



POLK COUNTY
**HOUSING
TRUST FUND**

Basic Needs | Powerful Solutions

Public Perceptions and Affordable Housing

2012

Polk County Housing Trust Fund

Public Perceptions and Affordable Housing

A Study Reviewing the Most Common Negative Perceptions of Affordable

Housing and Methods for Overcoming Opposition

Prepared by
The Polk County Housing Trust Fund

Affordable housing development faces many obstacles. Securing funds, allocating resources, and navigating the housing market are just some of the intricate complexities that must be understood and overcome in order to provide those in need with affordable living. One of the greatest obstacles can be overcoming negative public perceptions towards public housing.¹ It behooves affordable housing advocates and developers to obtain public support if they desire to pursue a project with the least amount of resistance and delay. Such supportive entities will discover that the more they plan and frame the issue of affordable housing, the less resistance they will encounter before, during, and after housing development.²

This paper can be divided into two parts: first, what are the most common negative perceptions of affordable housing and why they are generally held by the public, and second, what affordable housing advocates can do to overcome such perceptions. Following these two sections are individual case studies from various states analyzing different methods employed by housing developers to address negative perceptions of public housing. But before identifying the most common negative public perceptions, there will be a brief discussion on

¹ Rolf Pendall, *Opposition to Housing: NIMBY and Beyond*, 35 Urb. Affairs Rev. 112 (1999).

² *Id.*

how opinions are formed and why an understanding of such opinions should influence affordable housing planning.

Introduction: Defining Public Opinion and the Need for Issue Framing

Consideration of public opinion is critical to the housing development planning process because such opinions not only fuel and influence the funding allotted by private and public entities, but also the approval of necessary zoning permits, building construction, and overall community acceptance. Public housing developers benefit from taking an early “litmus test” of public opinion prior to moving forward on a project because such polling helps organizations navigate the preparation and implementation process of the housing development, thereby reducing opposition and increasing public support.³

Opinions are first formed based on any information an individual has related to a topic, whether the information is accurate or not.⁴ The media serves as one of the greatest distributors and influences of information in today’s society. This industry significantly controls what topics the general public has exposure to and how to interpret and understand that information. When individuals lack sufficient information to form an opinion, they usually turn to their ideological beliefs and/or commonly accepted stereotypes to complete their understanding.⁵

³ J. Rosie Tighe, *Public Opinion and Affordable Housing: A Review of the Literature*, 25 J. Plan. Lit. 1 (2010).

⁴ *Id* at 4.

⁵ *Id* at 6.

Research also suggests that individuals typically only seek out specific information on a topic if they are personally affected by that issue.⁶ However, when a person experiences no direct effects, they are less likely to seek out more information and more likely to rely on their previous understanding, no matter how limited or misinformed that may be.⁷ However, it is important to note that an individual's core values may not always coordinate with their actual support of a given issue. "Vague values such as 'equality' are easy to support and have no negative connotations- while specific public policies such as 'welfare' could affect tax rates and have negative societal impacts."⁸

An individual's ideological beliefs, stereotypes, and amassed information all work together to form perception. "Perception- how we view the world- determines how we behave toward other people, how we identify our interests, and how we view politics and policies."⁹ While people use perceptions everyday to interpret and understand the world around them, "...considerable evidence exists in the literature that such cognitive shortcuts prove particularly influential in attitude formation toward social welfare policies."¹⁰ The goal of affordable housing advocates should be to identify those perceptions within their community and from where those perceptions are being formed. Once advocates understand what those opinions are and how they are being formed, they will be better able to frame the issue of affordable housing in a manner that not only dispels myths about public housing itself, but also its recipients.

