



Minimizing and Managing Neighbourhood Resistance to Affordable and Supportive Housing Projects



BC Housing

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INTRODUCTION

Housing development, renovation and repurposing should be undertaken thoughtfully, with the neighbourhood's, the site's and the building's zoning, history, design, density and other planning-related factors carefully considered and managed. Sometimes neighbours identify a project's shortcomings in one or more of these areas, and they act to have those shortcomings addressed. Yet too often there is resistance to the people to be housed in a proposed development, particularly in the case of social or supportive projects housing the very poor, or people struggling with some combination of physical or mental illness, or addiction.

Identifying strategies for addressing tenant-based resistance to housing projects was the subject of the Promising Practices in Reducing Community Resistance to Infill, Affordable & Supportive Housing panel, presented at the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association's 2014 Annual Congress.

STEVE POMEROY, PRESIDENT, FOCUS CONSULTING, OTTAWA

Steve Pomeroy recently completed a study for the City of Edmonton that sought to identify "...processes, tools, or criteria that can be used to engage more positively and pro-actively with impacted communities on proposals for a range of housing types throughout the City including permanent supportive housing, affordable housing, and market housing." The study examined relevant practices in 19 cities in Canada and the United States, and among its key findings was that resistance based on concerns about who would live in the proposed housing were most common. These concerns were most strongly expressed where homeless people, many of whom suffer from mental health issues and addiction, were to be housed.

Drawing from the cross section of surveyed case studies, the typical people-related concerns raised by neighbours include:

- Potential for increased crime and compromised safety;
- Lower property values;
- Unwelcome visual impact as tenants loiter, to the perceived detriment of local businesses and tourism; and
- The neighbourhood already has too many homeless people and homeless-targeted services.

From the case studies, effective strategies for addressing neighbourhood resistance to housing projects were identified, and included:

- Establish a formal affordable housing project approval and funding policy;

- Public education and awareness-building specific to affordable housing policies;
- Early and low-key stakeholder engagement; and
- Process to constructively work through planning-related concerns.

These approaches and how they were developed are documented in the case studies, as well as summary findings, in Pomeroy's paper, titled Finding Common Ground. It can be downloaded in its entirety at <http://www.focus-consult.com/research-reports>.

NICOLE MACRI, DIRECTOR OF HOUSING, DOWNTOWN EMERGENCY SERVICE CENTRE, SEATTLE

Residents of Seattle, Washington, vote every 7 years to renew a property tax levy that funds affordable housing development, and since being introduced in the early 1980s it has been overwhelmingly re-approved with each vote (most recently, at the height of the recession, with 67% support). A population that willingly maintains a tax that it could long ago have eliminated might be expected to just as strongly support the affordable housing projects that those taxes fund. Generally the support does hold, but sometimes, particularly when those projects are for the very poor or homeless, the support falters. It is these occasions that make it necessary for local affordable and supportive housing developers to be in a constant state of readiness to address neighbourhood resistance when it appears.

About DESC

Seattle's Downtown Emergency Service Centre (DESC) began in 1979 as an emergency shelter and support centre for chronically homeless adults. Today, operating 1000 units of supportive housing in 10 buildings and scattered sites, and serving 2000 people daily with its extended emergency shelter, drug and alcohol treatment, mental health care and supported employment services, its mission is to end homelessness among vulnerable people.

DESC operates on a Housing First model, which is generally defined as barrier-free housing but was aptly defined by the 5-year old daughter of a DESC staff person as a "Welcome Home- stay as long as you want" approach. DESC has been developing supportive housing using this model for 20 years, and significant neighbourhood resistance has emerged in 3 of 7 developments over the past 12 years.

Screening In

Neighbourhood resistance tends to materialize when neighbours, on learning about a project and the DESC housing model, focus on just some, not all, aspects of the Housing First approach. Hearing that people will move in directly from the street, need not meet any pre-conditions pertaining to drug use or mental health stabilization, and do not have to participate in treatment or counseling services is likely to evoke images and breed assumptions that are concerning. Often DESC is asked who they do screen out when

selecting tenants, and the response, “We don’t screen people out, we screen people in” does not ease those concerns.

