhood.
- Pretending you understand their local area needs without researching them and educating yourself may result in later issues. Many of us know our own communities and have unique issues. Work closely with them to truly understand the issues and, when possible, find ways to provide guidance or resources to help resolve their issues.
- Don't accept challenges that you know are undeliverable. Be realistic with the community, and if you accept the challenge but later find that it is not going to be achievable, explain why.

**Oldsmar, FL – It's Not Just a Good Thing To Do – It's the Law – *The Wilson Company***

This case proved to be costly but ultimately successful for this developer but may not demonstrate the best grounds on which to establish relationships. This study showed that a great deal of work was put into the communications part of the project and community outreach. Be careful NOT to do the following:

- Alienate city officials. We should provide them with enough tools to understand the dilemma and relay the information back to their community.
- Limit yourself with testimonials. Generally, word of mouth is key to public acceptance.

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