Housing Development Consortiums:
Tremendous strides, forward thinkers

Housing development consortiums are basically local industry associations for affordable housing developers and their partners. Any organization or business committed to advancing the interests of affordable housing in the consortium's region of interest can be a member. These often include nonprofit organizations, municipalities, lenders, for-profit housing developers, legal and accounting professionals, and other suppliers. There are several reasons why I chose to focus on housing development consortiums in this issue of My View.

First, the creation of consortiums, along with their membership growth and community impact, has been picking up momentum in urban areas of Washington State. This includes consortiums in Spokane/Spokane County, Everett/Snohomish County, Tacoma/Pierce County, and one of the oldest and most effective organizations of its kind in the U.S., the Seattle/King County-based Housing Development Consortium (HDC).

Second, I knew these consortiums had accomplished a great deal in our state but I suspected I didn’t know the whole story. As in previous newsletters, I wanted to document their beginnings and share their successes and challenges with others. While accomplishing that, I also learned about the Community Development Network (CDN) in Portland, Oregon and the Pacific Coast Affordable Housing Network (PCAHN), which are included in the stories below.

Finally, I’m struck by the commitment HDC and the other consortiums are making to meet the future challenges of providing affordable housing. Due to a host of factors, gaps are widening between affordable housing needs and availability and between median incomes and rapidly increasing housing costs. Escalating prices for cement, steel, and lumber are eating away at the number of units we can produce with existing resources. This is fast approaching a crisis and HDC and its peers are actively seeking answers.
King County’s Housing Development Consortium: A pearl among peers

To get a pearl, you first need some grit, something to inspire the pearl to take shape. Many great organizations, today’s pearls, first arose in response to yesterday’s challenges. That’s essentially how the Housing Development Consortium (HDC) got started. HDC has been led by Executive Director Carla Okigwe since its founding in 1988.

Back in the mid-1980s, a group of nonprofit leaders had been meeting for lunch for several years to trade war stories about their housing development efforts. “They were basically grouch sessions,” Carla laughs. At that time, the way affordable housing construction projects were structured and funded by the City of Seattle was a sore point for local nonprofit organizations (nonprofits).

In the state of Washington, city governments can’t directly build and own housing—they need to partner with other entities to address the housing needs of lower-income residents. To provide for this, the City of Seattle was giving small operating grants and parceling out money to nonprofits for affordable housing construction. Nonprofits were frustrated because the City would allow for-profit developers to take a 20% profit. “But they wouldn’t allow nonprofits to take any developer fee because they felt they were funding them through these small operating grants—of about $20,000 to $50,000,” Carla recalls. “That was hardly enough to pay one person to get anything done.”

What the nonprofits were looking for was parity—to be treated like builders. They wanted to secure more stability as organizations and to be more like for-profits in the way they conducted business. “They wanted to gain more autonomy and have the funding necessary to move quickly and control building sites, without having to go through an onerous application process—without all that approval time and waiting,” Carla says.

HDC levels the playing field among developers

One group member seized the initiative by writing a grant proposal to study how the City was funding housing projects. The group received a grant of $50,000 to hire a consultant. “The City said: We realize that things aren’t perfect. It would help us if you could organize so that you have one voice,” Carla recalls.

At that time in late 1987, Carla had been consulting with the Commission, helping us to set up the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program. Carla was invited to advise the group and help get them organized by creating bylaws and filing as a 501(c) (3) organization. Membership quickly rose to 10 organizations—and then mushroomed. Right off the bat Carla developed training programs for members on technical issues impacting nonprofit housing developers and she tackled the funding parity issue. It took them about a year, but in the end, HDC negotiated a developer fee schedule with the City based on the size of a given project and other key factors.

“People were triumphant. What that did was give members the ability to sustain themselves as organizations and sustain the long-term effort it takes to get through projects.”

When the consortium was officially created in April 1988, to Carla’s knowledge, there were only three similar organizations in the country: a housing rehab group in Columbus, Ohio; a statewide association of community development corporations in Massachusetts; and a group of nonprofits in Northern California that ultimately became a conference organizer. But no one had
apparently done what HDC’s members were attempting to do in terms of organizing to meet the spectrum of affordable housing needs in their community. In the years to come, Carla and HDC pretty much wrote their own playbook.