What people who focus just on these elements miss is the model’s success for both tenants and the wider communities in which DESC operates. DESC’s strategy, designed to minimize the likelihood of sparking neighbourhood resistance, is to put a lot of time and effort into educating neighbours about all aspects of its housing model at very early stages of project development.

Geographic Dispersion Policy

Seattle has a policy of not supporting housing projects targeted to very low-income tenants in census areas where 20% or more of the available housing in that area is already subsidized for people who have very low incomes, (less than 30% of the city’s median income level). That policy has the effect of dispersing low-income people throughout the city, and is intended to ensure that no one area is disproportionately impacted, or becomes defined by, extreme poverty. As the city grows and a census area’s population increases, often the percentage of housing for very low income residents in the area decreases. This opens up new supportive housing development opportunities in well-established communities.

The downtown core is exempted from this policy because the area is dominated by businesses, and contains little housing, while it is a centre of homelessness and social support delivery. But when people move out of downtown they are able to develop new patterns that support their efforts to improve their lives. The intensity of homelessness and poverty downtown attracts activities that prey on that population. Still, it is when projects are sited in predominantly residential neighbourhoods outside the downtown that neighbourhood resistance is most likely to emerge.

This Process Moves in One Direction

DESC adheres to guiding principles when choosing a site for development, prioritizing sites where other people live, amenities are appropriate and plentiful, and zoning allows for outright permitted use of the planned building type. Once land is secured and funding feasibility is confirmed, turning back is not an option. Even when the mayor called to ask DESC to relent to a group of vocal and angry voters, the response to the mayor was “Please stick with us”, and he did.

Transparency, a focus on educating neighbours about the organization and its housing model, and collaborating with supporters who have seen the model’s success, are keys to quelling resistance. There are approximately 10 supporters that DESC can call on to help it to communicate the value of a new project to concerned neighbourhood influencers. These supporters are recognized community leaders, like heads of local business associations, whose input is likely to have an impact on their peers in other neighbourhoods.

Gentrification Meets Diversity

In 2013 DESC opened Cottage Grove Commons, a permanent supportive housing project with 66 studio apartments and common space for residents on the first floor. As per zoning requirements, ground-floor retail is incorporated. It is located in a neighbourhood that had recently been “up-zoned” to multi-family residential to promote greater housing density. On a main artery, but abutting quieter side streets with exclusively single-family homes, the neighbourhood had a long history of housing new immigrants and other low income residents, including people with disabilities and addictions. Recently, though, young, upwardly mobile residents had been buying up the single-family homes, a small number of whom became highly invested and engaged in the neighbourhood’s improvement. Active on the neighbourhood council, they spearheaded the public scrutiny of, and resistance to, the Cottage Grove Commons project. Indeed, DESC has found that neighbourhood resistance to supportive housing projects tends to be greatest in neighbourhoods dominated by single-family homes.

These neighbours wanted all the information they could possibly get about the project and the DESC housing model, and wanted to hold large public meetings to discuss their concerns. Elected officials saw the opponents as good-hearted and engaged, just wanting to understand the project, and so supported the large meetings. DESC tried unsuccessfully to de-escalate, and shift to a more small-group focused consultation process. The first public meeting started well, but one neighbour ultimately rallied fellow residents to stop talking and to oppose the project.

All the neighbourhood’s problems and grievances with the City administration became entangled with the discussion of the project. All the key City official champions attended the public meeting, but the tide against the project became too strong to contain in that forum. The up-zoning and the subsequent development plans that DESC introduced were seen by these new homeowners as running counter to the neighbourhood’s ongoing “improvement”, and the core questions were about the risks associated with the tenant population.

Be Reasonable

DESC applies the “reasonable person test” when developing a response to neighbourhood resistance, which essentially asks, “What level of engagement and influence would a reasonable person expect to have in this type of development?”. The model “reasonable person” is essentially a local elected official. Applying this test results in acceptance that the most rabid opponents do not have to be won over, or even engaged if their resistance becomes intransigent. Fear is at the heart of most neighbourhood resistance, which can make people irrational and immune to being won over by rational arguments and empirical evidence. DESC’s long-term goal, then, is not to convert opponents, but to earn neighbours’ trust by being transparent and openly sharing information about itself and the project. What is never entertained is discussion about the whether the people to be housed are a good fit for the neighbourhood.

