

Alabama Housing Finance Authority

Communications: Website – AHFA.com

The Alabama Housing Finance Authority's website needs to be many things to many people—it is a business-to-business website as well as a consumer destination. It is also part portal. When a homebuyer wants to find out about down payment assistance programs or an investor would like to research financial data, they would most likely start at AHFA.com. The new website design would need to offer clear direction for all users. The website not only needed a new design, it needed to be repurposed adding user-friendly and innovative functionality.

In the planning phase of the redesign, the first step was to identify and evaluate the website's positive and negative aspects. The communications department then developed a prospectus for the new website adding advanced functionality and navigational features, yet preserving the most effective components of the old website. The new AHFA.com should be a dynamic communication tool that features an infinite range of functionality and the plan focused on the following goals:

- Homepage—serve as a portal to the entire website with easy-to-find access to the most useful content
- Navigation—simplify and provide intuitive click path navigation
- Visual—furnish a fresh, new look while maintaining a balance between visual interest and pertinent information
- Function—add innovative functionality to meet the website users' needs

Also, it was decided that the website should be converted into a content management system (CMS) for easier manageability and a more flexible structure for future expansion. Additionally, CMS allows non-technical staff to easily add content or make changes as needed—providing the communications department with a back up plan.

In December 2008, the new AHFA.com was unveiled and has been very well received.

The new homepage is visually pleasing, as well as extremely practical. It successfully serves as the front door to the entire website. One element features a snapshots of AHFA feature families from past annual reports. The family's name links to testimonials advocating AHFA programs and a new family is featured each time you revisit the homepage. The new homepage also has various sections with informational snippets and pictures that link to AHFA news releases and announcements. Additionally, the single-family interest rates are prominently displayed, and there is ample room for miscellaneous graphics and/or links such as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act logo which is currently shown (Exhibit A).

The new website is much easier to navigate offering multiple menus which guide users beyond the homepage (see Exhibit B). Even the secondary pages have multiple menu options providing easier navigation throughout the website (See Exhibit C). Also, the new website utilizes “breadcrumb” technology on the interior pages—providing links back to previously visited pages that the user navigated through in order to get to the current page.

AHFA.com’s most anticipated component is the database search modules added in the developers, renters and homebuyers sections. First, the developers’ funding recipients list has been converted from a convoluted navigational nightmare to a stylized archive that can be searched and sorted according to the user’s needs. The details window lists a variety of information with options to print the window or download the actual application (in compliance with AHFA’s open records policy). Offering the information in this manner eliminates AHFA staff from having to respond to the many requests for this information and also allows cost-free access for the public. This new feature simplifies the search process immensely by giving the user the ability to sort the twenty plus year archive by county, city, application type and project year (see Exhibit D1&2).

Secondly, using the same data from the funding recipients’ module, the renters’ section now features an apartment finder where users can search for AHFA-funded rental properties and sort by city, county and targeted occupants. The apartment details window includes more in depth information along with an actual photo of the rental complex. This project was conceptualized following Hurricane Katrina and the massive intake of calls from victims seeking housing in specific areas of the state(see Exhibit E1 & 2).

The third database function is found in the homebuyers section of the new website. Users including potential homebuyers and real estate agents can now conveniently identify local AHFA lenders. The old website had extensive lists for each program which were cumbersome to view and maintain. This new function allows the users to search and sort by city and lender name. The details window offers contact information for each individual lender (see Exhibit F1 & 2). Moreover, a simple form is used to enter or edit the ever-changing lender data enabling other staff members to easily assist with these tasks.

While the old website served more as an online brochure with little functionality and no room for growth, the new CMS-based website allows for exponential growth and goes above and beyond in meeting the end user’s needs. The new and improved AHFA.com is now an integrated, valuable tool that powers a good interface design through enhanced usability with consumers, staff members and business partners alike.