PRELIMINARY FINDINGS ON SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA NONPROFIT HOUSING DEVELOPERS

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Abstract

A study of San Francisco Bay Area nonprofit housing developers shows that they have the organizational capability to be an agent of low-income housing policy. They are relatively productive and serve predominantly very-low-income households. Their organizations tend to be well established, with significant staff levels, wide geographic service areas, and substantial government support. Both the nonprofit housing developer organizations and their low-income housing projects depend heavily on government resources. Thus, nonprofit housing developers offer not an independent alternative to government, but rather represent a hardworking, dedicated partner.

Introduction

The federal government drastically reduced funding for low-income housing in the 1980s. Between 1980 and 1987, new federal budget authority for low-income housing plummeted by 72 percent. This loss of federal funding was not matched by direct city, state, and philanthropic dollar-for-dollar substitution. Instead, most cities now rely on remaining federal funds, spread thinly, for housing maintenance (Christensen et al. 1988).

In this policy vacuum, nonprofit housing developers have come to capture the hearts and imaginations of the press, policymakers, and politicians. The press showcase nonprofit developers as exemplars of grit and ingenuity, overcoming barriers to produce low-income housing in the face of austerity. Policymakers, disenchanted with bureaucracy and profit-led private developers, look to nonprofits as the appropriate agents of new low-income housing proposals. Politicians from both the right and the left point to nonprofit success stories as cases of grass-roots-based entrepreneurs. Jack Kemp, the new Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and former designer of supply-side economic policy, exemplifies this synthesis of honest commitment to help and of zeal for the private market. The nonprofits seem to have become both symbol and expected operational bridge between low-income housing assistance and free enterprise.

Beneath this widespread enthusiasm for nonprofit housing developers lie important but largely unsubstantiated assumptions. The policy perspective assumes nonprofits have the organizational capability to produce low-income housing. Politicians assume nonprofits act as entrepreneurs and speak for grassroots communities. Both policymakers and politicians assume nonprofits act independently, and tap into the private market to leverage nongovernment resources.

Because nonprofit organizations are widely regarded as the best agent for new housing proposals and are assumed to have the necessary qualifications, they demand systematic research. Yet most studies of nonprofits have been unsystematic, isolated case studies, often of particular projects.[1] While inspiring and instructive, such success stories give only partial pictures of nonprofit operations.

In contrast, the study described herein provides a more complete picture of San Francisco Bay Area nonprofit housing developers over an eight-year period. The study describes nonprofits' organization and housing production, and thus provides some insights into their organizational capabilities.

The resulting data confirm nonprofit organizational strengths and challenge assumptions about nonprofit autonomy. Bay Area nonprofits are experienced, well-staffed organizations which produce a substantial portion of the area's affordable housing for very-low-income households. Yet, nonprofit housing developers depend on government support in a variety of forms, and do not bring private resources. Thus, nonprofit developers do not represent an alternative to government but rather a hardworking partner.

This article reports the results of a detailed survey designed to probe the structure and activities of the nonprofit housing sector in the San Francisco Bay Area. The following section discusses the survey methodology. Subsequent sections describe findings, beginning with a historical overview of nonprofit low-income housing production, followed by highlights of nonprofit housing developers' organizational characteristics, and ending with a description of current and forthcoming nonprofit low-income housing projects. The article concludes with preliminary lessons learned from Bay Area nonprofit housing developers.

Methodology

The survey was designed to provide data on housing production and the general characteristics of nonprofit housing organizations.[2] The San Francisco Bay Area was selected because it is often portrayed as one of the exemplars of a successful nonprofit housing sector. Observers credit the nonprofit housing organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area as being "significant actors in producing housing" (*San Francisco Examiner* 1988), and the "principal providers of housing for low-income people" (Mayer 1988: 5).

The sample draws from the universe of all San Francisco Bay Area nonprofit low-income housing developers, as compiled from multiple sources such as the Northern California Association of Nonprofit Housing.[3] Information from a preliminary survey conducted in the spring of 1988 and other sources permitted us to separate nonprofits which were actively engaged in developing low-income housing from those which had operations only peripherally linked to low-income housing.