Consistency

DESC's response to neighbourhood resistance never wavers. Seattle requires that before a group applies for housing development funding, it must demonstrate that it has notified all residents living within 500 feet of the proposed development that the application is forthcoming. DESC finds this policy helpful, because should neighbourhood stakeholders later state that they were not consulted prior to the development being funded, it can clearly show that the application proceeded in accordance with City policy. The notification letter includes an invitation to a neighbourhood meeting where project information will be presented and discussed. Community leaders, including elected officials, are invited to participate in the meeting, but a challenge that results from the policy is that it puts non-profits out front in communicating government policy. Ways to make the municipal government more integral to the consultation process are now being explored.

The anticipated force or nature of neighbourhood resistance does not influence DESC's engagement strategy. Because they have learned that anything can happen with a given project, they consistently and rigorously take a "hope for the best, prepare for the worst" approach. Before securing a development site, DESC speaks with local government funders, and sometimes to elected officials. Before announcing a project elected officials are certainly engaged, as are key neighbourhood influencers, whether they are likely to be supporters of the project or not. DESC gathers intelligence on who key influencers are, as they are not exclusively the official leaders of organizations and community groups. This initial engagement process often takes place informally at small coffee meetings or in people's homes. The scale and formality of the engagement is progressively scaled up as intelligence on likely issues, supporters and dissenters is gathered, and project information is shared.

The community engagement plan is integrated into DESC's overall development plans. Even when no neighbourhood resistance emerges, all the same engagement and education steps are undertaken. Every team member, even the architect and contractors, are aware of, and involved as ambassadors and participants in, the community education and relations process. One contractor DESC frequently works with prepares a monthly newsletter that is placed in neighbours' mailboxes to keep them apprised of development progress and issues, and provides a phone number neighbours can use any time they wish to raise a question or issue. The involvement of these project partners in the engagement process is absolutely critical to its success.

The Long View

When DESC moves into a neighbourhood it anticipates at least 50 years of operation on the site, and this early information-sharing and trust-building is critical to developing the foundation for that long-term community involvement. It is DESC's post-development and ongoing involvement in the community, and its demonstrating that its housing model works as it said it would, that really builds its credibility and helps it to seed support for future projects. This ongoing engagement and involvement is a steadfast DESC

commitment, and it monitors its buildings to ensure that the engagement level remains strong. This is led by building managers, but those tenants with the capacity to be involved in community activities are also encouraged to do so. This helps promote the normalization of the project as rental housing, rather than as a treatment-focused centre.

Neighbour Advisory Committee

A key part of DESC's engagement strategy is the establishment of a neighbourhood advisory committee for each development project. Resistance to the Cottage Grove Commons project was resolved by channeling the neighbours' concerns into such a committee, which included representatives of local business, neighbourhood association, local service providers and residents. Participants learn about DESC and the project, and raise issues that require attention in order to make the project a success for the neighbourhood, as well as for DESC and the tenants. It provides a contained forum for mutual learning and dialogue, and issues often include plans for retail spaces, building design and landscaping. It is the most effective forum for communicating the large volume of complex information pertaining to complex and potentially contentious development projects. Here too, it is made clear in the committee's initial scoping meeting that questions about the tenant population are welcomed, but recommendations about who will or will not be eligible for tenancy are not.

Often when committee members who persist in opposing a project exhaust the project's substantive issues they turn to questioning the decision-making processes. Are the rules being followed properly? Is DESC getting special favours from government? Nicole calls this the "spaghetti approach"- throw one strand after another at the wall and see what sticks. When a neighbourhood advisory committee reaches this point, the majority of participants have generally had their concerns addressed, and the remaining opponents' steam tends to peter out.

Retail Diplomacy

Retail spaces, which the City of Seattle sometimes requires developers of multi-unit residential buildings to incorporate into new buildings, can be of great interest to neighbours. DESC scopes its projects such that rent from retail spaces is not required to make the project viable, which provides it with the flexibility to leverage the use of those spaces to build neighbourhood support for the project. The ideal retail tenant profile is determined through the community engagement process, with the local Chamber of Commerce, for example, selected in one case to help develop critical networks with, and the support of, the local business community.

