

MINNEAPOLIS: Building Relationships, Building Housing *Central Community Housing Trust*

CASE STUDY IN BRIEF

- NIMBY can be seen as a sign that people care about their community, but also means they need to be taught that affordable housing can be a positive asset.
- Developers need to develop one-on-one relationships with concerned residents, rather than relying on group settings, in order to better respond to individual concerns.
- Presentations and materials need to be clear and easy to understand for people who don't know anything about housing development or planning.
- Tell the truth, but be aware that terms like 'affordable' and 'low income' spark negative reactions in many people.
- Affordable housing advocates and developers must devote more resources to educating the public about the need for affordable housing and the positive effects such housing has on communities.

NIMBY need not be only a negative sentiment, said Alan Arthur, president of Central Community Housing Trust (CCHT) in Minneapolis. It can also be positive, even for developers of affordable housing. "It's a sign that people care about their community, and is based upon common negative impressions of affordable housing. Those impressions come from projects like Pruitt-Igoe and Cabrini Green, and from television police programs. Why would anybody want that in their neighborhood? The challenge is to get people to understand that affordable housing doesn't have to be like that."

CCHT has proven successful in making people understand just that, as evidenced by the 1,200 units of housing they've produced since 1986, and their recent strategic plan to expand their operation to include the entire Twin Cities metropolitan area and to nearly triple their annual production rate.

When CCHT approached a neighborhood near downtown Minneapolis about converting a historic nursing home facility into affordable housing, the neighborhood resisted. "They pointed out that they had a lot of rental already and didn't need any more," said Arthur, but the hidden message was clearly that they had property value concerns and significant ignorance about the project. CCHT worked for a year and a half with the community to prove the value of the project, working often one-on-one with individuals who were concerned.

CCHT's development staff met with people on the housing committee of the neighborhood organization, church groups, representatives from social service agencies in the community, and members of the community organization's board, answering questions and trying to alleviate concerns. They even enlisted the help of residents who were supportive to talk to those who were more resistant.

"You have to work with individuals. Forming personal relationships is the most important thing, and you can't do that in meetings – it happens one at a time." Developers need to attend meetings, of course, said Arthur, and listen carefully to concerns raised, but only one-to-one conversations can turn an opponent into a supporter. "Some people you just disagree with, but there's a lot that you can figure out about how you can serve each other's needs."

When asked how to best go about creating these relationships, Arthur suggests buying a book on marriage. "Read it, and do everything it says. It's all about good communication, looking for common goals, not lying, and thinking about the other person, not just yourself."

Arthur said he developed these principles the hard way, and is now trying to develop them into a system so that new staff at CCHT can learn from his experience.

Presentation materials are important as well, added Arthur. Developers need to understand that many people can't understand blueprints, and so have to develop renderings and 3-D plans and models so that people can really see what the housing will look like. Offering tours of existing projects can also go a long way toward winning over skeptics, he said. CCHT has also recently paid more attention to developing brochures about their work and their organization, in an effort to articulate their mission and work to new audiences.

As it turned out, the housing committee in the neighborhood with the vacant nursing home voted against CCHT's plan, but the neighborhood organization's board approved it. The developer is now beginning work on turning the two acre site, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, into affordable rental and homeownership units.

"You'll never get everyone on your side," said Arthur. "You can't please everybody, and sometimes people just have to make a choice. One of the most important things is to remember that we're not the center of the universe. We have a mission, but there are a whole bunch of other missions. If we remember that, and listen to people, our projects will end up much better."

"We've found that the message that resonates best is the truth," said Arthur. Through years of experience, CCHT has learned that words like 'affordable' and 'low-income' have a pejorative meaning to many people, and so instead they use real numbers when referring to the income levels a unit will be planned for. "We can't invent enough words to stay ahead of folks who want to oppose us, though."

"The affordable housing movement in general has not allocated enough resources to education, community relations, public relations, and marketing," said Arthur. "If we were a business and wanted to sell a product, we would dedicate three to seven percent of our total budget to that effort. How can we do our work when we dedicate nothing to that effort? Affordable housing needs are so great, but we'll never expand the pie if we don't do that kind of outreach."

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