

Background

WHEDA's annual Multifamily Housing Conference is always one of the highlights for the Authority each year. Last year, while faced with the task of organizing the state's largest affordable housing conference in the midst of a struggling economy, WHEDA's Multifamily team took the event to a new level by coming up with a brand new theme that was fresh and unique from any they had done before.

In 2009, WHEDA and its partners in the multifamily housing industry were up against some serious challenges that included a faltering housing market and economy along with low tax credit prices. As a result, WHEDA knew that it needed to stray from a conventional housing theme and do something extra special that would both rally its partners during those tough times and raise everyone's spirits. Since the conference was set for mid-October at the height of the fall football craze in Madison, WI, the Authority decided to go with the football-related theme "Game On Wisconsin."

This theme not only presented ideas to conference participants in a fun new manner, it also served as a challenge from WHEDA to partners to make the most out of what had been a very difficult time period and to make use of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding through WHEDA to do their part to help get Wisconsin back on track.

On the day of the conference, attendees were greeted with an "old-school" football theme that captured football fandom here in Wisconsin. It featured everything vintage football from the conference booklet and decorations to the gifts and keynote speaker. Not to lose sight of the underlying topic of affordable housing in Wisconsin, WHEDA tied in the fundamental football concepts of hard work, preparation, commitment and working as a team, all of which relate directly to affordable housing and WHEDA's connection to the developers, city leaders and property managers attending the event.

The conference location, the Alliant Energy Center near the city's downtown, featured retro football decorations including WHEDA pennants, classic football photography, old school playbooks and variations of our orange logo colors throughout. A prime example of WHEDA incorporating this vintage football theme into the event agenda was with its program called the Conference "Game Plan," which is listed below.

- *Warmup*: Registration and continental breakfast
- *Pregame*: Opening remarks from WHEDA Executive Director Antonio Riley
- *1st Quarter*: Wisconsin Badger radio personality, Matt Lepay, followed by Barry Alvarez
- *Timeout*: Vendor visits
- *2nd Quarter*: Breakout sessions on various Multifamily Housing related presentations

- *Halftime*: Lunch and WHEDA movie presentation
- *3rd and 4th Quarters*: More breakout sessions
- *5th Quarter*: Tailgate reception with the University of Wisconsin Marching Band

The keynote speaker of the event was former University of Wisconsin Head Football Coach and current Athletic Director, Barry Alvarez. Legend to Badger fans throughout the state, Alvarez spoke about the leadership qualities and hard work necessary to not only achieve success on the field, but also in the workplace. He shared these experiences of turning Wisconsin's football program around in the early 1990s, and how often times, the same principles apply to industries such as housing. As an added bonus, WHEDA also invited the radio voice of the Wisconsin Badgers, Matt Lepak, to introduce Alvarez and talk about the importance of what we do as professionals in the state.

Innovation

The theme itself involved some outside the box thinking on WHEDA's part. More conventional themes to do with housing were tossed around in its initial phases, but the planning team took a risk and decided to go with something that allowed for a more creative look at what we do at work. The October date also lined up perfectly with the University's Homecoming football game, which added to the buzz surrounding the conference.

As an added benefit for participants, WHEDA automatically entered everyone at the conference into a Halftime drawing for door prizes that included autographed Wisconsin sports memorabilia from the Wisconsin Badgers, Green Bay Packers, Milwaukee Brewers and Milwaukee Bucks. These prizes ranged from blankets and bobble head dolls to framed wall art, hats and other clothing apparel.

The afternoon "tailgate" reception also featured live music performed by the University of Wisconsin Marching Band. The band played a number of fan favorites from Wisconsin fight songs to American classics.

Replicable/ Reach target audience

For many Wisconsin residents, football is a pastime that transcends social barriers created by age, race or social status and brings people together to enjoy a game. With the University of Wisconsin currently ranked as the 4th best football and basketball school in the country according to CBSSports.com and the Green Bay Packers maintaining a long history of success and popularity in the state, WHEDA's thinking was "what better way to create a fun and upbeat atmosphere among affordable housing professionals than a theme centered around Wisconsin's favorite sport."

The theme itself was a simple idea that can be changed in several ways to mirror the state team(s) of the HFA hosting a conference. WHEDA stayed within the same budget of previous years for materials such as invitations, programs, food and decorations, and found that it was

even easier to come up with fun prizes and interesting ideas and subject matter on housing to go with this theme.

Achieved measurable results

Despite a rocky economy, the 2009 conference was a great success drawing over 500 attendees and 37 exhibitors. Between the money brought in from registration fees, corporate sponsors and exhibitors, WHEDA managed to turn a profit of \$33,000 after expenses.

Each year, the money generated by the conference provides WHEDA with the flexibility to provide a great venue along with catering, decorations, gifts and prizes, and a prominent keynote speaker to make the event a complete experience for all in attendance.

WHEDA has received a number of compliments from attendees on last year's conference because of its originality and style. Now the next challenge will be living up to this new standard for years to come.