

LIHTC MONTHLY REPORT

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How To Field Challenges and Attacks Skillfully

By Bobbie Christensen, *The Campaign for Affordable Housing*

To err is human, but to attack the one who made or is perceived to have made the error is, alas, also human. And it is the job of the media to find errors as well as controversial issues and... well... probe painfully.

That is why the Campaign for Affordable Housing (TCAH), a national not-for-profit committed to helping combat negative stereotypes about affordable housing, trains those in the industry in how to, among other things, communicate with naysayers such as some members of the media and community planning groups. A session, "Crisis Communications," at TCAH's national conference in Houston on September 27-28, will provide insights into how to handle negative inquiries and challenges.

"The first thing we talk about in this session is what exactly a communication crisis is," says Julie Bornstein, president of TCAH. "Basically, it is any event, perception, or media coverage that can have a negative impact on an organization's mission, including its ability to have projects approved. That means such challenges have to be dealt with fast."

What does your challenger want?

First, it is important to try to understand the challenger/questioner. If it is the media, what does the reporter want? The answer is usually simple: a good story (and a prompt response to inquiries). Controversy adds spice to any story. Human interest aspects (for example, about neighbors who fear the value of their homes will go down if a proposed project is passed or about a senior citizen who cannot afford rent and is waiting for or has benefited from an affordable apartment) are key. Some reporters are biased, but experienced journalists tend to consider themselves to be fair and impartial and try to report both sides.

What does that mean for those in the affordable housing industry? It means hard work establishing

relationships with journalists and explaining how people benefit from what the company/organization does. For example, one could show reporters the photos of actual attractive developments. Interviews with people who live in affordable housing could be set up. This advance work can pay off. It gives reporters/producers some background information that will help them see an issue from your side, not just an opponent's side. Trust is a key ingredient in a workable media-spokesperson connection. If an organization has earned trust, it has a much better chance of success in averting a media crisis.

And averting such a crisis is important. If an organization's reputation is damaged, the effects can be devastating. It often may result in more difficulty getting needed approvals from elected officials. Many members of the public will distrust what the organization says. Negative stories seem to beget more negative stories. As the saying goes, perception is reality.

The crisis communications plan

Being able to quickly and ably respond to negative attacks and questions is very important. One way to make that an easier task is to have a crisis communications plan already in place. Who will be on the crisis team? What will each person's role be? What are expectations in terms of timing, as in how often the team will meet to discuss a communication crisis issue? Who are the organization's audiences in addition to the media or the community planning group leader (employees and board members)? Who will notify them of what is occurring?

Fact Finding

Once a crisis or potential crisis occurs, it is important to gather all the facts. For example, if an apartment complex you developed burns and one person dies, the fact seeker will need to talk with the fire department and any other entity investigating the action. Do they think it looks like arson? Was someone smoking in bed? Were

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all egress areas open (and lit during the night) so people could escape? How long had it been since the property had been inspected? Were smoke alarms working and batteries checked regularly? A talk with the apartment manager and other residents will likely be appropriate. What safeguards are already in place? Do the other residents have to be moved to temporary apartments, etc.?

And what should the organization do about this issue? Should it change its behavior, systems, and/or safeguards? If so, how will it go about doing it?

It's also useful to think about who is for and against the organization. Look for third-party validation from an organization similar to yours that would be willing to say something positive, such as: "Yes, we use the same property management company and have found it to be excellent." Or the city permit department may be able to say it noted the complex was well laid out, and the fire inspector might say that the property had only a month ago passed a fire inspection. Such back-up information can help put what has occurred in perspective for the reporter. (Of course, in any situation involving a death, sincere sorrow for the family of the deceased should be expressed to the reporter.)

Realistic Goals

Once enough data and supporting information are gathered, define goals. Are they to prove tax credits are not a public giveaway to the undeserved? To show that subsidies are needed in order to create housing that will sell or rent at below-market rates? To demonstrate that a mistake was not made — or, if one was, how the company will address it?

Next, determine what "products" will be of use in achieving those goals, such as:

Printed materials: Ideally, an organization already has a simple fact sheet on what it is and does. Preparation of a fact sheet on the incident/project in question would be helpful, too. A "backgrounder" may be invaluable. An idea: use TCAH's resources, such as "Busting the five most common myths" about affordable housing.

Media interview (and/or community member, elected official, or other interview) preparation: This would include devising likely questions to be asked and how to answer them. It is helpful to practice an interview or presentation before it is given. And there are several techniques that are useful, such as deflecting the question and ensuring the negative is not repeated, that require practice as well.

Responding to negative questions or statements can be a huge

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challenge. But taking the time to be prepared and to practice can be well worth the time invested. After all, an organization is only as good as its reputation. ❖

Bobbie Christenson is director of communication strategies at The Campaign for Affordable Housing. For more information about TCAH's upcoming conference, mission and resources, visit www.tcah.org or call 323.330.0540.

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