

Getting Legislators and Their Staff on Board: Advocating for Housing Policy and Budget Priorities

Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority
Advocacy

HFA Staff Contact

Lori Buscaglia

lori.buscaglia@wheda.com

Getting Legislators and Their Staff on Board: Advocating for Housing Policy and Budget Priorities

SUMMARY

The Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA) has always been a proponent of advocating for housing-related legislation and continues to expand our outreach to work in tandem with state legislators. In an effort to creatively highlight the work of Housing Finance Agencies (HFAs), WHEDA invited decision-makers to participate in a comprehensive education campaign, which included bus tours of completed affordable housing developments throughout Madison to see first-hand the impact of our endeavors.

While traditional forms of communication are generally well received when advocating for policy and budget priorities, WHEDA strived to try something more **innovative** and **replicable**, to **forge effective relationships with state policy makers**, and to **demonstrate leadership** to our state and federal partners.

After the close of the 2023-2024 Legislative Session, WHEDA made the strategic decision to shift from interacting directly with legislators to creatively educating their staffs. The reasons for pivoting to make legislative staffers the **target audience** were, their continuous employment in legislative offices during non-legislative and election seasons, and their Madison base, which happens to be Wisconsin's capital city and the location of WHEDA Headquarters. By comparison, Legislators are considered part-time as they spend the majority of their non-session days in their home districts. Proximity to WHEDA developments, availability in non-session months, and sway with their respective legislators made targeting staff an enticing strategy to move the needle on affordable housing priorities throughout 2024 and 2025.

The most ambitious of the creative strategies to reach legislative office staff was the development of a one-day bus tour with stops at four WHEDA-financed affordable housing developments. WHEDA analyzed the costs and benefits of the tour, and determined that it was cost effective and within the budget to rent a coach bus. The policy team assessed the demand and availability of legislative office staff via an email survey that was shared with all 132 legislative offices. Twenty-five offices responded and confirmed interest and availability for 52 staff. Of the offices that responded, 28% were Republican, and 72% were Democratic. 40% of the responses were from Senate offices and 60% were from the Assembly.

Staff from the Community & Economic Development (CED) team scheduled the four locations while the Marketing & Communications team created one-page summaries for each project.

1. The Andre – The Andre is a 38-unit development that includes 32 affordable units, six market-rate units, and includes affordable rental options for residents with household incomes between 30-80% AMI. WHEDA supported this project with a Federal 9% Housing Tax Credit (HTC) award along with construction and permanent loan financing. We elected to show this development because of its inclusion of Supportive Housing services and the collaboration between the



developer and the Red Caboose Childcare Center, which occupies space on the first level. **Cost and accessibility of childcare is an ongoing policy issue in Wisconsin, and WHEDA demonstrated the benefits of integrating both childcare and affordable housing as a community benefit.**

2. Ella Apartments – The Ella was built on the site of a former, beloved deli and preserves the unique and playful energy that it brought to the Eken Park Neighborhood. The inclusion of a massive mural on the street-facing wall pays homage to the iconic site. This project features 135 affordable units and received an allocation of State and Federal 4% Housing Tax Credits for its construction. WHEDA chose this development to highlight the high quality of construction, the neighborhood and community connection, and the relationship between on-site commercial and residential spaces. **The mural on this development received significant local interest during construction. Spotlighting this development increased curiosity and open-mindedness, combating misconceptions on affordable housing for many of the legislative staff on the tour.**
3. Valor on Washington – The Valor was a unique partnership that provides affordable housing and community resources to veterans and their families. The newly constructed development provides office space to two organizations that provide supportive services and space to veterans, with the mission of improving healthy post-service lives. The project features 50 affordable units, 10 of which are set aside for households in which one or more individuals are living with a physical or mental disability. Nine market-rate units round out the mix. WHEDA supported this project with a Federal 9% Housing Tax Credit award. Interestingly, a former member of WHEDA’s Policy team learned of availability in this development and as a result, her father, a former service member, was able to access safe and affordable housing. **This personal connection and the larger link to Supportive Housing services for veterans made this an ideal development to spotlight for legislative staff.**
4. University Park – University Park is a multi-phase redevelopment on the former site of the Westgate Mall located on the west side of Madison. Many of the legislative staff members were already aware of this location because it was one of the largest blighted sites in the City of Madison that has been targeted for redevelopment within the last decade. Once the final phase reaches completion, this site will have 464 units of housing in five buildings. The first phase includes three buildings – University Park Commons comprised of 68 units, all of which are affordable at 30-80% AMI. 601@University Park is a mixed-income housing development with 156 units of family housing, 32 of which are affordable. Oak Ridge is 81-unit senior affordable housing development. WHEDA supported this development with State and Federal Housing Tax Credits in phase one, and Federal 9% HTC’s in phase two. **We used this development to demonstrate the combination of senior, family, affordable and market-rate housing, as well as the significant redevelopment of underutilized commercial space into housing.**

While only half of the originally interested legislative staff were ultimately able to participate in the tour, the smaller group was eagerly welcomed by the development teams. The attendees were able to view more public areas and units as well as ask questions of both the development teams and their partners due to the intimate size of the group.

Following the tour, WHEDA surveyed the attendees in hopes of gaining a better understanding of the impact of the event. All responses were positive, with an average rating of 4.2/5. While several



responders believed the tour was too long, all agreed that the information provided was useful. All attendees left with a better understanding of WHEDA's multifamily financing, State and Federal Housing Tax Credits, and other loan programs used for the development of affordable housing in Wisconsin.

WHEDA interpreted this increased understanding of affordable housing development as an immediate sign of the success of the bus tour. Long term use of the bus tour is currently being analyzed for use, to garner bipartisan support for future potential bipartisan legislation.