Carla thinks that so many great housing nonprofits sprang up in this region, “Because there was a big need and the housing authorities weren’t stepping up to meet it.” Carla points out that, “The City of Seattle couldn’t field a major development authority like Portland’s, so the idea of grass roots efforts became the theme for how our housing was structured—compared to other places where there are large development authorities that dominate activities. Our housing authorities were fairly big, but were basically in the sleeping mode at the time. Unlike now,” Carla points out, “Now they’re very adept.”

Accomplishments on a statewide level
One of HDC’s most profound early accomplishments was its involvement in the creation of the Washington Low Income Housing Congress in 1988, which later evolved into the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance. “Very early on, we realized that as housing nonprofits, we needed substantially more money from the state to fund affordable housing projects,” Carla says. “At that time, King County did not have a strong record in the state legislature. Rural legislators would always outvote King County issues.” During those early years Carla and other members helped establish the Congress. Carla served as the first Congress chairperson and also staffed it for about three years. In 1989, under Carla’s leadership, the Congress hired its first legislative lobbyist to focus on affordable housing issues.

The next step was to achieve staff support for the Congress. In 1993, Carla and Maureen Howard, who now works for Habitat for Humanity of Washington State, secured grant funding from the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) to start the Washington Low Income Housing Network to fill that role.

The Network later merged with the Congress to become the Alliance, with Carla again serving as the first chair, continuing HDC’s efforts to strengthen affordable housing at the state level. In fact, the current director of the Alliance, Ben Gitenstein, was formerly HDC’s advocacy director. While with HDC he supported Alliance issues in the state legislature, including this year’s successful funding increase to $121 million for the state’s Housing Trust Fund.

You may have to reread the last few paragraphs to get all the roles and organizations straight, but the message is clear: HDC recognized that mutual statewide support for affordable housing programs was the best way to get Seattle and King County’s low-income housing issues in front of state legislators.

Over the years, HDC has played a significant role in supporting important housing initiatives in its local community as well. HDC has led efforts for the passage of Seattle’s successful housing levies, including the 2002 Levy that raised $86 million to produce affordable housing in the city.

“The one thing that makes Washington State really different from most of country,” Carla emphasizes, “is the amount of collaboration and mutual support that we have in this state. The idea is that if we can all get together and help each other, we can get a lot more done. This is true with government as well. The government works hand in hand with us: it is not the enemy. We see ourselves as part of the system, supporting one another.”

Housing Development Consortiums: Tremendous strides, forward thinkers

The Bellevue/Olive Apartments
Located in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle, this housing serves households that earn below 50 to 60% of Seattle’s median income. Built by Housing Resources Group (HRG) in 1995, it is one of 25 affordable properties HRG maintains in the Seattle area. HRG (then known as Seattle Housing Resources Group) was a founding member of HDC in 1988.
Housing Development Consortiums: Tremendous strides, forward thinkers

Achieving stability
As with any new nonprofit, figuring out how to stay alive financially was a struggle in the early years. At first, Carla operated HDC part-time out of her home as a contract employee. HDC largely depended on a city grant of $25,000 a year, plus $200 annual dues from members to show their commitment. The membership continued to work on other ways to get funding to keep HDC going, including a city grant to work on neighborhood housing strategies. “That was a really strong collaboration,” Carla recalls. “Paul Fischburg, working with that group, later founded the Delridge Neighborhood Development Association.”

Ultimately, it became clear that it was easier for HDC members to get grants for the housing they produced, which helped pay for their overhead. In turn, they agreed to pay substantially higher dues for real services. “We realized that we could not easily get funding from grants just for general operating expenses. We were an indirect service organization.” HDC’s annual dues schedule now varies from $1,000 to almost $6,000 per member. “Some of our associate members are among our most active,” Carla says. These include banks, architects, general contractors, legal and technical consultants, accounting organizations, and property management firms, among others.

“We have a huge number of associate members,” Carla says. “Relatively speaking, we have pretty much everyone involved in nonprofit housing development in one way or another. The City of Seattle and King County pay dues instead of giving a grant. They both give us a substantial amount of funding.”

HDC members meet monthly. “If we’re to stay together as a group, it’s essential to have that constant contact.” HDC uses “affinity groups” to focus on specific issues of concern to members. For example, there is currently a utility cost reduction affinity group that’s negotiating a housing retrofit program with public utilities for the Seattle area. Members choose which affinity groups they wish to join.