Other key elements of DESC's approach include:

- Sharing lots of information, including reports about its other supportive housing projects, with neighbours;
- Consistently returning neighbours' calls within 24 hours;
- Tours of existing buildings, even another organization's if that is the only option;
- Neighbour testimonials about the success of other projects;

- Seeking out opportunities to get involved in a neighbourhood as soon as a decision to develop there is made, by organizing a park cleanup, for example;
- Bringing neighbours into your building when it's active, including offering volunteer opportunities. This breaks down barriers, and invests neighbours in the residents' success;
- Incorporating main-floor community meeting space, with direct street access, into a building design;
- Most supportive housing tenants are excited about the concept of being a neighbour, and want to be good neighbours. Being clear and frank with tenants about expectations around being a good neighbour, and supporting them in meeting those expectations with education, counseling and clear policies;
- A clear visitor policy that support tenants' desire to control who enters their space and how they behave when visiting. DESC tenants' visitors must be approved before being allowed entry, and approval always requires leaving a state-issued ID with the front desk while on the premises; and
- Prohibition of loitering and panhandling in the neighbourhood, with consequences, up to lease termination if it continues.

FRANCOIS GOULET, PLANNER AND DEVELOPMENT ADVISOR, CITY OF MONTREAL

Since 2002, after the amalgamation of all cities on the Island of Montreal into the unified City of Montreal, it has welcomed the development of 14,000 affordable non-profit housing units. Neighbourhood resistance to some projects has emerged, but partially for historical and cultural reasons, and also as a result of some unique and effective policies and practices, the resistance has been largely contained.

Despite amalgamation, each of the 19 boroughs maintains local councils with their own sets of powers. While the City has a central housing department, each borough has its own planning and permit approval department. Also, unlike most other Quebec municipalities, the City of Montreal has been granted by the Societe d'Habitation du Quebec (SHQ) full control over the administration of its portion of provincial housing programs. The City also supplements provincial government funding for new housing development, which the SHQ provides through the AccesLogis program.

An Effective Partnership

In order to access affordable housing funding in Quebec, an organization must engage one of several technical resource groups (TRG), non-profit consulting organizations that have been developing and advocating for co-operative and affordable housing projects for decades. They know the neighbourhoods in which they operate, including the community leaders, have detailed understanding of municipal housing programs, policies and decision-making practices, and have finely-honed expertise in designing buildings and projects that meet the needs of tenants and neighbours. TRG's have become adept at building

neighbourhood support for affordable housing projects, and at managing resistance when it arises.

The Toit en ville project illustrates how the partnership works. This 22-unit building, to be built on a small lot, appeared from the outset as if it would sail through the approval process. No zoning adjustments were required, and the neighbourhood in which it was located was depressed, having been dominated by bars and frequented by prostitutes and numerous homeless people. Some gentrification was underway with the construction of several condominium projects, but it was still very much a neighbourhood in transition.

The project partners, including the City and the TRG, did not anticipate the swift and strong resistance that emerged, first in the form of a petition by neighbouring, and relative newcomer, homeowners. It brought to the surface many residents' latent frustration with what they perceived to be the City's not doing enough to support the neighbourhood's improvement. The project was seen as further evidence of the City's neglect, and as such became the proxy for a set of grievances that was much bigger than the project itself. Also, for a small but active group of gardeners, the trigger for their resistance to the project was the fact that it required removing a popular community garden that had been set up, without formal permissions, on City land.

The TRG and the City of Montreal Housing Department quickly analyzed the rapidly-escalating situation, and developed a two-pronged strategy to address it. First the neighbouring Jeanne Mance housing society was engaged to partner in seeking a new site for the community garden. An easily accessible site on Jeanne Mance land was identified, and plans for its development were quickly drawn up. The second step was to convene all project partners, from the applicant organization to the City, to jointly develop and present a single presentation at the upcoming consultation meeting. This presented the project supporters as speaking with a single voice, while also demonstrating that the neighbours' concerns were taken seriously, and that a proposed community garden solution was in place. The presentation also methodically illustrated other specific ways the project would positively impact the neighbourhood, and together this set of measures succeeded in quelling the resistance.

Inclusionary Housing Strategy

Montreal has an inclusionary housing strategy that, in practice, requires that each new multi-unit housing project of over 200 units allows for the inclusion of at least 15% non-profit housing, and 15% affordable private units (usually homeownership). Given that Montreal remains a relatively affordable market in the urban Canadian context, the affordable homeownership target is usually achievable without great difficulty. The effect of this strategy is to spread affordable housing units throughout the city to avoid the creation of impoverished zones, which in turn reduces the likelihood that neighbourhood resistance to these projects will emerge.

