



CANADA MORTGAGE AND HOUSING CORPORATION

GENERATING COMMUNITY SUPPORT

You've conducted an affordable housing needs assessment, and the data prove that your municipality *needs* more affordable housing units.

Unfortunately, notwithstanding the evident need, unless the community shares your housing objectives, getting the project off the ground may be a very hard sell. It's essential to start developing community relationships early on.

This fact sheet examines the four key elements for community involvement that can assist in developing a successful affordable housing project, one that is accepted and supported by the larger community. These elements—Consultation; Communication; Community Capacity; and Commitment—are not linear steps, but actions that are interwoven in

the work of community and project development. By involving your community proactively, through strategies such as the ones described in this fact sheet, you will be better able to turn community opposition into community acceptance.

Background: Community Opposition, or NIMBY

Opponents to proposed affordable housing developments will cite a variety of concerns to justify their opposition, such as anticipated decline in property values; increased traffic, noise, and crime; loss of an established sense of neighbourhood; deteriorating quality of life; the neighbourhood's already having taken an unfair share of social services.

Often these concerns are based on myth or misconception rather than factual information. Case study analysis demonstrates that NIMBY objections often mask underlying issues and fears, derived from the opponent's real or perceived lack of participation in

the process; lack of knowledge or understanding; fear of change; negative stereotypes; and fear of the perceived threat that the proposal could cause.

Community opposition has been compared to an iceberg: what you experience above the surface is only a fraction of the issue. Each level of opposition manifests differently and requires different strategies to address it.

Using the iceberg analogy, the tip-of-the-iceberg objections generally concern land use or planning principles; the public consultation or participation process; physical design characteristics; and proposed operations of the facility. These concerns are voiced in public processes and forums, such as statutory public meetings.

Just below the surface of the iceberg, objections related to the potential and perceived impacts of the project on the neighbourhood, and concerns about existing problems in the neighbourhood.

These objections are often voiced in more informal forums, such as community meetings, petitions, and in the media.

At the bottom of the iceberg lie the murky depths of prejudice, fear, and stereotypes. These objections concern the nature of the client group and are voiced privately.

The impacts of community opposition can be severe resulting in higher costs due to delays, and the stresses resting on housing proponents, potential tenants, neighbours, and various levels of government. Proactively working to earn community support will be cost-effective, both in human and financial terms.

Suggested Activities

- Hold a brainstorming session to identify your potential allies: individuals, community groups, governmental and non-governmental institutions.
- Ensure the project is based on sound planning and design principles.
- Ensure good project planning and management.
- Work with local council and planning staff.
- Engage the community as a valuable resource.
- Provide factual information.
- Communicate regularly to build trust.
- Provide public education.
- Raise awareness.

Community Consultation

Community consultation—asking community members what they think and listening to what they have to say—is a first step in developing support. If you don't *ask*, you may miss some valuable input—positive or negative—that can improve your proposal. If you don't *listen*, they may conclude that you don't think that their input is valuable, and you will have lost a potential supporter.

Feedback from community members will help to inform the direction of your future activities and decisions. Begin community consultation in the early, conceptual stages of the development process. It's important to recognize that, especially for communities with deeply divided opinions, you will have to work hard to build support among some sectors.

Don't be afraid of negative feedback. It can be instructive, helping you to gauge the breadth of community opinion, and the assumptions on which those opinions are based. There are issues underlying the opposition that will need to be addressed if you are to be successful in developing your housing project.

Continue to consult in various ways throughout the development phase, from focus groups to test housing and service concepts to public meetings to preview and solicit feedback on design, location, and proposed supports. Each consultation will help to define your vision, lend credibility to your efforts and to the viability of the project, and build community support.

Suggested Activities

- Develop a positive working relationship with municipal planning staff.
- Invite identified allies to a meeting to brainstorm probable community issues and potential ways to address those issues.
- Research ways to get housing put on the community agenda.
- Disseminate a questionnaire to gauge public opinion.
- Conduct door-to-door surveys.
- Hold informal information meetings.
- Invite the neighbourhood to participate in design charrettes.
- Hold focus groups to test housing and service concepts.
- Enlist your allies to promote the benefits of the project to the community.

Communication with the Community

It is essential to keep the community informed. An informed community is an involved community. An effective approach to communicating with your community will help to build momentum, support, and credibility for your project.

Report on your progress at key stages of development, for example, securing land, kicking off fundraising, sod-turning, and major donations, and so on.

Use a variety of communication strategies and vehicles to celebrate and share your successes.

Suggested Activities

- Use varied media, for example, newspaper articles, cable TV, local radio, posters, website updates, neighbourhood and community organization newsletters, church bulletins.
- Hold public information meetings at key stages of the development process.
- Host neighbourhood events to celebrate completion of key stages of the development process, for example, a sod-turning event.

Community Capacity: Connections and Capabilities

Community capacity building involves finding and then building on the skills and resources that the community possesses. In other words, community capacity building means bringing resources and expertise to your project from a *community* base.

Supporters and volunteers often have skills we don't know about unless we ask. The board chair may have been elected because of her experience as a meeting facilitator, but she may also be an artist who can donate a painting to a silent auction. The society's treasurer may be an accountant during the day, but a Cordon Bleu cook at night who can organize food for public fundraising events. Other members of the organization may have media connections, landscape experience, or personal relationships with potential donors. Let the community know the range of what you need to contribute to good decision-making, design, fundraising, and the other aspects of development.

Suggested Activities

- Hold capacity-building workshops.
- Ask for the resources you need to make your project a success, for example:
 - Who has land, or a building, they would be willing to donate or sell at a reduced price?
 - Which service agencies are potential partners? What resources can they provide?
 - Who might be a donor of cash or in-kind services for the building, or for fundraising efforts?
 - Who might donate skills, knowledge, and experience to assist with your housing project?

Commitment

Community consultation, communication, and capacity building bring us to the fourth “C” of community involvement: commitment. So, why work for community commitment? Because it's really the smart thing to do. When you involve the community in meaningful ways, and secure its commitment to your organization and to the project, you:

- better identify the housing needs in your community
- raise public awareness about housing issues;
- identify solutions that will best address housing needs for your community and for the specific groups you serve;
- build a sense of community ownership of the project;
- build commitments from funders and donors;

- gain support from the media;
- build short- and long-term sustainability for your organization;
- create a dynamic, responsive organization; and finally,
- ensure that you are serving your community well.

Conclusion

You have identified the housing need in your community, and you know who your potential client groups are. Perhaps you've identified a potential site, or have several sites in mind. You know that in order for your project to be accepted in the community, you have to get community members on your side, preferably right from the beginning. Develop your community involvement plan early, one that fits your philosophy and resources and is informed by your research.

Enlist key sectors as allies: municipal politicians and planning staff; identified neighbourhood supporters; other housing organizations and service providers. Provide clear and accurate information in both written and verbal forms. Use a variety of media to get your message out.

Remember that no community involvement plan is guaranteed to work one hundred per cent of the time: you may follow your plan to a “T”, and still face neighbourhood opposition. But, by developing and implementing a plan that works proactively to gain the trust and support of the larger community, you will have done everything possible to mitigate the effects of NIMBY and gain community support.

Further Resources

CMHC Seed Funding offers financial assistance to potential housing proponents, from the non-profit or private sector, who are in the very early stages of developing an affordable housing project.

www.onpha.on.ca/affordable_housing_initiatives/nimby/

www.onpha.on.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=nimby#kit/

www.bcnpha.ca

www.munilink.net/live/AUMA/Toolkits