

Six Steps to a Successful Community Engagement Strategy – and getting the municipal approval you need!

A summary from Building Inclusive Community: Tools to Create Support for Affordable Housing.

The strategies:

1. **Work with local advocates, the development team meets early in the development process to *research, assess and plan in five key areas.***
2. **Prepare a *political strategy* which coordinates all your work towards getting the votes you need.**
3. **Prepare a strategy to *build active community support* for your proposal.**
4. **Prepare a strategy to *work through concerns of community members* and to deal with active opposition.**
5. **Prepare a strategy to *protect and use your legal rights.***
6. **Prepare a *public relations/media strategy* to send your message to decision-makers and the public.**

Instead of doing the same outreach for every proposal or waiting and seeing what will happen, this individual planning approach is like a “due diligence” process in which you consider and make deliberate decisions about five key areas that may be important for every development proposal. Conducting this planning process is not the same as deciding to adopt a high visibility entry with early notification of neighbors. Rather, whether to notify neighbors (and, if so, how and when) is one decision to make in this planning process.

In addition to this work, we recommend you participate in on-going, community-wide strategies to improve the political climate for affordable housing and services in your community, e.g. tenant organizing, voter registration, participating in the development of local housing policy, promoting pro-housing candidates in local elections, and promoting the enforcement of fair housing laws.

1 Planning meetings to research, assess and plan strategies in five key areas.

Schedule two or more meetings of the entire development team together with local advocates and assign responsibility for organizing the meetings (e.g. inviting key people) to a staff member.

At the first meeting, assess the following:

- Your organization’s reputation, capacity to attract broad community support for its work, and its previous experience in dealing with local government, opponents, and the media.
- What local government approvals are required, who will decide, what is the process and criteria for decisions, and an expected timeline.
- Local government’s current knowledge of and support for affordable housing, your organization’s work, and the current proposal.
- Full analysis of the neighborhood surrounding the proposed site (history, problems, organizations, assets, etc.)
- Likely concerns neighbors might have about your proposal, the neighborhood’s experience with similar programs and its potential for organized opposition.
- Potential legal issues associated with your development proposal, including your organization’s and clients’ legal rights.
- The regional and local media’s approach to your work and clients.

First, make sure your development plan includes at least two meetings to plan how you will obtain the local government approvals you need.

Based on these assessments, at the second and later meetings determine:

- (a) your strategies toward local government, potential supporters, potential opponents, legal issues and the media (see steps 2-5);
 - (b) staffing required to implement your strategies; and,
 - (c) any consequences for your proposal’s timeline, funding needs, or site selection.
- Each strategy should have a clear plan of actions: who will do what, when, how and with whom.

- Efforts to implement these five strategies will be going on simultaneously.
- Timing issues are critical and must be decided after consultation with persons most familiar with local politics and the relevant neighborhood.
- Expect to change and improvise your plans as you go along. You won't regret your planning because it will help you manage the process and avoid some surprises.
- Most importantly, draw on the collective experience of others to gain further insight into useful strategies for community acceptance.

2 Prepare a political strategy.

- Get to know your local government's players and relevant policies. There are "key leaders" in every community, but they don't always have the same jobs or titles. To find them always ask: "Who else should I talk with about this?"
- Identify solid supporters, committed opponents, and uncertain votes on your proposal.

If the crucial vote were taken tonight, do you know who would vote for and against your proposal?

- Determine education and advocacy efforts needed to keep supporters and win uncertain votes.
- Coordinate your efforts with supporters, concerned community members and with the media to get the votes you need.
- Act responsibly and document everything so that at public hearings you can honestly say: "We're a professional, community-based group with significant community support meeting a critical need, and we've done everything we can to reasonably respond to neighbors' legitimate concerns."

3 Prepare a strategy to build public support.

Active, vocal community support for your proposal will help you get political support, counter your opponents, tell your story to the media and, when appropriate, say hard things that developers usually do not want to say.

- Consider developing support for the proposal (at least in the broader community) before contacting potential opponents.

Don't fall into the trap of spending all of your time and energy responding to opponents.

- Identify and prioritize actual and potential supporters. Think widely about your potential allies.
- Plan recruitment of supporters and what you want them to do for you.
- Organize and support your allies with background information, housing tours and up-to-date information.
- Mobilize supporters at critical points (e.g. using a database and fax sheets.)
- Keep them informed and encouraged.

4 Prepare a strategy to work through community issues.

- Notification and community out-reach decisions should be designed to surface and deal effectively with legitimate concerns and for positive presentation of the proposal, not to create an open forum that brings out the worst in your opponents.
- Consider alternative methods for community outreach (e.g. door-to-door canvassing, open-house forums or small house meetings) instead of large, open community meetings.

Only when you understand why a person opposes, can you select the best response.

- Use an issue-based strategy for working through local community concerns.
- Find out the probable basis of their concerns before fashioning a response (e.g. misinformation, fears about impacts, expectation to participate, legitimate conflicts of interest, prejudice, or issues unrelated to your proposal.)

- Prepare appropriate responses to each kind of concern (e.g. education, reassurance by trusted authority, appropriate forum for participation, negotiation, clarifying legitimate from illegitimate issues.)
- Peel away layers of opposition and their issues to leave only “unreasonable” opponents.

5 Prepare a legal strategy.

- Identify the legal rights of your organization and your prospective tenants/ clients and learn how to spot potential legal violations.
- If your proposal is likely to encounter illegal discrimination or raise complex legal issues, contact legal assistance immediately to learn what you should do now to protect your rights, and how and when to get further legal assistance.

Learn to assert your legal rights without litigation.

- Work with legal advocates to identify how to protect and assert your legal rights without litigation, e.g. by educating the city attorney early in the process.
- Keep records of all statements, flyers, etc. that may be evidence of discrimination.

6 Prepare a public relations/media strategy.

Before you get any media coverage on a proposal, decide if you want to generate media coverage (proactive strategy) or if you want to be able to respond effectively to any media coverage you receive (responsive strategy).

- Designate and prepare spokesperson(s) including former clients and supporters.
- Develop your message(s) and alternative stories for your target audiences (e.g. decision-makers).
- Prepare brief fact sheets about your organization, the proposal, your supporters, your efforts to resolve legitimate community concerns and other information to support your message(s) and alternative stories.
- Invite reporters for a tour of your existing facilities and to meet your staff and clients.

At the very least, select and prepare a media spokesperson, your message and some easily-transmitted information.

- Follow-up on any coverage you receive with thank you’s and corrections.
- To the degree your resources allow, develop on-going relationships with the media.

*For more information on community acceptance strategies, contact the Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California (NPH),
369 Pine Street, Suite 350, San Francisco, CA 94104, ph: 415-989-8160. www.nonprofithousing.org*