



Using the Media to Your Advantage

In small towns, there's often not much news to start with and what news there is travels fast. That's why media is a powerful vehicle to get a message across (even a letter to an editor may generate weeks' worth of responses). But for the same reason, it's important to cultivate a trusted and respected base of allies before going public. Once the word is out, project opponents can mobilize very quickly to create a presumption that the project is a threat to the community that needs to be stopped. But if it appears that your development is a well-received asset to the community, fewer people will be willing to stick their necks out as naysayers.

But even if you think you are not quite ready to seek media attention, it is still important to be prepared for a reporter's call.

Here are some tips to remember:

Develop and maintain a personal relationship with a reporter or an editor. In turn, they may develop a particular interest in your project and cover your issue on a regular basis. A reporter who has an ongoing relationship with a group is more likely to write an accurate and compelling story.

Provide easy to understand, powerful human interest "sound bites." Identify 2-3 main speaking points and refer to them throughout the interview. In small communities, one or two reporters are expected to cover all the local news – so remember that you are most likely dealing with generalists who don't have housing as their beat. Your job is to educate them. (Sometimes it can be worth asking if you can review the article for accuracy before publication.) Continuous reference to 2-3 talking points reduces the likelihood of speaking "off message." For example, when the reporter starts focusing on the fact that prospective residents may have had serious addiction problems in the past, the spokesperson guides the reporter back to the 2-3 themes ("Yes, some of our tenants have struggled with drugs and alcohol in the past, but the supportive setting will provide them with the stability and structure that has been shown to be effective in the long term, with costs that are far lower to the community than the alternative.")

Assign one spokesperson to speak to the media. That person should be prepared to communicate the message clearly, consistently and using good "sound bites." Always refer the press to the same person.

When you see a story on your issue or a related one, notice who the reporter is and develop a relationship with him/her. The same is true for columns, and even editorials. Call and find out who wrote the editorial on your issue.

Don't overlook the power of Op-Eds, Editorials and Letters to the Editor. Get someone notable in the community to write a positive "op ed" (the page across from the editorial page) for your project. [Note: Lots of prominent people may be far more willing to "write" an op ed, if it's written for them. Have someone on your board or staff with good writing skills draft such a document.] In addition, call the paper, get the Editorial Department or just ask to speak to the

editor, and describe the issue you'd like the paper to endorse as an editorial (the "position" of the newspaper). Remember, if you don't ask, you don't get. Letters to the editor are coverage too – and the third most read part of a paper. Get as many letters to the editor sent as you can.

Make the reporter's job easier for him or her. Provide him/her with names and contact numbers of engaging interviewees; provide him or her with fact sheets that contain all the background info they will need. This will increase the likelihood that he or she will call you in the future.