“Our organization grew so fast because we were doers,” Carla says. A critical aspect was HDC’s ability to figure out rational solutions to problems. They gained a reputation for responsible, thoughtful approaches—and for results. That in turn heightened members’ buy in. For Carla, that means the members’ personal investment. “Members started HDC, they helped guide it, they had a voice at the table. And now that they’re committing large dues, they want to make sure HDC continues to work for them,” she says.

Looking ahead
I’ve been particularly impressed by HDC’s efforts to help members address future affordable housing shortfalls in King County. One wake-up call was the decreased buying power of current financial resources. Carla gives the example of how little additional housing the increase in the Housing Trust Fund will buy. “Normally we would have said that was a big success—but we realized that with the cost of concrete and other materials having gone up so much, all that [increase] did was cover increased costs for the same number of units. That was a real eye-opener for a lot of people,” Carla says.

A similar example is that, “The Housing Levy for the City of Seattle has been roughly the same amount for some time,” she points out. “When our members were originally producing housing, we made the assumption that incomes would go up in concert with costs.” That hasn’t happened.

All of these factors are coalescing into a dire outlook for HDC’s housing producers. They see that production levels could drop by as much as 20% in terms of the number of units they can produce over the next decade, based on their current resources. According to Carla, King County is going to need 155,000 more housing units by 2015. A large portion of those units will be needed for working people who will be priced out of affordable housing.
Future of the Field

In response, HDC initiated a new process last year called Future of the Field. The mission is to engage its members in a discussion about preparing for the future. The members have committed to doubling their own housing production. “That means we have to move up to 4,000 units a year—somehow,” Carla says. To meet the future needs of low-income residents, she and HDC are asking the hard questions that they hope will lead to solutions: “How are we going to double that number? We have to become more efficient in our production—even though we think we’re efficient already. We have to get more subsidy resources. Where are we going to find them? To get more resources, we realize we need even broader community support than we do now. That’s where HDC is now heading.

“We are trying to figure out how to build more coalitions with the for-profit development sector to see what can be done to make a huge dent in that number.” With the right incentives, the private sector could integrate lower-cost units—and could go a long way towards achieving the goal of 155,000 units. “So our other big goal out of this, other than doubling our production, is building a broader alliance.”

HDC recently held a second Future of the Field retreat to continue planning to meet the future head-on. Given their past record of success, I’m confident Carla and her members will succeed.

Spokane Low Income Housing Consortium: Maximizing local housing resources

“It’s all about maximizing local housing resources... SLIHC wants to ensure that people can fully utilize the resources that are available.”

“IT’s all about maximizing local housing resources,” says Cindy Algeo, Spokane Low Income Housing Consortium’s (SLIHC—pronounced “Slick”) executive director. SLIHC has been doing just that since its founding in 1990. Cindy took on the director’s role two years ago and SLIHC is fortunate to have a great community of people and organizations committed to developing, promoting, and supporting affordable housing. Today, the Consortium has more than 25 nonprofit and public organizations as members, along with a number of for-profit associate members who support its housing efforts.

OneStopHousing.org

One recent project, OneStopHousing, illustrates how SLIHC takes the initiative in the Spokane community. OneStopHousing.org, a Website listing of affordable Spokane County rentals, was launched by SLIHC in July. “We’ve already had great results,” Cindy says. “After four months, we have over 2200 rental units listed, with approximately 80 available immediately.”

At a SLIHC monthly meeting less than two years ago, Arlene Patton, director of the Spokane HUD office, pointed out a disconnect: there were many vacancies at Project-based Section 8 complexes, yet many people who were in need of affordable housing weren’t aware of them. “The knowledge of what was available was not connecting with demand,” Cindy explains. “SLIHC wants to
ensure that people can fully utilize the resources that are available.”

SLIHC members formed an exploratory committee to research affordable housing locator products nationwide. They ultimately settled on a software program called Housing Point, also used by Portland Metro’s Housingconnections.org. The Consortium’s thinking was that sharing the same software might make it easier for other communities in Washington State and the region to follow suit. The City of Seattle is exploring a similar move, and other areas of the state are showing interest as well.