The kinds of nonprofits excluded from our in-depth survey typically fell into two categories. On one extreme lies the typical very-low-income-neighborhood-serving organization, often a Community Development Corporation or church, with little housing experience or resources. Such nonprofits might undertake a single housing project, along with other activities addressing neighborhood needs. On the other extreme lie large regional- and national-serving organizations, with considerable experience and resources. Such organizations are concerned with housing, but mainly as promoter, serving as a financial intermediary, technical assistant, or partial investor.[4]

Rather than either of these two extremes, poor-neighborhood-serving and large-scale promoter, the survey focused on the center, the local nonprofit, whose main purpose is developing low-income housing. These organizations function at the local (city or county) level and build housing expertise and organizational networks over time in their particular jurisdictions. This group should represent the best source of in-depth working knowledge of locally based nonprofit low-income housing.

These local nonprofit housing developers formed the pool for our detailed survey questionnaire on organization and projects. The survey was mailed to all 52 low-income housing developers in the Bay Area. Twenty-six (50 percent) provided sufficiently complete responses for analysis. Careful review of the respondents and non-respondents, based on information from our preliminary survey and interviews with Bay Area nonprofit housing experts, suggests that the 26 respondents are generally representative of local, Bay Area nonprofit housing developers in terms of type of organization and volume of production.

The survey's purpose was to analyze the organizing principles at the operational and project development levels of the nonprofit developer. Specifically, the survey was designed to elicit two types of information:

- Basic facts about the activities of the organization: the year of inception, source of initial administrative funds, geographic area, and types of housing activities undertaken, as well as the groups served by the organization, the source of revenues, and housing production levels since 1980.

- Detailed information about the projects completed during the last fiscal year (1988), and projects currently in the predevelopment phase, including type of project, the nonprofit role in project development and ownership, sources of funding for the project, the tenure and affordability structure of the project, and unit and resident mix.

Furthermore, data from the San Francisco Information Clearinghouse report, the City of Oakland Community Development Office, and the preliminary survey permitted us to expand the data set of 26 to a total of 39 nonprofit housing developers for analysis of total production.

Nonprofit Housing Production Between 1980 and 1988

Bay Area nonprofit housing developers have produced a significant proportion of low-income housing in the Bay Area. Our sample of 39 Bay Area nonprofit housing developers has produced 5,286 units since 1980, Projecting from these representative organizations to the total, and including BRIDGE,[5] yields an overall Bay Area nonprofit production level of approximately 10,000 low-income units between 1980 and 1988. A comparison of this estimate with the total 23,833 "affordable" housing units built in the same time (Bay Area Council 1989) shows that nonprofit housing developers produced approximately 42 percent of the total "affordable" housing production in the Bay Area.

Variations in nonprofit low-income housing production over time reflect fluctuations in government support and market forces. Between 1980 and 1988, as Figure 1 shows, new construction by our sample of nonprofits appeared fairly stable, in the 250-unit-a-year range, except for peaks in 1983 and 1988 and a striking low in 1987.

In comparison, the volume of acquisition and rehabilitation undertaken by our sample nonprofits, shown in Figure 2, has been significantly lower, surpassing 200 units only in 1987 and 1988.

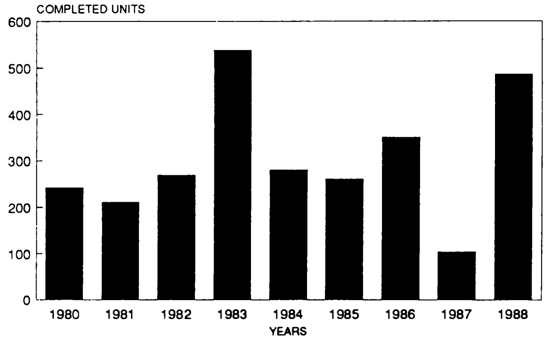
Figure 3 highlights the low volume of nonprofit new construction compared to market new construction, as it attests to cyclical market forces and the costs of funds. Multifamily production fell in 1981 and 1982, reflecting extremely high interest rates, and grew to highs in 1985 and 1986 as interest rates fell.