⁶ *Id* at 5.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id* at 6.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

Part One: Negative Perceptions of Affordable Housing

Generally, opposition to affordable housing as a whole is referred to as “NIMBY”, which stands for “not in my backyard.”¹¹ Individuals and organizations categorized as part of the NIMBY opposition resist the development of affordable housing in their community. There are many underlying reasons that a person may not support affordable housing in their neighborhood.¹² Opponents may engage in a variety of activities to discourage the development of housing in their area, such as: picketing, circulating petitions, and contacting their local representative. While neighborhood opposition may appear to hold a united front, researchers stress the importance of distinguishing NIMBY from anti-growth groups, who oppose all kinds of new development not just affordable housing.¹³ By stamping an all inclusive brand on all types of opposition, public housing advocates miss the opportunity to effectively communicate with community members and make a lasting impact. Advocates would benefit from recognizing that “not all protests are NIMBY protests.”¹⁴

NIMBY can also be unnecessarily “demonized” by researchers and accused of being fueled solely by prejudice and discrimination. The “pejorative connotation” associated with the frequently used term can prejudice people towards the individuals opposed to the housing development.¹⁵ While prejudice is sadly a hallmark in some opposition campaigns, it is not always the case. “[NIMBY is] a sign that people care about their community, and is based upon

¹¹ *Id* at 1.

¹² Pendall, 35 Urb. Affairs Rev. 112 (1999).

¹³ *Id* at 121.

¹⁴ *Id*.

¹⁵ *Id* at 133.

common negative impressions of affordable housing. Those impressions come from projects like Pruitt-Igoe and Cabrini Green, and from television police programs. Why would anybody want that in their neighborhood? The challenge is to get people to understand that affordable housing doesn't have to be like that."¹⁶ Recognizing this human element in opposition is key when seeking to understand the negative perceptions most frequently associated with affordable housing. Affordable housing advocates "can only benefit from a broader recognition of the many reasons for protest."¹⁷

The most common negative public perceptions regarding affordable housing include: 1) fear of increase in crime, 2) fear of decrease in property value, 3) the belief that affordable housing properties are unattractive and poorly maintained, and 4) an ideological view that affordable housing recipients do not deserve assistance.¹⁸ Again, the goal of this study is not to determine conclusively whether such beliefs are valid, but rather demonstrate the importance of understanding public opinion and what affordable housing organizations can do to overcome such beliefs in order promote affordable housing.

1. Fear of Increase in Crime

Arguably the negative perception most feared by the general public is the belief that the presence of affordable housing will increase crime.¹⁹ This belief is fueled by many preconceived notions of the quality of affordable housing and the types of individuals who live

¹⁶ *Minneapolis: Building Relationships, Building Housing*, NeighborWorks Symposium: Changing Minds, Building Communities (2004).

¹⁷ Pendall, 35 Urb. Affairs Rev.112, 133 (1999).

¹⁸ Tighe, 25 J. Plan. Lit. 1 (2010).

¹⁹ *Id* at 10.

there.²⁰ Discrimination and judgment can play a large role in this particular belief; founded on the assumption that the disadvantaged groups occupying public housing (the majority of whom are low income minorities) are more prone to criminal activity.²¹ It is also a widely held belief that the building structures themselves are more conducive to, and in fact, encourage criminal behavior.²²

Despite what the underlying reasoning may be for this belief, it raises the question whether such assumptions are in fact reality. Depending upon the affordable housing's size and location, different methods of research can be used to determine the potential impacts on neighborhood crime rates; however currently there is no research that suggests there is any direct causal link between the presence of affordable housing and a neighborhood increase in crime.²³ There is evidence, however, that "housing development in poorest neighborhoods brings significant reduction in violent crime, but little to no difference in property crime."²⁴ Research also suggests that the scale and size of development can impact the rate of crime in an area, and that "crime occurs because large facilities either provide a pool of potential victims or fail to maintain social efficacy."²⁵

2. Fear of Decrease in Property Value

A second fear associated with public housing is the decrease in property value of neighboring residences. This belief is likely based upon another negative perception, for

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² Galster, Pettit, Santiago, and Tatian, *The Impact of Supportive Housing on Neighborhood Crime Rates*, 24 J. Urban Affairs 289 (2002).

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Freeman and Owens, *Low-Income Housing Development and Crime*, 10 J. Urban Econ. 115 (2011).

