

SEATTLE: Speaking in Residents' Terms *A Regional Coalition for Housing (ARCH)*

CASE STUDY IN BRIEF

- ARCH takes its cues from residents, and asks them for help finding solutions. Residents are more accepting of proposals and plans, even if they are different from what they want, if they have been included in the process.
- Because the term 'NIMBY' has become a way of putting people down the group avoids using it.
- Residents are more supportive of assistance in the form of loans, rather than grants, even if the loans are deferred or forgivable.

A coalition based outside Seattle, Washington has learned from the communities it serves that the term NIMBY is best avoided when talking with residents about affordable housing. "You can't go in to a discussion thinking of residents as 'NIMBYs because it's a way of putting someone down, of saying they're wrong," said Art Sullivan, Executive Director of A Regional Coalition for Housing (ARCH). "You have to go in and say 'what's important to you?'"

A number of cities (ranging in size from <1,000 to 100,000) formed ARCH as a means to help local governments be effective in addressing

housing needs in suburban communities. The coalition of 15 cities coordinates housing funding among the cities, assists cities with land use policies to allow greater diversity and affordability of housing, organizes community dialogues, and "empowers small cities to be as effective as large cities in getting involved with housing," said Sullivan.

ARCH has taken its cues on how to operate from the residents of the cities it serves. "To work effectively and to build support over time, we need to know how the people who live here think. Four years ago we did focus groups with a wide range of people," said Sullivan. "Our theme was not 'this is the answer' but more 'We think housing is an issue, do you agree?' and if they did, what did they think, what kind of solutions could they think of?"

The focus groups yielded some interesting outcomes, said Sullivan. "It turned out that there's an awareness that while we are in a wealthy, suburban area, people understand there's a problem. The awareness and sensitivity to the issue is a lot closer to the surface than people assume."

Individuals assess housing proposals against their own value system and how it affects them personally in terms of the kinds of communities they want, he said. When residents begin asking questions like "how will you keep it affordable?" that means they are applying their values system to the community at large.

Developers and city governments have to demonstrate a willingness to listen, Sullivan said. One common mistake is to only have public hearings at the end of the process. This makes it difficult to really listen to community comments after many decisions and even investments have been made.

The focus groups revealed a strong preference among residents for affordable housing subsidies to be in the form of loans, rather than grants, said Sullivan. "Even if the loans are long term, deferred, or are forgivable, people will support loans as long as there is the potential that if the borrower can afford to pay it back they do."

ARCH took these learnings and applied them to a campaign to promote new forms of homeownership in the communities it serves. In an effort to encourage more first time homeownership in an expensive housing market, ARCH enlisted the help of a designer to develop plans that kept standard sized lots and created a neighborhood that felt like all single family homes, but that included twice as many units, with cottages, duplexes, and other variants that all looked like single family homes.

ARCH presented this plan at a community meeting when residents were discussing the development of a neighborhood plan. “They loved the whole concept,” said Sullivan, “and that shows that by designing a concept based on input from the focus groups, it is more likely the initial reaction from the community will be more receptive. We also included information about our process of working with the community, and they asked as many questions about the process as they did about the product. We earned their respect right off the bat because we said we knew that this was so different that we had to use this inclusive process.” Afterward, the neighborhood committee modified their recommendations in order to accommodate the ARCH proposal, and the City Council included the recommendations in the updated Neighborhood Plan.

When an opportunity arose a for ARCH to help the city develop a large vacant parcel with affordable housing, ARCH with the County developed a process that allowed for a great deal of community involvement and accountability to officials.

The plan hit a major hurdle when it became clear that the city’s comprehensive plan didn’t allow for attached housing on that site, but “because we had developed a concept based on what we learned earlier while helping the City write its Housing Element (e.g. mixture of affordable ownership and rental housing, design features, preserve wetlands) , the council recommended changing the comprehensive plan on the spot,” said Sullivan. The council was so pleased with the process that they went even further, waiving building fees for units that met affordability tests, approving alternate road schemes, and even paying for a portion of the site to create a neighborhood park.

“It’s all about setting up a process that involves listening to the community,” said Sullivan. “You can always take residents’ comments and repackage them to help them understand that affordable housing doesn’t go against what they want for their community.”

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