Figure 4 shows nonprofit new construction as a percent of all new construction, generally less than 3 percent. Examining nonprofits as a percent of all multifamily new construction controls for the effects of market forces, revealing the effects of government interventions.

The relatively strong nonprofit share of production in 1981 attests to the length of the "pipeline" for HUD direct-subsidy programs. Even

Figure 1

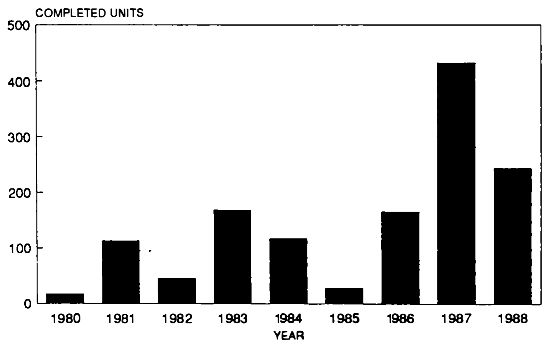
San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Production
New Construction, 1980-1988



Source: San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Survey, 1988.

Figure 2

San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Production
Acquisition and Rehab 1980-1988

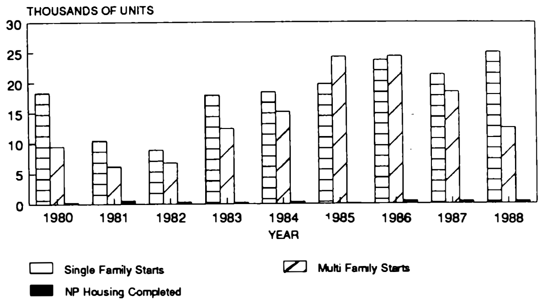


Source: San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Survey, 1988.

though HUD funding was drastically reduced in 1981, projects approved with funds committed in 1979 and 1980 were still being processed and were not ready for actual construction to start until 1981 and 1982. In addition, the large share of nonprofit production seems to reflect the depressed market rate production caused by high interest rates. As the

Figure 3

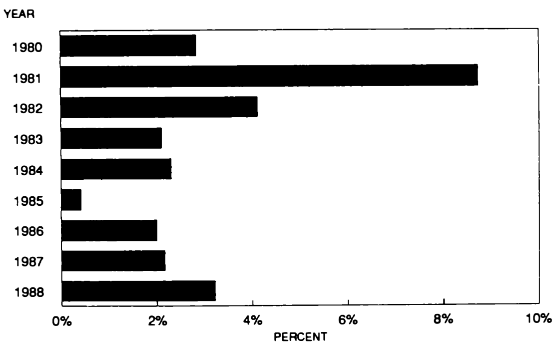
San Francisco Bay Area Housing Production 1980-1988



Sources: Construction Industry Research Board; San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Survey, 1988.

Figure 4

Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Production as a Percentage of Multifamily Starts



Sources: Construction Industry Research Board; San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Survey, 1988.

multi-family market improved, peaking in 1985, it dwarfed modest nonprofit production.

Characteristics of Nonprofit Housing Development Organizations in the Bay Area

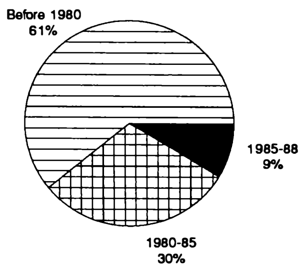
Bay Area nonprofit housing developers tend to be well-established, with a wide geographic basis, strong government support, and a focus on housing. Although the nonprofit housing developers selected for the sample listed housing construction and rehabilitation as their main activity, housing management was also of importance. Nearly 40 percent of the organizations indicated that their activities extended outside of housing development into housing counselling and economic development. In addition, many organizations reported support activities such as advocacy, tenant assistance, and organizing tenant limited-equity co-operatives.

Nonprofit housing development organizations in the Bay Area generally predate the fiscal austerity era. More than 60 percent of the organizations surveyed were formed prior to 1980, while less than 10 percent of the organizations were formed during the past three years (Figure 5). The typical nonprofit housing developer was not only experienced but supported with a paid staff of eleven.

