

Bringing Housing Home to the NC Congressional Delegation North Carolina Housing Finance Agency

Category: Federal Legislative Campaign

At an October property dedication in Red Springs, North Carolina, Congressman Mike McIntyre (7th NC) told a crowd of 100 how important the North Carolina Housing Finance Agency is to the state. He advocated strengthening the Housing Credit and preventing further erosion of HOME Program funding, and noted the role of housing in economic development. The local media reported Congressman McIntyre's sentiments.

This success for affordable housing was no chance circumstance. It was a result of the deliberate effort, begun by the N.C. Housing Finance Agency in 2005, to strengthen congressional delegates' appreciation of federal housing investments in their districts and to give them a personal stake in the success of Housing Bonds, Housing Credits, and the HOME Program.

A strategic expansion. We decided in 2005 to carry the story of federal and state housing resources personally to federal and state lawmakers in their own districts. At the time, the Agency enjoyed an excellent reputation with both groups, supported by regular written communication about projects, reports on investments in each district, Capitol Hill visits, and by the participation of various staff members—as often as seemed possible—in openings for Housing Credit, HOME, and state Trust Fund properties. But it was clear that we needed to do more in light of all the competing priorities for elected officials. The time to build legislative relationships is before you need them.

We made a commitment to systematize and expand our legislative efforts. We created a new community outreach position, hired a former Senate staffer to fill it, asked local partners to take a more active role, and set out to Bring Housing Home to the lawmakers that held the purse strings. We've taken advantage of two years when NCSHA's national housing agenda has moved slowly, to dig deep and build first-hand understanding of what Housing Credits, Housing Bonds, and HOME dollars are accomplishing in every North Carolina member's district.

We targeted especially Senate Banking Committee member Elizabeth Dole, and House Financial Services Committee members Walter Jones, Brad Miller, and Mel Watt. But all 15 North Carolina delegates have received attention. The new outreach representative visited every district office, invited district and housing LAs for personal project tours, encouraged Housing Credit developers to host openings and ground-breakings, coached them (including writing a guide on how to host a successful opening), and systematically followed up invitations to openings by sending event photos to members and staff who attended. With the credibility he earned, the Agency mounted an extremely successful one-stop housing briefing in May for caseworkers in the district offices, the first such briefing in North Carolina. One goal is to establish the Agency as North Carolina's go-to resource on housing. Results so far have included an increase in case referrals and requests from the congressional offices to participate in their district housing events. We expect an even more important result will be a more active dialogue on housing needs with the congressional offices, and more energetic support by them for our housing legislation.

The Red Springs success, at a project opening held at Rep. McIntyre's request, illustrates how the relationships have begun to build. Preparations for it began a year earlier during the outreach officer's initial visit with Rep. McIntyre's district director and housing caseworker, and continued during several openings and a project tour attended by Rep. McIntyre's staff, and our Housing Caseworker Briefing in May.

Forging stronger relationships. NCHFA has built a stronger congressional relationship by taking a holistic approach that includes district as well as Washington staff. The systematic approach has included:

- **Outreach visits to each district office.** Discussions with district directors and housing caseworkers included an overview of the Agency's work in the district, upcoming project openings in which the member might participate, and questions about the most frequent housing inquiries the office received.
- **Tours of NCHFA-financed properties.** The community outreach representative invited district directors, housing caseworkers, and Washington LAs to see local examples of the Agency's work. So far, he's conducted nine tours.
- **Custom events for members of Congress.** The delegation increasingly has sought NCHFA's help organizing housing seminars and workshops. (See exhibits.)

For example, we helped Senator Dole's staff organize two "housing summits," participating on panels and identifying local partners as speakers. NCHFA staff coordinated a financial literacy workshop for Congressman Miller, and organized home ownership seminars, foreclosure prevention seminars, and ribbon cuttings for Congressmen Bob Etheridge, Mike McIntyre, and G.K. Butterfield. We helped Congressman Watt's office with a housing fair sponsored by the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. His district director said of the result:

The Housing Finance Agency was a significant part of the event's success. Their participation resulted in the first new home built in the town of East Spencer in over 20 years.

- **A Briefing for Housing Caseworkers.** Based on questions asked by caseworkers during the initial visits, the communications group designed a one-stop housing briefing that brought together the state's housing resources under one roof. Along with NCHFA, representatives from USDA-RD, HUD, and the North Carolina Division of Community Assistance outlined their programs. NCHFA created a housing casework manual, Housing Matters, as a take-away from the event, with a glossary of housing acronyms and bulleted outlines of the each program. (See exhibits.) Representatives of more than half the delegation's offices attended the day-long event. The community outreach representative followed up with personal visits to deliver the notebooks to the other offices, and created an email list serve to apprise caseworkers of program changes that could help their constituents. Staffers wrote afterward:

The NCHFA briefing was the most informative I have attended in some time.

I wanted to thank you and the staff for putting together the Housing Casework notebooks. They are a wonderful resource and have already been very useful.

- **Developing Partners' Political Know-How.** The outreach representative invited members and their staff to 40 groundbreaking and ribbon cuttings in 2006 and 2007. He spoke at the Agency's workshops for newly funded developers to create the expectation that they would host project openings. Seeing how inexperienced most developers were in mounting a political event, he wrote a "how-to" guide and led a workshop at NCHFA's annual conference. "Strut Your Stuff: Promote Your Property with a Well-Planned Opening" is a first in the state. (See exhibits.) NCHFA gives copies to developers when they receive funding and posts it on the website.

Bringing housing home. Our goals throughout the effort have been to:

- **Increase members' ownership of local successes.** The community outreach representative works with project sponsors to ensure that members and staffers who attend openings have the opportunity to take credit for a project in their district, interact with constituents, and see a tangible return on their appropriations. He helps hosts identify members to invite, coaches them on protocol, and coordinates with the congressional office's scheduler.
- **Increase members' awareness of NCHFA's work in their district.** For each event, the community outreach representative contacts congressional staff to make certain that they receive an invitation to the event and know about the Agency's financing for the project. He ensures that the event is scheduled at a time that the member can attend. Members of the Board of Directors are encouraged to play a role. After the event, the outreach representative follows up with thank you notes and digital photographs, which often appear on members' websites.
- **Enhance NCHFA's reputation with the delegation.**

We're laying the foundations for successful legislation. NCHFA continues to provide regular written reports to our congressmen, make Capitol Hill visits, and host its traditional LegCon luncheon for Housing LAs. However, our newly expanded local efforts have greatly enhanced our communication and relationships with members and district staff, and have shown them, first-hand, the quality of housing being produced with federal resources.

Our efforts have brought attention to the tangible impact of federal appropriations in all 15 North Carolina House and Senate districts. We believe the work will pay valuable dividends when housing legislation is in front of our delegates in future years.