“We’ve had over 6,000 searches in the past four months,” Cindy says. “One site manager told us that most of the people who contacted her found out about the vacant units through OneStop.” The Spokane community has pitched in by making free Internet access available through locations all over Spokane County, from libraries to HUD kiosks to the Transit Authority and employment service offices. “It’s been a wonderful partnership. There’s just been a great response from the community.”

Proactive roles
Here are just a few of the additional roles SLIHC has taken on during the past year to maximize affordable housing resources in Spokane County:

Watchdog. SLIHC frequently takes on the role of watchdog to make sure that local housing support programs are meeting the needs of nonprofit developers. This year, SLIHC pushed for Spokane County’s review of its plan for distributing housing money received from the state under House Bill (HB) 2060, passed several years ago. The initial plan had been implemented in 2002. SLIHC drafted the agenda for the review and suggested amendments to the initial plan to make it work better. Almost all of SLIHC’s suggestions were accepted, including setting a clear timetable for annual funding rounds so that housing developers could achieve more certainty for planning and development.

Catalyst. SLIHC was a catalyst in the creation of the task force that prepared Spokane County’s Ten Year Plan to end homelessness as required and funded by HB 2163, passed in 2005.

Organizer. SLIHC has been leading grass roots efforts to secure new housing through the Department of Defense’s Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) activities. Cindy credits SLIHC member Larry Griffiths, executive director of Salem Arms and Spokane Community Housing Association, for spearheading these efforts. Griffiths and SLIHC have been keeping close watch on three facilities in the Spokane area that are due to be privatized. The City of Spokane has formed a local redevelopment authority (LRA) and an LRA task force. “SLIHC has been very proactive. There are tremendous possibilities here for affordable housing, shelters, and employment training.”

Innovator. SLIHC was instrumental in ensuring that Spokane County submitted a competitive grant application under HB 2163 last month to implement better planning and coordination of services for people exiting local prisons and hospitals. “We worked with 20 organizations on the grant submission,” says Cindy. “We want to fine-tune housing plans to help prevent the cycle of homelessness.”

SLIHC has truly been successful in bringing people together to find local housing solutions. Like others involved in affordable housing, SLIHC members are concerned about an affordability gap that continues to grow. “At times,” Cindy says, “it feels like we’re winning battles but losing the war—but we’re still winning battles. The changes may be incremental, but change is happening.”

Partners Jerry Fintler and Linda Harvey were able to buy their home with the help of the Homeownership Opportunities program through The Arc of Spokane. The Arc, a long-time SLIHC member, serves people with developmental disabilities and their families.
Housing Consortium of Everett and Snohomish County: Expanding outreach, enhancing visibility

One refreshing aspect of researching this issue of My View has been seeing how different consortiums have evolved to respond to the needs of their communities. In the case of the Housing Consortium of Everett and Snohomish County (HCESC), advocacy and education play a significant role; members are focused on providing strategic leadership in the formation of housing-friendly policies and programs.

June Robinson, the second executive director of HCESC, has been on the job for just four months, but she’s been learning the ropes quickly. “Affordable housing is a new area for me,” she says. “My background has been in public and community health. But,” she points out, “the two have much in common with affordable housing. It’s hardly a stretch to think of affordable housing as a critical aspect of the health of a community.”

HCESC emerged from an Everett-area initiative called Healthy Communities, which got its start in the late 1990s. Its precursor organization, the Housing Stakeholders Group, built a great track record, developing a countywide Affordable Housing Strategic Plan, sponsoring housing forums, advocating for progressive policies, and helping build public support for funding the Snohomish County Housing Trust Fund.

Bringing people to the table
June credits HCESC’s quarterly Affordable Housing Breakfast Forums the group sponsors in Everett with establishing an effective community conversation on the topic of affordable housing. “The breakfasts have been very successful at attracting a wide range of folks to the table. This includes a mix of elected officials from the cities, state legislators, county council members, and people from nonprofits—both housing and other human service organizations that are concerned about affordable housing. Depending on the topic, we also get realtors, bankers, and other for-profits who are impacted by housing concerns.”

Looking forward, June says HCESC wants to get all the Snohomish County cities more involved in the Consortium and in affordable housing efforts in general. “The City of Everett has been involved from the beginning, but we’d like to reach out beyond Everett, to provide education and information, determine what other cities want and need in order to help them become more amenable to affordable housing,” she says. Most recently HCESC has been reaching out to the smaller cities in Snohomish County to foster a dialogue with elected officials, planners, and managers on how HCESC can help them better address their affordable housing needs.