An examination of start-up administrative funding sources reveals that government funding played a key role in the formation of nonprofit development organizations. Government funds provided nearly

Figure 5

Year of Inception of San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Developers

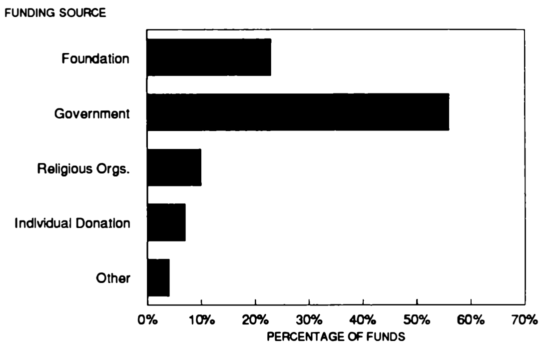


Source: San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Survey, 1988.

60 percent of nonprofit housing developers' initial administrative funding sources (Figure 6). Foundations and religious organizations accounted for approximately one-third of start-up funding, and private funding accounted for less than ten percent of funds.

Figure 6

Initial Administrative Funds of San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Developers



Source: San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Survey, 1988.

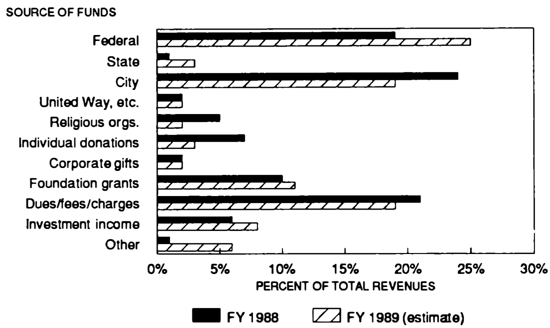
This pattern has not shifted substantially in recent years. Government sources accounted for one-half of total revenues, with federal sources accounting for about one-fifth of fiscal year 1988 revenues (Figure 7). Private support remained at levels comparable to those during start-up; approximately one-fifth of revenues were obtained from foundations or individual/corporate donations. Unpaid volunteer labor -- over 60 percent of organization workforce -- undoubtedly made an important charitable contribution, however.

While external sources of operational support remain about the same, dues, fees, and charges have grown to account for over 20 percent of organization revenues. In addition, investment income provides approximately 5 percent of total revenues. Though not self-sufficient, the nonprofit housing organizations have at least begun to generate revenue to defer the cost of operations.

Contrary to the expectation that increased self-financing would lead to serving higher-income clients, nonprofit organizations do not appear to have shifted their client base in order to increase revenues.

Figure 7

San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Developers' Total Revenues, FY 1988, FY 1989



Source: San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Survey, 1988.

Most local nonprofit housing developers in the sample had a city- or county-scale service area. This finding is hardly a coincidence, since organizations whose main purpose is housing development were selected for the sample, as distinguished from organizations whose main purpose is addressing problems of a particular poor neighborhood. On the other hand, finding the majority (about 60 percent) were active county-wide constitutes more than a sampling artifact, because it shows that housing developers may need to operate at a fairly wide geographic scale.

Both the nonprofit organizations and their projects were located in a variety of communities. The central cities of San Francisco and Oakland accounted for nearly half of the nonprofit organizations' locations in our sample. But others were dispersed throughout the Bay Area in both older, slower-growing communities and newer, fast-growing communities. Similarly, and somewhat surprisingly, in view of land costs, projects were dispersed among central cities and suburbs, and among communities which were relatively poor (e.g., Oakland) and wealthy (e.g., Palo Alto).

Characteristics of Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Projects

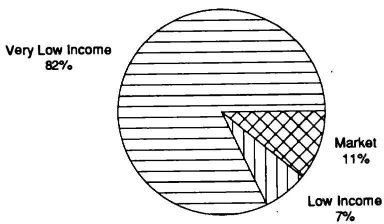
Survey respondents provided detailed information on projects completed in fiscal year 1988 and on "pipeline" projects (those anticipated in 1989 or later). A total of ten projects were completed in 1988, while approximately 45 projects are currently in the predevelopment phase, with construction anticipated during the next three years, assuming project funding can be arranged.