²⁵ Galster, Pettit, Santiago, and Tatian, 24 J. Urban Affairs 289, 292 (2002).

example that affordable housing is unattractive and poorly maintained. The fear is that those negative attributes “inherent” to affordable housing that would cause the property values of surrounding residencies to decrease. As with any of these most common negative perceptions, the answer to the question of validity for that particular belief is, it depends.²⁶ What is clear is that “the distinctiveness of subsidized housing...could [play] a part in determining how subsidized housing affects surrounding property value.”²⁷ Most research suggests that any possible changes in property value will be dependent upon whether the building structure is conducive and complimentary to the surrounding residencies, which will be discussed in greater detail under affordable housing appearance.²⁸ There is also research that suggests affordable can even increase the property value of an area.²⁹

3. Belief that Affordable Housing is Unattractive and Poorly Maintained

Another negative public opinion is that the affordable housing is unattractive and not well managed or maintained.³⁰ This belief may have been true during the early stages of public housing, when tower style structured were built and overcrowded, with little attention given to maintenance.³¹ However, the face of public housing has significantly changed since its early beginnings. Existing homes are being renovated into unique, modern designs that are conducive to neighborhood and surrounding properties. Contemporary townhouses are being

²⁶ Lance Freeman, *Subsidized Housing and Neighborhood Impacts: A Theoretical Discussion and Review of the Evidence*, 16 J. Plan. Lit. 359 (2002).

²⁷ *Id.* at 362.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Furman Center Policy Brief, *The Impact of Supportive Housing on Surrounding Neighborhoods: Evidence from New York City*, http://furmancenter.org/files/FurmanCenterPolicyBriefonSupportiveHousing_LowRes.pdf.

³⁰ J. Rosie Tighe, *Public Opinion and Affordable Housing: A Review of the Literature*, 25 J. Plan. Lit. 1 (2010).

³¹ Lance Freeman, 16 J. Plan. Lit. 359, 364 (2002).

built, revitalizing and providing a “face lift” to struggling communities. Affordable housing developments are no longer the blemish of a neighborhood, but often its most notable feature.

Such attractive appearances are often products of legislative policies requiring affordable housing developments to meet certain community standards. Because of such preventative measures, the belief that affordable housing is unattractive and poorly maintained cannot be accurately stated for the vast majority of recent housing developments.

4. Ideological Belief that Public Housing Recipients do not Deserve Assistance

Finally, many individuals do not approve of public housing because they believe that the recipients do not deserve assistance, viewing “housing programs as giveaways.”³² This negative perception is likely the hardest public opinion to confront, because it is so deeply rooted in an individual’s personal beliefs and not necessarily on facts and information. “One of the most important manifestations of social constructions is the extent to which such perceptions shape the way people view the worthiness of themselves and others.”³³ Such predisposed beliefs of a person’s lack of worthiness can be addressed however, often by helping those individuals relate and identify with public housing recipients.³⁴

Research also suggests that word choice can greatly affect the perception individuals will have of public housing. When polled, people were more likely to support “life cycle housing” as opposed to “affordable housing”, even though each term was given the exact same

³² Tighe, 25 J. Plan. Lit. 1 (2010).

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

definition.³⁵ However, “we can’t invent enough words to stay ahead of folks who want to oppose us,” noted Alan Arthur, president of Central Community Housing Trust Fund.³⁶ Ideological beliefs that oppose affordable housing development are the likely hardest to overcome because they are not based on fact but in deeply ingrained values; however that does not necessarily mean that any efforts for change by affordable housing advocates will be unsuccessful.

Part One Summary

Public opinion is a dynamic creature with numerous influences and complexities that can make it difficult to predict and understand. Many factors influence a person’s views of affordable housing beyond the most common negative perceptions described previously. A person may support affordable housing generally, but not understand how affordable housing is a solution for societal problems today.³⁷ It is also common for a person to support the development of affordable housing as an overall policy, but just not support development in their community.³⁸ Another possibility is that an individual may support the goals of affordable housing, but have disagreements as to how development should be funded and what entities should distribute the assistance.³⁹ Whatever the reasoning or misconceptions, it is critical for affordable housing advocates to understand the public’s opinion prior to housing development.