“There are tools, like zoning, that cities can use to incentivize housing efforts,” she continues. “That is certainly an area we want to work on. Our plan is to reach out to the staff people, the city planners, the city council members, the mayors. How can we as a consortium support them and provide assistance?” In the works is a questionnaire structured to ascertain the level of interest in affordable housing, and what kinds of structural incentives are already in place.

HCESC is fortunate to have a strong membership, June says. Virtually all of the nonprofit housing developers that work in Snohomish County are members, as well as the Everett and Snohomish County Housing Authorities, and a strong roster of associate members. The board, June reports, “is a very active group. They’re my more immediate contact for direction, input, and ideas. And there’s lots of room for members to set the agenda.”

June acknowledges that visibility and public awareness of affordable housing concerns are critical to increasing support for HCESC’s initiatives. “We as an organization are talking about a public education campaign. I know other housing groups around the state are discussing the same thing—the need for more broad-based education campaigns that speak to both elected officials and the general public about affordable housing needs and what that means for...
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us as a community. Everyone knows that housing is expensive, but it’s difficult, if you’re not involved with it every day, to understand the magnitude of the housing issues we face. We’re hoping to partner with other organizations in this.”

Tacoma/Pierce County Affordable Housing Consortium: Cross currents in the downtown core

The City of Tacoma presents some unusual challenges for affordable housing advocates. Unlike neighboring high-priced Seattle, Tacoma, with so much visible urban blight—including vacant buildings and rundown tenements—had too much low-cost housing in the past. But it wasn’t the kind of safe, attractive, healthy affordable housing that advocates strive to create. Tacoma’s downtown core has been off limits to new low-income housing projects since 1997, and the city council has had a moratorium on special-needs housing in place since May 2005. Their idea was to increase livability and safety, which in turn would encourage investment.

Tacoma’s renaissance

In general, the strategy has been successful. Tacoma’s downtown has been reviving for a number of years, led by the new Art Museum and the Museum of Glass, and the new University of Washington campus in Tacoma. Tacoma is also seeing new businesses and condominiums locate downtown. Urban renewal is definitely taking hold.

Most recently, Connie served as executive director of the YWCA of Pierce County. She’s also worked as a remodeling contractor and a marketer at US West. “I do bring different skills,” says Connie. “I have an MBA in finance and accounting, but I’ve also swung a hammer.”

Keeping members informed

Connie says her main function at the Consortium is to “support our members with information about developments in the community and government proceedings. It’s very hard for people to keep up on their own.” The group consists of 16 core members who are nonprofit housing developers, 12 affiliates and six financial institutions. What they share is a desire to create more affordable housing in a healthy environment.

To achieve its goals, the Consortium has been opening channels of communication with all of the stakeholders. They’ve been talking with builders to determine what incentives can result in workable cost models. They’ve also been talking to policymakers in the city and on the county level. “Everyone understands that affordable housing needs to be produced,” says Connie. “We’ve spoken to all the members of the City Council individually. We’ve testified at hearings. Basically, we find them interested and motivated to find solutions.”

But the special-needs populations have not gone away.

That is the focus of the Tacoma/Pierce County Affordable Housing Consortium. As the new executive director Connie Brown explains, “In Tacoma, the critical need is for more decent affordable housing. We bring stakeholders together to create a unified voice on housing policies at various levels of government.”

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The organization had its beginnings in a small group of nonprofit housing developers that started meeting in 2001. The group grew steadily and incorporated in 2003. They achieved 501(c)(3) status in 2006 and hired Connie as executive director in May.

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Making the case for affordable housing
The consortium’s first effort is to bring some new low-income housing to Tacoma.
Connie explains that the 1997 Miller Amendment, which prohibited funding for low-income projects in the downtown core, does have a provision that permits exceptions on a case-by-case basis. “Developers and funders view it as a blanket prohibition; no one has gone to the City Council for an exemption.”

The Consortium is working with local government and community groups to come up with long-range solutions. The moratorium on special-needs housing expired in early November as some land use regulation changes were approved by the city council.

