

SEATTLE–KING COUNTY: Seattle–King County Consortium Tackles Housing Needs *Housing Development Consortium*

CASE STUDY IN BRIEF

- The first campaign is the hardest, because subsequent ones can build on a theme of “renewing an existing success.”
- Focusing campaigns on specific themes – housing for a particular group, for instance – can generate more support than a more broadly targeted effort.
- Television commercials were an effective way of partnering with nontraditional allies who were highly regarded in the community and a way of leveraging the message that affordable housing affects quality of life for everyone in a community.
- Commercials aimed at raising awareness about affordable housing as an issue, rather than garnering support for a specific ballot initiative, proved effective at doing both.
- Including stories of “real people” and their housing challenges can make messages more effective.

Since 1981, Seattle voters have approved four property tax measures to develop affordable housing in the city, most recently in 2002. “Like so many other parts of the country, we’re faced with dwindling state and federal funds for housing, said Carla Okigwe, executive director of the Housing Development Consortium (HDC). “We are fortunate to have strong local public support for affordable housing. Our current strategy builds upon this good will.”

HDC is a nonprofit trade association formed in 1988 by 10 nonprofit developers who recognized a need to improve the environment for developing low- and moderate-income housing in Seattle-King County, Washington. The group now has more than 70 members, including the region’s most innovative nonprofit housing developers, financial lenders, architects, contractors, property management companies, attorneys, development consultants, and local housing authorities and government housing offices.

The four successful ballot campaigns to raise significant public funds demonstrated HDC’s proven track record of convincing voters of the value of supporting affordable housing. The campaigns have gotten easier, in some ways, said Joyce Halldorson, director of communications for HDC, because they are able to capitalize on a theme of “renewal of a success story.” Leading up to the ballot measures, HDC worked hard to place stories in local media about nonprofit housing organizations’ key role in the area’s economic vitality and quality of life.

Each of the four ballot measures has had a different focus – first senior housing, then homelessness, then working families with children and, in 2002, \$86 million primarily to house families earning below 30% of area median income. A research study conducted prior to the 2002 election concluded that focusing on the needs of extremely low-income households would resonate best with voters.

In 2001 to lay the groundwork for the upcoming voter initiative, HDC launched an ambitious public relations effort, which sought more media coverage of the housing problem and solutions. By building individual relationships with reporters, pitching stories about affordable housing and partnering with the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties and the Seattle-King County Association of Realtors, HDC succeeded in getting most of the area’s major media outlets to give coverage to affordable housing issues. “We recognized that we needed to raise awareness about what affordable housing looks like, who lives there, and why we need it,” said Halldorson.

An important part of the strategy was building partnerships with nontraditional allies. In 2002, the consortium partnered with the Master Builders of King and Snohomish Counties and the Seattle-

King County Association of Realtors to produce television spots. The groups paid about \$30,000 for production and airtime on KOMO, the local ABC-affiliate. Those commercials ran in June and September, leading up to the vote for the property tax levy. This successful partnership led to another round of television commercials in 2003 with the addition of new partner – the Washington State Housing Finance Commission, a housing lender.

The television ads were not political in nature and did not mention the 2002 ballot initiative, but were aimed at educating viewers about affordable housing needs in the area. “We’re trying to get people to think of housing as a good investment for donations of money, land and resources,” said Halldorson. “We want to tap into new, nontraditional sources of funding. Currently, most funding for affordable housing comes from the government, and we don’t expect those resources to expand in the future.”

In 2003, Halldorson collaborated with HDC’s partner organizations to write the script for the commercials, with the theme “Housing Our Community – Working Together to Build a Better Quality of Life.” KIRO, a local CBS-affiliate, provided production services as part of a package to air the 30-second spots, which ran during the morning and evening news over two three-week periods in fall 2003 and winter 2004. As part of the package, KIRO created a web campaign for the group on KIRO-TV’s website. The four groups each contributed \$10,000 for a production and airtime package, with KIRO creating an additional web campaign that ran from September 2003 through March 2004.

“We filmed the television commercial at one of our nonprofit member’s affordable housing complexes. We wanted to show real people served by low-income housing and that affordable housing is indistinguishable from other housing in the neighborhood,” said Halldorson.

KIRO produced four versions of the commercial. All carried the same core message, but each had a 12-second “donut” that was customized to spotlight one of the four groups behind the campaign and its role in affordable housing.

As part of the marketing campaign, KIRO included a “Housing Our Community” splash page link on the station’s Web site that linked to the HDC Web site, where one could learn about the campaign and view the television commercial. The web campaign ran from September 2003 to March 2004 and, according to KIRO, had an advertising value worth \$102,661.

To support these marketing efforts, the consortium produced a brochure, “What Does Affordable Housing Look Like?” which it distributes to local government officials, community leaders, and at community meetings. The brochure shows photos of affordable housing and describes what affordable housing is, who needs it, who develops it, and why it is so important.

Because of this solid groundwork, HDC is expanding its efforts to reach out to nontraditional allies in hopes of building a strong network of support and attracting new funding and resources to develop affordable apartments and homes. HDC hired a branding and marketing firm, Phinney/Bischoff Design House, to develop a clear and recognizable identity, message, and strategy for promoting nonprofit affordable housing. The firm will also research perceptions among key targeted audiences and recommend strategies for communicating the group’s message, said Halldorson. The consortium has budgeted \$50,000 for this phase of the program. The next phase will involve implementing the strategy, an expanded public awareness and education campaign and additional research to measure the impact.

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