Additionally, in March 2025, Democratic members of the Senate and Assembly organized a Housing Workgroup, which features several offices with staff who participated in the bus tour. WHEDA was invited to kick off the inaugural session of this workgroup with a presentation of WHEDA's available programs.

Overall, WHEDA is seeing increased engagement by the State Legislature related to housing issues and the bipartisan movement of housing legislation during the 2025-2026 Legislative Session. While WHEDA's policy priorities have not all been signed into law yet, we are confident of their continued support in 2025 and beyond by Wisconsin's legislative offices.

VISUAL AIDS

Agenda for July 30, 2024

8:50 a.m. – meet and load bus at the Wisconsin State Capitol

9:00 a.m. – travel to first stop

9:10 a.m. – arrive at first stop: The Andre Apartments

9:40 a.m. – board bus

9:50 a.m. – arrive at second stop: The Ella Apartments and enjoy refreshments

10:35 a.m. – board bus

10:45 a.m. – arrive at third stop: The Valor on Washington

11:15 a.m. – board bus

11:50 a.m. – arrive at fourth stop: University Park Apartments

12:20 p.m. – board bus

12:45 p.m. – arrive back to the Wisconsin State Capitol





André Apartments

Developer: Movin' Out
Opened: October 2023

About the Property

- André Apartments honors the life and legacy of André Brown, one of the developer's longest-serving team members. Brown was a strong advocate within the disability community for community-integrated housing before his passing in 2022.
- A commercial condo on the first level is occupied by Red Caboose Childcare Center. Red Caboose Childcare Center is Madison's oldest independent daycare center founded in 1972.
- The collaboration between the developer and Red Caboose is a unique partnership that produced an integral community asset providing both housing and childcare for low and moderate-income families in Madison.

The 38-unit development includes:

32

affordable units spreading
across 30-80% area
median income (AMI)

6

market-rate units

WHEDA Funding

- WHEDA supported this project with a highly competitive 2020 federal 9% housing tax credit award that generated about **\$5.8 million in project equity**.
- WHEDA also provided nearly **\$7.4 million** in construction and permanent loan financing.

Scan the QR Code to hear from resident Tracy Swenson as she describes how her quest for an affordable home was undoubtedly aided by her new home's namesake—her angel, André Brown.





Ella Apartments

Developer: New Year Investments
Opened: June 2022

About the Property

- Ella Apartments retains the beloved history of this site, which was home to the iconic Ella's Deli and carousel for so many decades.
- Through great design and quality construction, the developer successfully preserved the unique character originally brought to this neighborhood by Ella's Deli nearly 50 years ago.
- The bright and energetic 5-story new construction includes features intended to build community, such as a common lounge area, fitness center, and terrace. Residents have access to garden beds, grilling stations, and included utilities as part of their rent.

The Ella Apartment complex provides:

135

affordable one- and two-bedroom
apartments spreading across 30-80%
area median income (AMI)

The building also includes:

9,000

square feet

of first-floor commercial space and
108 underground parking stalls

WHEDA Funding

- WHEDA support for this project included a state and federal 4% housing tax credit award that generated about **\$18.2 million in equity** toward the construction.





Valor on Washington

About the Property

Developer: Gorman & Co.
Opened: June 2022

- The Valor on Washington honors veterans and their families by giving them a safe place to live, to engage in the community, and to adjust to life after serving their country.
- The Valor on Washington is a 6-story new construction housing development centrally located in Madison's Tenney-Lapham neighborhood close to schools, parks, and downtown. The development features a clubhouse, fitness studio, covered parking, in-unit washers/dryers, and wheelchair-accessible units.
- The developer's partnership with Dryhootch and Lutheran Social Services makes this a unique development by providing support groups and a meeting space on-site for veterans to gather with people who have shared experiences.

The 59-unit development
includes:

50

affordable housing units and
nine market-rate units

Of the affordable
units:

10

are set aside for households in
which one or more individuals
are living with a physical or
mental disability

Valor on Washington
offers:

2, 3 & 4 bedroom units

spread across 30-80% area
median income (AMI)

WHEDA Funding

- WHEDA support for this project includes an award of more than **\$1 million** in federal 9% housing tax credits which generated about **\$9 million in equity** for the development of this affordable housing project.





University Park

Developer: JT Klein
Opened: June 2023

About the Property

- University Park is a multi-phase redevelopment of the former Westgate Mall on the near west side of Madison. It is considered one of the largest blighted site redevelopments in the City of Madison within the last decade.
- Upon completion, University Park will have up to 464 units of multifamily housing in 5 separate buildings and a medical office building.

University Park Commons

was the first phase of the redevelopment, comprised of **68 units**, all of which are affordable. These one-, two- and three-bedroom units are designed as workforce housing and spread across 30-80% area median income (AMI).

601@University Park

is a housing development consisting of **156 units** of mixed-income family housing, of which **32** are affordable. The development features 22 different floorplans ranging from 553 square feet to 1,450 square feet.

Oak Ridge at University Park I

is an **81-unit** affordable independent living facility for seniors. This development is a four-story building consisting of one and two-bedroom units over an underground parking structure.

WHEDA Funding

- WHEDA supported the development with a mix of funding resources including about **\$17 million** in financing for 601@University Park, 4% federal and state tax credits that generated nearly **\$6.4 million in equity** for University Park Commons, and another **\$7.2 million** of equity for Oak Ridge at University Park.
- Phase II of the University Park Commons development received another **\$1.4 million** in federal 9% housing tax credits in 2023. This phase will create an additional 68 units, of which 53 will be affordable housing.