Mixed-income solutions
One high-profile project in Tacoma involves the Winthrop Hotel, which is located in the downtown theater district. Since the 1970s, it has served as home to 170 Section 8 tenants. However, it is sorely in need of a major overhaul. According to Connie, a developer is interested in renovating the current building into an upscale hotel and condos. Part of the plan is to relocate the tenants to a new facility—or facilities. HUD would prefer a simple one-for-one replacement, but the Consortium believes the tenants would be better served in three or four sites. “That would give people more choice,” says Connie. “They could live in a more mixed-income environment, with less concentration, better security and an overall higher quality of life.”

Affordable Housing NOW wins a big victory in Portland, Oregon
They’re celebrating in Portland. Sam Chase, Executive Director of the Community Development Network (CDN), was truly in high spirits when he told me that they had just achieved “one of our most historic victories in terms of generating resources for housing.”

CDN is roughly Portland’s equivalent of HDC. But, as you’ve no doubt realized by now, things don’t work the same everywhere in the West. Oregon has Urban Renewal District monies available—otherwise known as Tax Increment Financing or TIF—which allows the Portland City Council to access tax revenues collected in designated districts for redevelopment purposes. Last month, the City Council finally said yes to a request for an additional $25 million per year from TIF monies for affordable housing. Sam was kind enough to explain in detail how this was achieved.

Building the coalition
The Affordable Housing NOW (AHN) coalition came together about three or four years ago. Sam recalls discussions with representatives of like-minded groups, which were focused on different issues, such as the environment, tenants’ rights, and so on. The group made a strategic decision to focus on generating resources for affordable housing. They examined all of the sources for revenues, including real estate transfer taxes, document stamp fees, linkage fees, and urban renewal monies. Then they started organizing.

The first step was forming a core group to coordinate the effort. This included CDN, the Coalition for a Livable Future, the City Club of Portland and the Community Alliance of Tenants. Members of these groups wrote grant applications that procured initial funding for early administrative efforts.

Next, AHN organized community forums to identify priorities and broaden the base of support. The forums clearly pinpointed people at the lowest income levels as the highest priority. Says Sam, “We used that information to build our agenda.”
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We articulated our ideas about solutions and did a series of outreach programs to a broad range of community organizations and asked them to sign on to our agenda.” This resulted in endorsements from 40 organizations and hundreds of individuals.

The political process
Although Portland generally has a reputation for being supportive of social needs, Sam knew that AHN still had a formidable task. “Even with sympathetic ears on the City Council, it’s another story when you’re trying to get an actual dollar commitment. Plus, the scale that we wanted to reach—that can be hard on the local level.”

The solution was a massive postcard campaign. AHN created postcards and encouraged supporters to send them to City Council members. The high volume of mail translated into a tangible show of the community’s support for affordable housing. AHN also hosted forums with candidates in conjunction with local elections. “We asked them if they supported our agenda, and got a great response.”

Finally, Sam says a key part of the strategy was the decision not to specify where the resources should come from. AHN consistently presented its entire range of funding options, but declined to single-out any of them. This allowed the elected officials to take ownership of the eventual decision.

Once the City Council decided to focus on the TIF solution, AHN launched an innovative “Puzzle” campaign to show their support. As Sam explains, “We had different delegations go to the Council each week throughout the spring to tell their stories and give one more piece of the puzzle. They timed the visits to take place just before the weekly budget meetings where the Council would decide on housing.

“There were 30 pieces to the puzzle to match the 30% set aside of urban renewal funds we were pushing for and the $30 million in the general funds request.”

On October 18, 2006, the City Council voted to approve the 30% urban renewal set aside, with the funds earmarked for affordable housing. It’s a textbook case of how a coalition can work with elected officials to create an outcome that truly benefits everyone in the community.

“Put the Pieces Together”
This is the picture of affordable housing, created by the Affordable Housing NOW coalition, that Portland City Council members assembled after the delivery of 30 individual pieces.
On advocacy and organizing—and PCAHN and HTFs

A conversation with Mary Brooks of the Center for Community Change

The Pacific Coast Affordable Housing Network (PCAHN—pronounced Pecan) has been in existence for about two years. The brainchild of several of the most adept and effective housing development consortiums on the West Coast, it’s a consortium of consortiums. PCAHN, which currently numbers about 18 consortiums in California, Oregon, and Washington, is still wrestling with fine-tuning the challenges that most new organizations face, including how to best meet the needs of its members and finding financial support.

