

Using Technology to Generate Support for Developments

Virtual Bridges - Developers leverage Web 2.0 technology to balance the yeas and nays of community development.

By Joe Bousquin

Council Rock Partners' proposed development of the Aqua Vista condominiums in Los Angeles' Studio City area was bound to get messy. Not only would the 122-unit luxury condominium project require the demolition of three existing apartment buildings—and the relocation of the residents living there—but concerns over traffic and unbridled growth in the neighborhood of 1930s-style bungalows was bringing out opponents in droves.



At one particularly contentious meeting before the Studio City Neighborhood Council's Land Use Committee, residents charged that Marina Del Rey, Calif.-based Council Rock was going to "ruin" the area and trash any remaining "good" air quality along the corridor. Meeting minutes recorded residents saying they were being "numbed" by "monstrously" overbuilt developments in the area.

But Julie Gertler, founder and CEO of the Consensus Planning Group, a Los Angeles-based consultancy that helps developers such as Council Rock build community support for their projects, knew that the views expressed at that and other meetings represented just a small portion of public opinion. The problem was getting residents who supported Council Rock to turn out and show their support.

"[Often], the process at public meetings has been taken over by negative people who don't want to see anything built anywhere," Gertler says. "When you do find people who do support you—who have jobs and families—going to those meetings is not high on their agenda."

Unable to pack the room with bodies, Gertler decided to bring their voices instead. Using a PowerPoint presentation, Gertler and her staff showed officials a map of the area overlaid with pictures of residents at their exact addresses. Each picture corresponded to an audio interview with the resident voicing support for the project. The presentation was posted online for those who couldn't attend the meeting, and the interviews were available for download as the project worked its way through the approval process.

"In the end, even some of the opponents who didn't vote for it said [the presentation] was the most amazing thing they had ever seen," Gertler says. "We got an overwhelmingly supportive vote, and it went on to be approved by both the Planning Commission and the City Council."

Gertler and Council Rock aren't alone in using technology to generate support for controversial development projects. Whereas community groups and anti-growthers have used technology and the Internet for years to organize grassroots opposition to development projects, developers are now starting to turn the table. Through presentations such as the one Gertler posted online, Web-based feedback forms, bulletin boards, blogs, Web video, and even social networking sites, developers are using the Internet to wage supportive campaigns for their projects within the surrounding community.

CONSENSUS BUILDING

Consider Town Run Commons, a planned "creative community" in the small rural city of Shepherdstown, W.Va. The 32-unit condo project aims to provide market-rate and affordable housing to artists on historic land along the banks of Town Run, a Potomac River tributary and the site of West Virginia's bloodiest Civil War battle.

When local businessman Peter Corum proposed to develop the project, he decided to take on opponents where they were organizing: the Internet. Collecting e-mail addresses from petitions opposing the project, Corum turned to listservs and Yahoo! bulletin boards where residents voiced their opposition. He sent out ideas and solicited suggestions for how he could address their concerns. Ultimately, he won the town over, and his project is now slated for approval.

"Every time there was a new development, or we needed input, we would send out an update to the listserv, to the people who were fighting us, along with interested parties," Corum explains. "After a while, when you include your opponents like that, people start to see that you're not an evil developer. They start thinking, 'Maybe this guy is actually listening to me.'"

While certainly not the only part of a successful marketing strategy, having the ability to communicate with opponents online today is a huge part of the battle for developers. "The tools have changed," Gertler says. "And it's not just the Internet, actually, but what the Internet has created. Your communication with people now has to be interactive—they don't want to be talked at; they want to be engaged."

Mark Kopatz, managing partner at Nuszer Kopatz Urban Design Associates in Denver, recommends creating project-specific Web sites to help build neighborhood consensus and elicit community feedback. "Contrary to what we all experience at public meetings, there are a lot of people who are not comfortable speaking up in that forum. But on the Web, they can be anonymous, while still feeling that they are part of the process. It empowers people."

Developers and consultants say Web-based feedback forms are particularly effective. That feedback led to the proposal for the World Trade Center Orlando, a commercial development along Magnolia Avenue that's slated for completion in 2009. Originally approved as a 470-unit residential project, developer Skyrise Development Group changed course after it received thousands of e-mails culled from a Web site designed to elicit feedback from the surrounding community. The Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.-based firm revamped the project into a commercial venture after realizing there was stronger demand for office space in the area than for-sale housing. (With vacancy of just 6.5 percent, Orlando ranks second behind Manhattan in demand for office space, according to Skyrise's Web site.)

"We're talking about hundreds, if not thousands, of people who have given us feedback on that Web site," says David Hourii, Skyrise's CEO. "We changed course not because we are geniuses—it's that most interested parties wanted to see offices, so we moved our strategy accordingly."

LURING BUYERS

The Internet is also a tool to reach out to your residents and prospective buyers. The Internet featured prominently in the marketing of 125 North 10th, an 86-unit condominium development going up in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn. With a theme of promoting the arts within this historically bohemian and artistic enclave, the building has its own MySpace page, where it unabashedly broadcasts itself as a 34-year-old male Scorpio "looking for great people ... that want to live in a thriving community."

The building's official Web site uses Web video and podcasts to create an edgy and hip montage of life at 125 North 10th.

"The community here is a younger, more artistic demographic, and we wanted to reach out to them through the Internet," says Cooper Kramer, project manager at New York City-based Savannah Partners, which is developing 125 North 10th. "We've got hundreds of 'friends' at this point on the MySpace page, and we're anxious to see if we can translate those into sales."

Of course, while the Internet is an effective tool, observers say getting support for your project can't be achieved through pixels and URLs alone. Face time is still very much at the heart of the game, no matter what technology you employ.

"You have to still always walk the neighborhoods," says consultant Gertler. "It's just that now, we take the tiny flip video cameras with us and get permission from the people we talk with to put them on our Web sites."

THE POINTS – TECH SAVVY

Use technology to win development support.

■ **Understand that the Internet is not a static medium.** Make sure your Web sites are interactive so that interested parties—yes, even your opponents—can give input, and feel assured that you're listening.

■ **Leverage the Web on its strong points.** Web video, blogs, and even social networking sites such as MySpace should be where you talk to your constituents. Create a virtual personality for your project on a social networking site to bring it to life for potential buyers.

■ **Don't just zone out.** While the Internet is an integral part of the process today, you've still got to press the flesh. Get out and walk your neighborhoods and bring along a video camera to get your supporters on record. And ask them if you can post their interview clip online.