

NCSHA 2009 Annual Award  
Rental Housing  
Preservation and Rehabilitation

## Partners for Preservation and Economic Development

Partnerships for preservation: Nothing speaks more to that truth than the preservation and adaptive reuse of the old Whitman Hotel into affordable housing in Pocatello, Idaho. The acquisition, renovation, and transformation of the Whitman Hotel into the Whitman Apartments shows how a group of businessmen, City government, a Redevelopment Authority, a non-profit housing developer, a national bank with tax credit syndication experience, and the state housing association, in this case the Idaho Housing and Finance Association (IHFA), can come together to surmount huge obstacles and bring a landmark in the city center back to life. In this case, the idea of a public-private partnership grew into a community wide collaboration.

At the inception of this project, a group of local businessmen had the idea to start the revitalization of a block of historic properties in their old town neighborhood. As one of the most prominent buildings was left to deteriorate, they knew that somehow the building had to be saved. The desire to save one building transformed a small group into a larger assembly of stake holders and industry experts with the expertise needed to provide a sound design, implementation, and financing package.

There already existed a redevelopment authority which proved to be a major partner in the success of the process. The redevelopment authority had been created to provide a mechanism to help in the revitalization of the neighborhood. With the ability to levy local taxes and provide grants and loans to specific projects or larger streetscape enhancements, the development authority had a vested interest in seeing its programs prosper. The redevelopment authority also provided several grants for the project to make it economically feasible. As a result, a larger vision was created with regard to renovating the block. Individuals on the redevelopment authority board also acted as cheerleaders and supporters of the specific project. This voice served as a catalyst to create the positive attitude and push needed for the successful completion of the project

Local businesses had been able to bring renovation efforts into the downtown from individual property owners for personal use. The redevelopment authority provided some funds for individual façade and streetscape improvements that helped to refresh the neighborhood. Events such as art walks and weekly farmers markets facilitated bring people back to the neighborhood, but only on a temporary basis. As these individual success stories grew, and the stakeholders talked more about how to improve upon their momentum, it became apparent that the one component lacking was permanent residencies. People came to work, people were coming to shop, but few were living downtown.

Based on individual experiences and discussions with local business owners, it was determined that there was a need for affordable housing for entry level workers and service providers. There were limited individual opportunities for living above the stores, but options were scattered and antiquated. What was needed was a project that would be: large enough to achieve some economy of scale; accessible to lower income wage earners; and of a quality that would attract people to live downtown once again.

Since none of the local developers had experience with affordable development, especially multifamily, the natural selection for leadership was the state housing authority, IHFA. IHFA is the clearing house for low income housing tax credits and HOME funds and has a track record of successful affordable housing projects. By bringing the housing authority into the process early, the partnership was able to create a working team that hit the ground running with well delineated tasks for the members and timelines to follow. The team and each of its members were able to concentrate on their area of expertise and quickly bring tasks to fruition. The timeliness achieved by this approach proved beneficial in several ways.

One benefit was that the development process went smoothly. The processes associated with the redevelopment authority, tax credit application, plans, financial packaging, and City approval were spread out among many willing and competent participants. Tasks were running on multiple parallel tracks, which proved to be more efficient than completing one task before starting another. In addition, the multiple participants were spreading the word on the wonderful plans for the Whitman, creating a very positive buzz for the project. Instead of having to deal with nay-sayer's and NIMBYS, many people were very excited about the project and were constantly seeking out information on the progress.

The City saw that the community was behind the development, and the project and community meetings went smoothly. People spoke of the need and quality of the proposal. The local paper and news channel started to print and report on a regular basis the progress of the project. The non-profit developer who would own and manage the property started getting calls about the rental units before the renovation even started. When the grand opening was held after the completion of construction, over 2,000 people from the community came to tour the building.

The success of the project was in the process. Getting the stakeholders and decision makers to the table from the commencement of the idea was paramount. This approach allowed everyone who wanted to be involved a place at the table. Having local experts concentrating on their areas, as a component of the larger development, removed the on the job learning stumbling blocks. The process was propelled forward because of the depth of experience of individuals from the community and their enthusiasm for the project. Media involvement also kept the spirit of the renewal alive for the community as a whole.

In the end, 25 units of new affordable housing were created where none existed before. Vitality has been restored to the old downtown. People now live and walk to work where before they drove. Area merchants are seeing increased sales because residents are spending their money in the immediate neighborhood. And the community now has a team that is able and ready to undertake another redevelopment opportunity.