As Carla Okigwe tells it, the idea for PCAHN came up at a national conference for community development leaders. PCAHN’s founders wanted to establish a forum to discuss gaining peer support to sustain their organizations, how to deal with conflict, how to keep a group together, and how to advocate effectively. “They called me up and we decided to have a planning group of all the coalitions up and down the West Coast to see if we could figure out the commonalities,” says Carla.

The fledgling group first met in Oakland, California in 2004 for an initial planning meeting; the members brought in Mary Brooks of the Center for Community Change (CCC) to advise them. Founded in 1968, CCC is a national organization dedicated to helping community organizations become more effective. Mary has worked in affordable housing for three decades, and founded CCC’s Housing Trust Fund (HTF) Project in 1986.

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Bringing advocacy and organizing elements together

Mary’s work in advising HTF campaigns around the country has been phenomenal. When she first started the Project, there were just a handful of HTFs in the U.S. Now there are some 400 in cities, counties, and states nationwide. I was interested in hearing her perspective on PCAHN and its efforts to organize and make the transition from a great idea to a great tool for its members and their causes; our conversation also touched on her work in HTF advocacy and technical assistance.

“The effort of PCAHN was fascinating to me and also to the Center for Community Change,” Mary says. “There’s a huge amount of interest in both advocacy work and organizing. They’re seen a bit differently, of course. With organizing, you’re engaging grass roots groups. And then advocacy works on a different level when the organizations are involved. Frankly, with the consortiums that are part of PCAHN, all of them have a foot in both areas. They were interested in how to be more effective on both levels. Throughout the country, at least with HTF work and I would say in affordable housing altogether—that’s a tension that exists.”

In Mary’s experience with HTF campaigns, virtually all are a product of collaborations or coalition efforts. Some are brought together to create a HTF; sometimes they have a broader agenda. “But bringing the advocacy and organizing elements together has been a challenge,” she states. “The efforts that can bring them together are successful. And that’s the challenge of my work.

“With HTFs, we’re trying to get a dedicated source of public funds. Even if a legislator is committed to doing something about affordable housing, it is a very difficult position to put them in, to take scarce public resources and commit them to affordable housing. So they need to hear that it’s the right thing to do. And frankly, the best way to hear that is from the voters.” The grass roots are what brings that element to a campaign, Mary emphasizes. They communicate the message that they have members and constituencies that are impacted by their inability to find acceptable affordable housing. “That gives those elected officials the kind of grounding they need to make those decisions.”
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MARY BROOKS
Director
Housing Trust Fund Project
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Striking a balance
One of the key topics brought forward at that first PCAHN meeting was how to balance the local community needs and relate them effectively to a national agenda. “That was a big part of the conversation,” Mary says. “Nationally, we need to figure out how to call on organizations that are really effective—and do that in a way that builds the influence and power that they can have locally.”

Prioritizing the needs of its various constituencies is a concern that PCAHN members are still struggling with after their first three meetings. What they’re finding, says Carla, is that they’re confronting similar issues to those they face as ‘individual’ coalitions. “Members want PCAHN to happen, but if we decide that there’s value to it, we’re going to have to get some kind of staffing. Mainly what we’ve been doing these first meetings is deciding what would make sense for all of us.” There’s a clear difference: some organizations are relatively new or have a recent change in leadership. With the more experienced directors, on the other hand, the desire is to delve into broader advocacy issues vs. more nuts-and-bolts peer support.

Mary Brooks points out that all three West Coast states have completely different histories and environments in terms of their strides towards achieving affordable, decent housing for their residents. PCAHN, she asserts, has some of the top housing advocacy groups in the country as members. In other words, this is an organization to watch.

As an aside, I was pleased to hear Mary’s perspective regarding Washington State’s strides to address affordable housing on a statewide level. “Washington State has one of the best HTFs in the country,” she told me. “And [House Bill] 2163 just set Washington State apart even more, by showing that it really could work in partnership with its counties. Pennsylvania did it first, but they did it differently. They had legislation that enabled counties to increase their document recording fees by a vote of the county commissioners. But it wasn’t quite the same thing that Washington did. People around the country are really looking at 2163 as a model.”