Completed Projects

Projects completed during fiscal year 1988 consisted of 83 percent rental and 17 percent owner units. Eighty-two percent of all units were scheduled for occupancy by very-low-income households (Figure 8). Unit sizes were generally small: 21 percent studio, 44 percent one-bedroom, 17 percent two-bedroom, and 11 percent three-bedroom.

Figure 8

Income of Residents of San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Units, Completed Projects



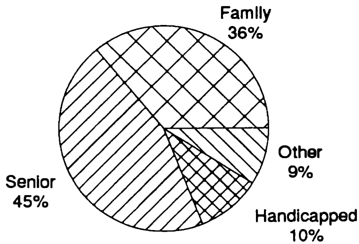
Source: San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Survey, 1988.

The projects were designed to serve a variety of tenants; 45 percent of the units were scheduled for occupancy by seniors, and 36 percent of the units were reserved for families (Figure 9).

As would be expected, projects required significant non-debt sources of capital. Figure 10 highlights the different funding sources of fiscal year 1988 projects. Private debt financing accounted for only one-fifth of project costs; projects were highly leveraged, with little sponsor equity provided. Cities provided significant levels of project funding for completed projects; almost one-half of projects costs were provided by local sources. While this does not reflect the long-term financial structure of low-income housing, it does reflect an extremely strong commitment by local government to address the housing problems of its citizens. The absence of foundation funds is equally significant.

Figure 9

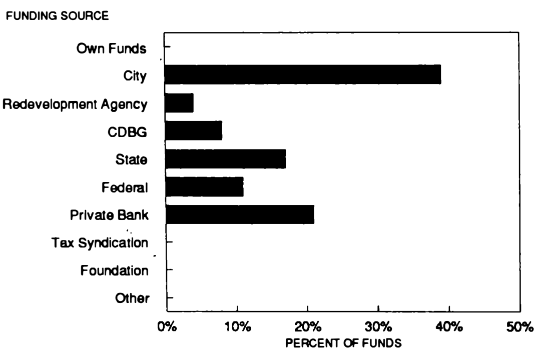
Resident Mix of San Francisco Bay Area Housing Units Completed Project



Source: San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Survey, 1988.

Figure 10

Sources of Funding for San Francisco Bay Area Completed Housing Projects



Source: San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Survey, 1988.

Nonprofit housing developers needed substantial subsidies in order to serve very-low-income households. With 30 percent debt, they were able to serve very-low-income households in 82 percent of the units they assisted. Table 1 outlines a prototype project. In this case, rental

Table 1

Prototype Development of San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing

UNITS:	50
TYPE:	New construction
AREA MEDIAN INCOME:	$35,000 (4-person household)
INCOME MIX:	82% at 50% median 6% at 80% median 12% at 100% median
OPERATING EXPENSES:	$2,000 per unit annual (including taxes, excluding debt service)
TOTAL DEVELOPMENT COST:	$3,731,850 ($74,637 per unit, incl. land)
LOAN TERMS:	30 years; 10% fixed mortgage

Loan-to-Value Ratio	Loan	Annual Payment	Monthly Payment
50%	$1,865,925	$197,936	$16,495
30%	$1,119,555	$118,762	$9,897

Table 1 continued next page

Table 1 *(continued)*

% of Median	Annual Income	Monthly Income	30% of Income	Utility Allowance	Monthly Income Available for Rent
100%	$35,000	$2,917	$875	$75	$800
80%	$28,000	$2,333	$700	$75	$625
50%	$17,500	$1,458	$438	$75	$363

Units	Rent	Monthly Income	Annual Income
41	$363	$14,863	$178,350
3	$625	$1,875	$22,500
6	$800	$4,800	$57,600

Gross Income Available for Rent:	$258,450
Less Vacancy: (5%)	$12,923
Less Operating Expenses:	$100,000
Net Annual Rent Available for Debt Service:	$145,528
Operating Deficit (Surplus):	($26,766)
Loan-to-Value Ratio:	30%
Subsidy or Capital Writedown Needed:	$2,612,295
Federal:	$287,091
City:	$1,008,085
CDBG:	$211,073
Redevelopment Agency:	$100,835
Foundation:	$10,449
State:	$444,090
Own Funds:	$2,090
Other:	$548,582

Source: San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Survey, 1988.

income was sufficient to cover the debt service. To achieve this financial feasibility, however, the typical developer had to piece together nine funding sources for a project in 1988.

