Housing Trust Fund in Nashville

Our group was first introduced to our project during the summer retreat. Graham Reside in the Divinity School had received correspondence from Claire Smrekar in Peabody, which provided only an overview of the project. I understood the project would involve housing for low income residents and there was a community leader, Rev. Bill Barnes, who had an interest in providing guidance for a group of Fellows. To date, our team of four students has visited Indianapolis Indiana and Charlotte North Carolina in order to gather testimonies that will help activists in Nashville make a case to the Metro Council to implement a housing trust fund.

After the retreat, our group reached out to Dr. Smrekar to obtain more information on the assignment. She arranged a visit to the Neighborhood Resource Center were two of our four group members met her as well as Rev. Barnes and the director of the center, Mike Hodge. From that meeting, we learned of the previous efforts led by Rev. Barnes in which he and other community leaders presented Mayor Karl Dean and the council with a proposal for a housing trust fund. The previous “pitch” was three years old and they thought our team could update the information to better equip them in making their case once more. The expectations of our sponsors, Smrekar and Barnes, had to be clarified after that meeting. Dr. Smrekar thought we were PhD students and thought a research based project, in the form of a forty or fifty page report, would be of interest to us. After a team meeting and discussing ideas with Dr. Smrekar, we opted for collecting the newest data available on the subject and doing a couple of site visits where a housing trust fund had been established. The purpose of our work would be to give Rev. Barnes a list of success factors that had been carried out in other cities and could be highlighted when he made the case for a housing trust fund to the metro council next.
Our team obtained a list of subject matter experts from Smrekar and Barnes and began contacting them during the fall of 2010. The interview process was helpful in understating the mechanics of the trust fund, as well as learning about the government conditions and/or organization that may help a trust fund be successful. Mary Brooks, an expert on housing trust funds at the national level, provided great insights into what sites our team would visit, and most importantly she provided the contacts that would enable us to meet key contributors in those sites. Due to the scheduling needs of conducting the various interviews, our team delegated amongst ourselves the tasks. From this moment, our team began to gain a better understanding of our work styles, which made the division of work simple. Before leaving for the university’s winter break, our team had a meeting with Dr. Smrekar to update the progress of the project and began planning for the site visits to take place in the spring.

In the second half of the school year, our team identified Indianapolis and Charlotte as the cities that would provide us with the most useful information in housing trust efforts, as well as having a similar council structure to that of Nashville. Our team divided into two groups of two to make the trips and planned on video tapping interviews to present testimonials back in Nashville. One of the most valuable experiences for me was seeing how the different organizations that obtained funding managed the funds and how they run their operations. As a management student, I appreciated the leadership styles of the different people. At the same time, I was saddened by the negative reaction to the interdisciplinary efforts of our project. Over the last two years as a graduate student, I’ve been lucky to have worked with many talented individuals. Our management program actively recruits JD and MD students and welcomes as diverse students that are willing to study here. It gives me great satisfaction to have been part of the CTP program and know that there are groups of soon to be graduates that have had the opportunity to work alongside other disciplines. I hope that as the students become leaders they welcome younger and a more diverse workforce to their organizations.