³⁵ Edward G. Goetz, *Words Matter: The Importance of Issue Framing and the Case of Affordable Housing*, 74 J. Am. Plan. Assn. 222 (2009).

³⁶ *Minneapolis: Building Relationships, Building Housing*, NeighborWorks Symposium: Changing Minds, Building Communities (2004).

³⁷ Tighe, 25 J. Plan. Lit. 1 (2010).

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

Identifying needs and concerns prior to development minimizes and can even prevent opposition, filling the neighborhood with a sense of voice and understanding.

Part Two: Combating Negative Opinions of Public Housing

Having identified the most prevalent negative perceptions of public housing, we will now address the remedies for overcoming such potential opposition. Methods for overcoming opposition to affordable housing can be divided into three general categories: education and information, negotiation, and lastly, litigation.⁴⁰ After having completed the initial “litmus test” of public opinion, housing organizers are ready to create an action plan to overcome any negative perceptions revealed during initial polling.

Education and Information

Educating the public with the facts of public housing is the greatest tool in overcoming negative public perceptions.⁴¹ Providing information dispelling the most common misconceptions and stereotypes associated with public housing can be very effective in smothering NIMBY fires. While some communities require specific knowledge related to crime rates or property value in order to accept public housing, the majority of housing opponents simply need information demonstrating the necessity of affordable housing in their area.⁴²

One example of such information distribution can be seen in the Fort Collins, Colorado, where in 2004 they launched the Affordable Housing Poster Campaign titled “Can I be Your

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.* at 11.

⁴² *Id.*

Neighbor.”⁴³ The Social Sustainability department of the City of Fort Collins wanted to “put a face on local affordable housing issues.”⁴⁴ The campaign advertised posters depicting individuals who would represent the recipients of affordable housing.⁴⁵ Poster headlines highlighted the recipient’s occupation and its value to the community.⁴⁶ For example, one poster included a photograph of a young medical professional with the following heading: “He can take care of you family’s health. Can he be your neighbor?” Another poster displayed multiple individuals in essential, community sustaining occupations, such as a firefighter, teacher, and auto repairman.⁴⁷ Beneath the photos were statistics showing the great discrepancy between cost of living in a standard two bedroom apartment with that of the occupation’s hourly wage.⁴⁸ The closing statement on the poster reads “These people benefit our communities. Let’s keep them here.”⁴⁹ By identifying familiar faces in the community in roles most would consider essential to public safety and well being, housing advocates help individuals opposed to affordable housing identify with its recipients. Providing information and education on what affordable housing is, who it helps, and the need for assistance should be the foundation of all affordable housing advocacy.

⁴³ 2004 Affordable Housing Campaign: “Can I Be Your Neighbor?”, Fort Collins, Colorado, <http://www.fcgov.com/socialsustainability/neighbor-posters.php?key=affordablehousing/neighbor-posters.php>

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

Negotiation

Negotiation is another tactic with which developers can overcome neighborhood opposition to affordable housing.⁵⁰ By welcoming community input, developers are setting the stage for cooperation rather than a prolonged defensive-offensive game. A “joint problem-solving approach” that includes the concerns and desires of the community are often successful in seeing affordable housing come into fruition.⁵¹ Adaptations in the size or style of housing being built are changes often requested among community members. However, as useful a solution negotiation may seem, when ideological beliefs with regards to “race, class, and neighborhood quality” are present, potential success of negotiation strategies are minimized.⁵²

Litigation

The last method for overcoming affordable housing opposition is litigation. In most scenarios, this method is used as a last resort.⁵³ After providing information and making efforts to negotiate with a community have failed to dispel opposition, affordable housing advocates may consider if there are any statutes that would support their attempt to revitalize a neighborhood. Organizations may be able to sue if city zoning codes are not being upheld, or if the refusal to allow the development of affordable housing violates anti-discriminatory laws. Such was the case in Yuba City, California where opponents blocked city council approved development by arguing that “the minority residents tend to have more school age children

⁵⁰ Tighe, 25 J. Plan. Lit. 1 (2010).

