

Let's Talk About CONTEMPORARY AFFORDABLE HOUSING

DEALING WITH FEARFUL OPPONENTS OF HOUSING

"Those people will bring drugs and crime into our neighborhood!"
"Our property values will plummet!"
"The buildings will be ugly and run down!"

I. WHY IS FEAR IMPORTANT?

We've all got a lot to learn about dealing with fearful people. Fear drives much of the local opposition to affordable housing. It underlies some racial and class prejudice. Fearful people feed on each other and spread their hysteria like a virus. Fear is a strong motivator: it can unite an otherwise disjointed neighborhood against a common enemy. Leaders stir up fears in flyers and statements at community meetings to organize opposition. The media frequently fuel and multiply fears, by broadcasting unsubstantiated fears and misunderstandings.

II. FIVE STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS FEAR

While there are no silver bullets, there are some strategies which may be helpful. In order to choose a strategy which is more likely to work, it is important to probe and analyze the sources of the fears. Are the fears based on personal experiences, second-hand stories, media images, purportedly factual studies, or other sources? If there is a primary source, you can try to address it.

a. Education

Many fears, e.g. that affordable housing reduces nearby property values, are based on lack of information or misinformation. Contemporary affordable housing is not well-known among some decision-makers and planners, much less the general public. Some initial questioning should be expected. Even when these queries are accompanied by a hostile tone, it's best to calmly convey pertinent information or arrange a later time and place when it can be provided. While bias and prejudice may not yield to facts, getting the facts out is usually an important and necessary step. Our facts must be accurate and well-grounded. Rebuilding credibility after getting caught in half-truths is difficult.

Pay attention to who presents information, how, and in what context. Often fears are paired with distrust of the developer. In this case, the same information will be more credible if communicated by other people or organizations. Facts which have already been publicized by education campaigns outside of the context of a particular development approval process are more likely to be believed. Education is more likely to be effective with decision-makers and the media than with neighbors. To some degree, early education can inoculate decision-makers from fears about issues that arise regularly; they may still respond to the fears for political reasons, but they won't actually believe them. Early education of the media, including providing background materials on typical issues, may lead to useful investigative stories, reporting which includes references that question the fears, or at least stories which include the developer's point of view.

With many people, factual information has no effect, or even inflames their fears. Repetition is important; people in the grip of fear and anger won't hear things the first time they are said. Sophisticated opponents may find apparently contradicting facts or hire their own "experts" to dispute your facts. Unfortunately, misinformation, once spread, is almost impossible to completely eradicate. Opponents may continue to repeat and spread misinformation even after exhaustive responses have been made.

b. Humanizing the object of the fear

Most fears are ultimately based on stereotypes of prospective residents. In some cases, meeting prospective residents can calm these fears by replacing abstract concerns with a human face and a compelling story. Housing tours and testimony at public hearings are two opportunities for introductions. Of course, the longer and more deeply the prospective residents have been involved with the proposal, the more powerful their impact. Before involving a prospective resident in this work, it's critical to warn them that opponents may treat them in a hostile and offensive manner, especially at community meetings when decision-makers or the media are not present.

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c. Reassurance by respected authorities

In some communities a respected leader from local government, the faith community, business, or local civic organizations will support the proposal in a letter, in public testimony, or as a spokesperson to the media. Some leaders will need to be educated and have their own concerns met before lending their reputation. For example, after researching the issue himself, one chief of police wrote a letter testifying that there was no increased crime associated with a developer's previous projects. Leaders of the opposition subsequently dropped this issue from their arguments before decision-makers.

d. Building relationships

Most people see non-profit affordable housing sponsors as just another unscrupulous, slick, developer whose unlimited resources will be used to "shove its project down the community's throat." Getting out from under this reputation is a prerequisite to dealing with fears effectively. Some developers, especially community based developers, view education and other strategies as part of building a relationship with the local community. The scope of this relationship may only extend to winning project approval, or it may extend to future cooperation in other community-building efforts.

Sometimes, building a relationship means listening to and acknowledging fears in a sympathetic manner without agreeing that they are factually valid, and not blaming the questioner for not being properly informed. Sometimes a developer can earn trust by using its contacts to focus local government's attention on pre-existing, neglected neighborhood problems that are now being used as issues to oppose the proposed development. Invitations to the developer's office and previous developments are common ways of establishing a relationship. During long delays, keeping in touch with opponents regularly may head off suspicion. Treating initial skeptics and questioners as opponents may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the other hand, former skeptics can be very powerful allies. The goal is not becoming "friends," but engaging opponents in a series of conversations and a consistent pattern of interactions, including making and keeping promises, so that, by virtue of actually knowing who they are dealing with, they will withdraw opposition and give your development a chance to demonstrate that common fears will not be realized.

e. Taking actions to address fears

In some cases, it is appropriate to revise a development proposal or to take other action to address fears, e.g. organizing a study, adding staffing, or creating a review mechanism. Sometimes, the change is made to build confidence and to show that no basis for fear exists.

Sometimes planning commissions and city councils add unnecessary, burdensome, and even illegal conditions in conditional use permits in order to calm fears. Developers' acceptance of such conditions is controversial. While the project will get built, the conditions may be used as a precedent against the next proposal.

While numerous laws, including fair housing law, prohibit discrimination against prospective residents, citing law directly as a response to neighbors' fears is more likely to incite resentment than to improve the situation. The best role for the law in these cases is to challenge discriminatory local laws and practices before a project is proposed or after one has been approved. During a dispute, the law can sometimes be used to educate and to persuade local government to prevent a violation of the law through carefully selected channels. Of course, if discriminatory fears cause violations, developers, advocates and prospective residents should consider enforcement.

III. WE'VE ALL GOT A LOT TO LEARN ABOUT FEAR

Using these strategies require time and resources as well as extraordinary patience, preparation, and self-discipline. It's hard to not be adversarial when opponents treat you as the enemy. Being subject to double standards is infuriating: opponents' factual allegations are assumed true until disproven while developer's statements, even with supporting facts, are treated with suspicion.

Some advocates strongly question the approach of attending to emotional issues, such as fear, behind local opposition. On their view, these strategies may not work and may even backfire. And, if it's discrimination, why not just call it what it is.

Finally, it's important to set reasonable expectations. Don't expect to dispel years of accumulated fear or every opponent's fear even by a combination of these strategies. You probably don't need to. The goal should usually be to strip away legitimate concerns, focus on the issues properly before decision-makers, and let the fearful and prejudiced reveal themselves as just that.

These ideas were gleaned from conversations and interviews with non-profit developer staff and advocates who are experienced with local opposition to affordable housing.