Comparison of Completed and "Pipeline" Projects

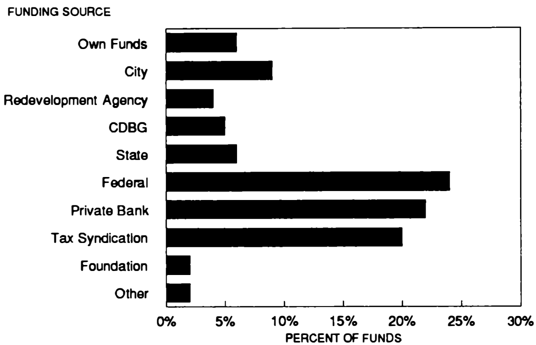
The arduous, convoluted, creative, and somewhat opportunistic process of assembling a viable project implies an important caveat to the following comparison between current completed projects and projects in the "pipeline." The housing development process is so full of uncertainty that what developers today think -- or are planning -- a project to be may scarcely resemble the eventual project. The developers may have some funding commitments but no site, for example. Or the sudden availability of HUD Section 202 funds may convert a family to an elderly project.

Even with this high degree of uncertainty, the differences between recently completed projects and those in the development process pipeline present a striking contrast. Figures 10 and 11 show the project funding sources, but their level of detail masks the most important conclusions. Actual projects depend heavily (approximately 80 percent) on government and, other than bank resources, have *no* private support. In contrast, the pipeline projects, while still dependent on government for half of the project funding, are expecting the private sector to provide for the other half. While expected bank participation remains the same for pipeline as for completed projects, and possible funding from foundations and "other" would contribute negligible proportions, the nonprofits are expecting to increase their own contribution from nothing to about 7 percent of project costs. They are also looking to tax syndication for a major contribution (about 20 percent). Of course, if syndication funding, which constitutes an indirect federal subsidy, is classified as government, the shift in government's funding share is less dramatic; it declines from about 80 percent of completed projects to about 70 percent of pipeline projects.

Within the government funding sources, contributions from Community Development Block Grant (locally allocated federal funds) and redevelopment funds are expected to be the same for pipeline projects as for actual projects. On the other hand, if pipeline projects are funded as currently projected, direct local contributions would decline drastically and state contributions would decline more modestly, while federal contributions would increase. Although it is difficult to assess the reliability of the state and federal contributions, a significant decline in direct local contributions seems plausible. The very substantial direct local contribution for the completed projects seems impressive, but probably unsustainable.

Figure 11

Sources of Funding
for San Francisco Bay Area Pipeline Housing Projects



Source: San Francisco Bay Area Nonprofit Housing Survey, 1988.

A comparison of completed and pipeline project types may be more reliable than a comparison of their sources of funding, because new construction and rehabilitation development processes are so different. Completed projects were divided 60 percent new construction to 40 percent rehabilitation, whereas more than 80 percent of the projects in the pipeline are slated for new construction. If they proceed as planned, pipeline projects would serve a larger proportion of families than completed projects.

Conclusions

Preliminary results of this study indicate that nonprofit housing organizations produced more than 40 percent of the Bay Area's new low-income housing between 1980 and 1986, validating the nonprofit housing sector's purported productivity. Moreover, recent projects serve very-low-income households to a degree far surpassing expectations of results achievable in an era of fiscal austerity. Standard financial viability seems to demand rent levels only affordable by relatively higher-income households. Yet successful Bay Area nonprofit housing organizations were able to reach very-low-income households (50 percent of median income) in 82 percent of the units they assisted. The combination of relatively high volume and success at targeting the needs of the very-low-income, even in the extremely tight San Francisco Bay Area market, demonstrates that the nonprofit housing sector can be effective. Moreover, successful nonprofit housing developers are well established, with professional staff, thus exhibiting both a dedication to serving low-income households and entrepreneurial expertise.