⁵¹ *Id* at 11.

⁵² *Id* at 12.

⁵³ *Id*.

than their white counterparts.”⁵⁴ The developer sued based on discrimination and won.

Litigation can be costly and cumbersome, delaying the construction of affordable housing.

However, sometimes it is the only available means by which affordable housing can sustain a future in the community.

Case Studies: Education, Negotiation, and Litigation in Practice

Lastly, we will analyze real life examples of affordable housing organizations putting into practice the tactics of education and information, negotiation, and litigation by reviewing specific city case studies. Case study examples were gathered from research conducted by the NeighborWorks Symposium: Changing Minds, Building Communities 2004. NeighborWorks is a nonprofit organization that conducts research and study projects across the United States, contributing to the ongoing body of knowledge on affordable housing.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

Location: Oldsmar, Florida.

Project:

The Wilson Company, an affordable housing developer, purchased land near a local church where the property was already zoned for multi-family use. Wilson proposed that 270 units to be designated for individuals living below 60% of median income for that area. These units were to serve the population of “industrial, manufacturing and retail businesses” whose low wage workers were forced to commute because they could not afford to live in the city. “Teachers, office workers, and salespeople could [also] qualify to live in the new community.”

Opposition:

NIMBY: Neighborhood residents came out in strong support against the construction of the affordable housing units. Led by the Oldsmar Community Alliance (OCA), alliance leaders brought suit against the city and city council members, requesting a temporary injunction prevent construction. Motivations cited for opposition to the development included various fear of what kind of residents would be moving into the area. Discriminatory allegations were raised.

Action Plan:

Education: The Wilson Company held informational meetings, and even gave tours of other affordable units. The organization also brought in familiar faces from the community, so that neighbors could see and recognize those who would actually be benefiting from the affordable housing units.

Litigation: However, the informational meetings were boycotted and the tours ignored. The OAC filed suit against the city and the individual council members. The Wilson Company also brought suit against the city and the council members in their individual capacities.

Results:

When the city council was faced with the law suit, they voted to approve construction of the Westminster development. But even after construction began, opposition still existed. The units were vandalized during construction. However, now the Westminster affordable housing units are occupied and serving the community.

Lesson:

Use of Fair Housing laws are sometimes the last and only option for achieving results when public opposition is strong and resolute.

Oldsmar, Fl: It's not Just a Good Thing To Do- It's the Law, NeighborWorks Symposium: Changing Minds, Building Communities, May 5, 2004.

Location: Minneapolis, Minnesota

Project:

Central Community Housing Trust (CCHT) sought to renovate a vacant nursing home located in downtown Minneapolis into affordable housing units.

Opposition:

NIMBY: Neighbors were concerned with a potential loss in property value and argued that there was already a substantial amount of rental property in the area.

Action Plan:

Education: CCHT worked to meet with all types of community leaders to dispel fears and provide factual information on the impacts of affordable housing. The organization also worked to make their blue print renderings of the housing construction more reader friendly so that the general public could easily understand what was going up in their neighborhood. CCHT also offered tours of already established affordable housing units. CCHT noted that “words like ‘affordable’ and ‘low-income’ have a pejorative meaning to many people, and so instead they use[d] real numbers when referring to the income unit levels a unit will be planned for.”

Results:

CCHT spent a year and a half working within the community to overcome opposition to the housing project and was able to develop the vacant nursing home into what is now called the Alliance Apartments.

Lesson:

Setting aside resources to educate the public can save time in comparison to the time potentially spent battling uninformed, NIMBY opposition. “The affordable housing movement in general has not allocated enough resources to education, community relations, public relations, and marketing... Affordable housing needs are great, but we’ll never expand the pie if we don’t do that kind of outreach.”

