

# Winning Public Support for Low-Income Housing

Frank Benest

In many parts of urban and suburban America, local communities are feeling the impact of a housing crisis. The lack of low-cost housing always has affected the poor, including the working poor, but now is hurting moderate-income families as well. To ameliorate the crisis, local governments increasingly have become involved with difficult financing, planning, and design issues. The biggest problem for local government, however, is a marketing issue: How does local government leadership win public support for low-income housing?

This marketing issue relates to the negative images associated with the government-subsidized housing of the past. Images of high-rise, slum housing projects occupied by large black and brown families on welfare generate fears of crime, neighborhood deterioration, and loss of property values. Without community support (i.e., political support) for low-cost housing, there will be no ease in the housing crunch. So how do we, as local government officials, develop that public support?

## Create a Positive Environment

Any marketing plan to win community support must first formulate a rationale for developing low-cost housing. In some states, including California, cities are required by law to replace low-cost housing units demolished for redevelopment projects and to use a certain percentage of tax-increment funds for low- and moderate-income housing. Saying "It's the law," however, is a totally insufficient rationale. We need to focus on the deep-seated concerns and emotions of our residents and businesspeople.

A marketing plan to generate support for affordable housing must address the question: For whom is this low-income housing? The answer is: For us . . . for all of us. In Orange County, California, for example, 85 percent of all households cannot afford to buy a single-family residence.

To reinforce this notion that low-cost housing benefits "us" instead of "them," the city of Brea, California, has developed a chart used in public meetings. The chart shows that most employees in our community—including teachers, firefighters, insurance agents, data processors, and secretaries—are classified as low-income persons because the cost of housing far exceeds their ability to pay for it.

Another answer to the question of who's this low-cost housing for anyway? is: It's for our kids. (Notice the use of our.) In suburban America, young families cannot afford to live and raise a family in the suburbs where they grew up. This is a potent political force. Many uptight residents will reassess their views on low-income housing when they understand that "it's for our kids."

In order to discuss low-cost housing, we also must create a positive environment in the business community. Many urban and suburban areas located in or around large metropolitan centers (e.g., San Francisco, Los Angeles) have developed balanced economies. These economies are threatened as employees move their families to distant semi-rural areas (the "exurbs") where they can afford the housing. Such employees often give up on long commutes and find employment closer to their new homes, and many companies are following their workers out of metropolitan areas. With a growing labor shortage, especially of skilled workers, people no longer follow jobs; jobs follow people.

In Brea, the city council has stressed that low- and moderate-income housing is critical if we are to maintain our competitive economic edge. In recognition of this key interest for the business community, the Brea council plans to form a citizen and business committee called the Task Force on Affordable Housing and Economic Vitality.

## Use Positive Imagery

Any marketing plan must begin to routinely use positive imagery in discussing the issue. As mentioned above, we need to talk about housing for "us" instead of "those people." In

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fact, in my community, we plan to name our low-income community campaign "Housing for Breans." Instead of helping the poor, we need to talk about supporting our economy. Our colleagues in Canada talk about minisuites rather than single-room occupancy hotels. Instead of using the term low-cost or low-income housing, we need to discuss affordable housing. In some of our programs, we can talk about helping tenants become owners and thus experience pride of ownership. By using positive imagery, we can help people envision the opportunities offered by affordable housing.

### **Involve People in Confronting the Problem**

A key strategy for winning public support is truly involving residents and businesspeople in defining and solving the problem. As mentioned, Brea is taking this approach with its affordable housing task force. Similar citizen participation efforts have been organized in both Rancho Cucamonga, California, and San Diego, California.

A creative example of citizen participation is the first-ever International Design Competition for low-cost housing for the elderly used by Colton, California. When first proposed by city officials, the low-cost housing proposal frightened both property owners and seniors. They feared slum housing would attract muggers, rapists, and murderers to the downtown area. The International Design Competition attracted over 300 architects from around the world, creating a sense of excitement and pride in the community. The city held a street celebration, featuring wine, food, music, and an exhibit of all the designs submitted. At the event, residents evaluated the designs by completing "Tell the Jury" forms. Their evaluations then were used by the competition jury composed of local citizens as well as outside professionals. The winning design selected by the jury subsequently won a number of national architectural awards, further enhancing community pride.

By generating residents' involvement, the International Design Competition helped local government overcome the stigma of low-income housing and elevated the effort as the prestige flagship project for revitalization.

### **Minimize Community Concerns**

A successful marketing campaign for affordable housing must minimize traditional citizen concerns such as fearing a loss of property values in the neighborhood or poor quality design and construction.

In constructing low-income housing, a local government must demonstrate that any new housing project will be high-quality housing, thus preserving nearby property values. Visits to good-looking and high-quality projects in other communities are a must. Showing civic and neighborhood groups slides of other high-quality projects from around the state and country also is helpful.

There is another way to protect property values and help ensure consistent quality within existing neighborhoods. A local government can subsidize or otherwise buy into existing market-rate housing projects as opposed to constructing new low-income projects. Scattering government-assisted units throughout the community also can alleviate citizen concerns.

In many downtown areas across the country, affordable housing is being constructed as higher-density, smaller-unit housing, often with fewer of such amenities as swimming pools, saunas, and tennis courts. In this situation, downtown areas must incorporate amenities—town squares, plazas, fountains, pubs, cafes, public art—that can become amenities for the housing project. Living in affordable housing downtown must be marketed as an

exciting urban experience in contrast to the boredom of suburban subdivisions.

### **Start Incrementally**

In dealing with politically controversial issues, it is always wise to start incrementally. Housing rehabilitation programs are generally safe. Housing programs for the elderly (our grandparents) also tend to be less risky. By starting with less controversial projects, local governments can gain some easy wins before expanding the total housing effort into more politically volatile areas.

### **Celebrate**

Local governments need to celebrate the positive. We can organize street dances to celebrate groundbreakings, parties for citizens evaluating design entries, festive lottery events for potential tenants or buyers, and grand openings and anniversary celebrations for housing projects. In an event reminiscent of old-fashioned barn-raising, Brea and Habitat for Humanity will soon involve com-

munity volunteers. They will work shoulder-to-shoulder with soon-to-be homeowners providing sweat equity in the construction of their low-cost homes.

All these celebratory events accentuate the wonderful human side of the issue. Simply put, celebrations bring out the best of who we are or who we can become as a community.

### **Frame the Issue**

Local government officials must be adept in marketing affordable housing if we are to address the housing crisis. We must:

- Use positive imagery and rationales
- Get people involved in defining and confronting the issue
- Minimize community concerns
- Start incrementally
- Celebrate!

Local government administrators cannot allow others to define the issue. To be successful, we must take the offensive in framing the dialogue. **PM**