Montreal's history and culture of developing mixed-income neighbourhoods supports the policy's realization, despite its not yet being enshrined as an official regulation. The majority of the housing on the island of Montreal is inhabited by tenants, and tenants' associations are very well organized and influential, and are closely networked with the TRG's. Homeowner associations on the other hand often emerge only on occasion and are less well organized. This geo-political dynamic is an important force supporting the inclusionary policy, as renters expect new multi-residential developments to include affordable units, and will forcefully oppose developments that do not. Any project requiring a zoning change triggers a requirement for public consultation, regardless of project size, and tenant groups are active participants in this process. This, effectively, is a form of public engagement that promotes rather than opposes affordable housing development.

There are times when a developer cannot incorporate affordable units into a project, and in these instances a negotiation is triggered with the goal of ensuring that the intended social benefit is still secured. Alternatives can include the transfer of land to the City or a non-profit organization for affordable housing development, development of more affordable units than required in another of the developer's buildings, and in some cases a fee may be paid to the City in lieu of incorporating the required affordable units. Approval for any of these alternatives generally requires that the developer make a larger overall affordable housing investment than would otherwise have been expected.

Section 89(4)

Again, a zoning change request always triggers public consultation. After an initial public meeting, a citizen has the right to request that a neighbourhood referendum be held to decide a project's fate. If, before the referendum request is submitted, the City anticipates that a request may materialize, it may invoke Sub-section 89(4) of the City of Montreal Charter. Doing so prohibits a referendum on that specific project from taking place. This decision, typically requested by the borough council, is made only occasionally when a project is seen as important but potentially controversial.

Invoking Section 89(4) is considered a measure of last resort because it can be politically costly, but its existence provides a powerful planning and development tool that often motivates all parties to engage in productive discussions about a project without triggering its use. It was used to facilitate the development of the CEGECOM project, a 12-unit residence for people living independently with mental disabilities. The project had the strong support of the borough administration because it saw the need for the housing, and also because the project would open up two previously dead-end streets which would improve local traffic flow and emergency vehicle access, and make snow clearing faster and less expensive. When signs emerged that the local homeowners association was opposed to the project, despite the neighbourhood being one of the most tenant-intensive in the city, the borough decided to employ Section 89(4) to ensure that the project proceeded. This effectively shut down the possibility of successfully opposing the project, but the borough still held a public consultation meeting to make the case for the project's merits to the neighbourhood, after which the project was built.

¹ Budget for road work comes from the Housing Department when the work is related to affordable housing. It works as an additional incentive for some borough that might otherwise not be in favor of some affordable housing projects.,

CONCLUSION

Both Montreal and Seattle feature municipal policy and practice frameworks that support the central role that affordable and supportive housing development play in their housing systems. Montreal has secured the right to deliver autonomously the provincial AccesLogis program, and supplements it with funding of its own, and likewise Seattle partially funds affordable and supportive housing using its voter-supported municipal tax levy. In both cases municipal politicians are for the most part affordable housing champions, or at least partners, and their support is crucial to effectively addressing and quelling neighbourhood resistance when it arises.

Montreal has the ultimate, if judiciously used, tool to overcome neighbourhood resistance to a project in Section 89(4), which provides the municipality with the power to stop resistance before it can really form. While Seattle does not have a comparable policy, DESC has compensated for its absence by developing a well-honed and unwavering community engagement process that allows no room for debating who is suited to live where, and no room for turning back from developing a project once the decision to proceed is made. It has built its reputation for over three decades on its transparency and openness, its long-term commitment to being a productive member of the neighbourhoods in which it operates, and the effectiveness of its particular Housing First model. There is much to be learned from both approaches.



The **Canadian Housing and Renewal Association (CHRA)** is the national voice for the full range of affordable housing and homelessness issues and solutions across Canada. We have over 275 members who collectively house and shelter hundreds of thousands of Canadians, and provide housing support to many more. CHRA provides a home for the housing sector and for all who believe that every Canadian should have a decent, adequate and affordable place to call home.

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