Location: Dallas, Texas

Project:

The Foundation for Community Empowerment (FCE) sought to rebuild and revitalize the southern district of Dallas. FCE wanted to change local housing regulations to make the approval process more “streamlined.”

Opposition:

Developmental policies and regulations were cumbersome, and delayed the development of affordable housing. The FCE had meet with city officials to voice their concerns about the barriers legislation imposed on the development of affordable housing in Dallas, but no change occurred.

Action Plan:

Education: FCE gathered other partners and decided to launch a media campaign (both television and newspaper) to educate the public as to the current need for and obstacles to affordable housing.

Results:

After gaining media support, the mayor agreed to meet with the coalition and listen to their issues and recommendations, including changes that would accelerate the “time it took to turn over a lot for development from the current two and a half years to just 60 days.” New policy drafts were formulated and presented to the city council for adoption and passed, allowing for a more efficient housing development process. Prior to the campaign, “no more than 50 affordable housing units were being built each year” in the southern Dallas area, and in March 2003 following the campaign, 3,700 units were under construction with more to come in the future.

Lesson:

Sometimes the same public that usually presents the greatest opposition can be the strongest ally when struggling against governmental agencies and political stalemate.

Location: Vermont, statewide

Project:

Vermont State Housing Authority (VSHA) launched the Vermont Housing Awareness campaign, aiming to educate people on the need for more affordable housing in their area.

Opposition:

No specific opposition existed, but just a general disbelief that there was a need for affordable housing in the state. When polled, the majority of residents believed that no housing problems were present in their neighborhoods.

Action Plan:

Education: The project began by polling the public in order to better understand their gaps of knowledge and understanding on affordable housing issues. This included presenting information on the significant increases in prices for single-family homes and the stagnation of average median income, as well as statistics like “61% percent of Vermont workers are employed in jobs with a median income insufficient to afford the rent for a basic two bedroom apartment at the Fair Market Rent.” Housing advocates also switched from using the term “affordable housing” to “housing that average Vermonters can afford” in order to avoid the previously joined stigmas associated with the term. Supporters produced a video highlighting the need for affordable housing in the area, alongside what were to become annual reports documenting the problem.

Results:

Once residents were informed that affordable housing was lacking in their area, 79% supported affordable housing development.

Lesson:

By proactively educating in the early stages of development, the housing coalition was able to build a strong supportive base within the state upon which to build future affordable housing projects.

Location: Seattle, Washington

Project:

The Seattle-King County Housing Development Consortium (HDC) wanted to raise funding for future affordable housing projects by increasing public and governmental awareness of housing issues.

Opposition:

General NIMBY opposition had created a lack of support and deficient funding.

Action Plan:

HDC launched a large marketing campaign prior to a vote on a property tax levy, focusing on who would benefit from the newly developed affordable housing. Such marketing included pitching affordable housing news ideas to the local stations and television commercials. The commercial was filmed at an affordable housing complex, in order to show the real faces behind affordable housing, and to show that affordable housing is just like any other type of housing. Brochures were also distributed headlining this theme: "What does affordable housing look like?" "We recognized that we needed to raise awareness about what affordable housing looks like, who lives there, and why we need it," said Joyce Halldorson, director of communications for HUD. The TV commercial avoided political affiliations, and instead focused on educating people on the actual need for affordable housing. "We're trying to get people to think of housing as a good investment for donations of money, land, and resources. We want to tap into new, non-traditional sources of funding. Currently, most funding for affordable housing comes from the government, and we don't expect those resources to expand in the future," Halldorson continued.

Results:

While government funding had lessened, HDC credits the success of its continued affordable housing developments on the increased and reliable public support it received. The organization measures its increased public support by the four ballot campaigns that have been successful for raising public funds for housing.

Lesson:

Marketing and media campaigns should not be slighted on budgets of affordable housing advocates. The rewards of advertising and information distribution can be great.

Seattle: Speaking in Resident's Terms, NeighborWorks Symposium: Changing Minds, Building Communities, May 5, 2004.

