

How To Organize Successful Affordable Housing Tours

Sometimes, seeing is believing. Whether the tour is large or small, informal or carefully orchestrated, introducing people to affordable housing "up close and personal" neutralizes many opponents and can engender support from potential allies. Stereotypes are challenged, burning concerns are quenched, and minds are opened. The following are suggestions gleaned from organizers of recent housing tours on how to make the most of them.

I. Identify Clear And Specific Goals

Why do you want to organize a tour? Are you trying to reduce opposition to a proposed development by easing the concerns of already agitated neighbors? Or do you want to proactively bolster supporters or immunize decision-makers from typical fears about design and property values that come up every time a development is proposed? Or, do you want to develop new relationships, for example, recruiting supporters from the environmentalist community or faith congregations?

How you answer this question will determine your target audience, your program, and many practical details. The more specific you can be, the easier the rest of the organizing will be. East Bay Housing Organizations' (EBHO) recent tour targeted Oakland city officials (including the newly elected) and staff. A tour in San Francisco primarily organized by Greenbelt Alliance in October 1997 reached out to environmentalists and planning groups to enlist their support for in-fill affordable housing.

II. Gather a team and get to work

Consider getting other organizations to co-sponsor the tour. Co-sponsors may provide staffing, useful contacts, mailing lists, credibility and even partial funding. The Greenbelt Alliance tour was co-sponsored by NPH, Urban Ecology, Inc., and Mission Housing Development Corporation. After your goals and target audience are clarified, you can design the tour and the program.

III. Invitation and motivation

This is not a case of "If you hold it, they will come." Often, the hardest part of organizing a tour is motivating the target audience to attend, especially opponents of a proposed development. Substantial planning and effort may be required to produce a good turn-out.

Making the logistics as user-friendly as possible will help, e.g. the tour bus picking up participants at a convenient location, date, and time. Invitations should be as personalized as possible and have a clearly-devised "hook" to grab your intended audience. You can use popular speakers as tour guides to attract an audience. Nail down some key participants and then leverage these to get others to come. Peer pressure may help: "Yes, Councilman Smith, three other members of the Council have confirmed." Including a certain kind of housing, e.g. senior housing or low-income ownership, may be a hook for some decision-makers. If project opponents are the target audience, they should know that decision-makers will be informed about your offer and their response.

IV. Details, Details, Details

The numerous practical details your team will need to decide include the following:

- How many people do you want to come on the tour?
- How will you pay for mailings, tour bus rental, refreshments, and other costs?
- Which developments will you visit?
- What will you do at each site?
- What will your format be?
- Will there be a "program" at some time during the tour?
- Who should be your "tour guides"?
- Will it be a walking tour or a bus/car tour?
- Will someone take pictures and/or slides of the tour for use in the future?

Providing refreshments, even simple drinks and cookies, always makes for a welcoming spirit and happier participants. If at all possible, before you settle on details, someone on the team should do a "dry run" of the tour and the program to determine whether it's realistic. Test every critical decision you make by asking yourself: Will this help us meet our goal? For example, EBHO organizers decided to not inform the media about its tour so that the participants could have frank, off-the-record conversations.

V. Select sites carefully

Many cities have an abundance of potential sites to visit; others have only a few and may need to visit developments outside of their jurisdiction. Quality and depth are more important than sheer numbers. If you list the potential sites on one side of a chart and the characteristics you want to include on the top (e.g. a range of neighborhoods, types of development, population served, new construction vs. rehabilitation, types of financing used, how the development fits into the neighborhood, etc.), you can determine which developments best exemplify what you want to show. EBHO designed its tour so that each development "told a story" about an important issue, such as professional management. To make points about good property and tenant management, include buildings constructed or rehabilitated 10 years ago. Leave 'em hungry for more, not exhausted and resentful for being dragged on a forced march. The tour can drive by additional developments and give brief profiles of them in a tour packet to broaden the exposure.

VI. Making points in your program

At the beginning of the tour, the tour leader could ask a few questions to elicit participants' concerns and fears about affordable housing. (For example, "What are the most common concerns about infill/affordable housing that you have heard?") This accomplishes a few things: (1) it helps establish rapport between the facilitator and the group; (2) it gives you a feel for the interests, concerns, and sophistication of your audience; and (3) it sets up what points you need to make in subsequent presentations.

Have someone available at all times (e.g. on the bus between stops) who can answer questions that arise after seeing one development and before seeing another. Pass out survey forms for participants to give their suggestions for improvement. Explain how you will use their feedback, e.g. Construction/Design department will review it.

The presentation at a building could include pictures of the site before rehabilitation or construction to make a point about how it improved the neighborhood. You may want to include a slideshow or a small discussion panel as part of the tour program. Invite current residents of existing developments, property managers and current neighbors to give their "testimony," as well as the project manager or a representative of the developer. However, go over their comments with them beforehand. A volunteer at a shelter unwittingly told visiting guests, "I like to help out here, but I wouldn't want to live next door."

Residents and on-site staff should always be informed about the tour and its purpose. Those who are expected to speak should be prepared to answer questions that are likely to be asked. If the resident has a conflict with the management about her apartment, resolve it before the presentation. If your target audience is opponents, you'll want to leave time in the program to elicit and respond to their concerns. Don't promise to answer everything there and then.

VII. Handouts can help

Providing printed materials can take the pressure off of your desire to communicate large amounts of complex information in a short time. They can also provide participants something to browse through during the inevitable "dead" time between buildings. You can include "project profiles" which give vital information about each development, "resident profiles" which educate participants about who needs

affordable housing, and "issue profiles" which reinforce and further document the points you are making in your presentations, e.g. about property values and professional management.

VIII. Evaluation and follow-up

During the last leg of the ride or at the end of the presentation, invite participants to evaluate the tour. This reinforces your interest in their concerns and could help you design more effective tours in the future.

To get the most of your efforts, don't stop after the tour bus is empty. Set up a meeting with the team to debrief and evaluate your efforts. Call interested or enthusiastic participants to recruit them for future work. Send follow-up letters to those who attended, thanking them, answering any unanswered questions, and directing their attention to the next step -- whatever it is. Using your original mailing list, send follow-up letters to those who did not attend, informing them of the tour's success and offering them another chance to find out about affordable housing.

Most of all, don't let the persuasive power of successful affordable housing developments go to waste. Show them your work, and show it often.

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