However, this conclusion that nonprofit housing developers have the necessary organizational capabilities carries three caveats. First, although the nonprofit sector has been effective and productive, the actual volume of low-income housing units created between 1980 and 1988 was small in comparison to the need. Second, while the nonprofit sector contributes sponsorship and entrepreneurial energy to low-income housing projects, nonprofit housing developers generally cannot contribute funding. (In about one-half of the respondents' projects, the nonprofit organization was not the final project owner.) Therefore, nonprofits cannot dramatically expand efforts without significant outside funding. Third, as the funding sources indicate, nonprofit project development generally requires a major government commitment, both financial and administrative, to create low-income projects. Historically, the nonprofit housing sector has relied on government assistance for both project capital and ongoing administrative costs. In contrast to popular images of independent, voluntary organizations, the nonprofit housing sector is highly dependent on government support.

Government support for Bay Area nonprofit housing organizations is not only pervasive, but deep and diverse. At the state level, legislation permitting tax increment financing has recently been revised, and now requires 20 percent of surplus proceeds to be spent on low-income housing. In addition, a state tax credit has been in place for three years, and legislation is currently pending to extend the tax credit system. Moreover, under state law, cities must offer nonprofit organizations the right of first refusal prior to selling surplus land at market rates. In the tight land market of the Bay Area, reduced cost or donated land offers an extremely valuable resource for housing development. Finally, state voters have approved bond issues for the construction of additional low-income housing.

Some cities in the Bay Area have taken an aggressive, supportive stand for low-income housing. Special housing funds have been capitalized by developer exactions, special taxes, general obligation bonds, or one-time general fund contributions. For example, in San Francisco and Palo Alto, commercial developers must either build housing or contribute to a housing fund. In addition, San Francisco reserves hotel taxes for housing, and Oakland has established a special fund for rehabilitating Single Room Occupancy hotels.

Yet even with this level of support, new low-income housing is difficult to arrange. The typical nonprofit-developed new construction project must combine land writedowns with special local resources and incentives and CDBG funds, plus whatever HUD subsidies are available, into a unique package.

Findings from the survey and key informants suggest that successful, well-established Bay Area nonprofit housing organizations work carefully with city counterparts and private capital (using Community Reinvestment Act leverage whenever possible), monitoring the changing tax and legislative provisions in order to create new housing opportunities. Low-income housing specialists must be adept at evaluating proforma variations in order to adapt prospective projects to the changing terrain of financial sources, both public and private. New funding opportunities mean projects can contain more low-income units or reach poorer families. Lost resources mean either projects with fewer low-income families, or no projects.

Surviving, successful contributors to low-income housing must be entrepreneurial and they must be collaborators. The concept of public-private partnership has been tested by austerity and has continued to be refined throughout the learning experience.

NOTES

The authors particularly want to thank Michael Smith-Heimer for valuable insights on analysis and contributions to an early draft of this article.

[1]As part of the Urban Institute's Nonprofit Sector Project, Abramson and Salamon (1986) have surveyed a sample of SFBA nonprofit organizations providing services in health care, employment and training, community development, day care, institutional care, arts, and other human services, in 1982 and 1984. This systematic research is the exception that proves the rule.

[2]Data collection followed Don Dillman's (1978) systematic survey design and follow-up techniques. Data collection and analysis followed standard practices.

[3]Sources include State of California (1987); a list from the Northern California Association of Nonprofit Housing; a list from the Mayor's Office of Housing and Economic Development of City of San Francisco; City of Oakland (1984-1988); ABAG (1983); and a preliminary survey conducted in a Spring 1988 course at the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of California at Berkeley.

[4]BRIDGE (Bay Area Residential Investment and Development Group), both a regional-scale housing promoter and an active developer, was excluded from the survey because of its outlier characteristics of operational scale and purposes, and partly because it poses an analytic problem. Since BRIDGE develops some low-income units directly and some indirectly through various investments in and assistance to nonprofits which are the main developer, (Pickman et al. 1986, Stegman et al. 1987) in the aggregate analysis including BRIDGE would create a difficult problem of double-counting.

[5]See note 4 above.

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