

# ARIZONA BUSINESS THE BUSINESS RESOURCE GAZETTE

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## PR professionals smooth developers' paths

Specialists deal with residents' fears, objections

By **Christia Gibbons**  
SPECIAL TO THE ABG

A new breed of public-relations experts is helping developers head off neighborhood dissent even before rumors that a project will block views, lower property values or block traffic sweep up and down the block.

Professionals in this niche of community outreach may sit with a single resident on a Saturday morning at Starbucks, walk door to door with site

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plans in hand, make phone calls or even develop Web sites — all to make the details of a proposed project accessible and understandable to neighbors.

"Most people are not very excited about a change and are concerned what it will do to impact them," says Susan Bitter Smith, who along with her husband Paul, runs Technical Solutions. Their neighborhood



SHERRIE BUZBY/ARIZONA BUSINESS GAZETTE

Martha Moyer of Master Planned Communications helps explain new real estate developments to potential neighbors.

work on Grace Communities' proposal for a mixed-used project on the southwest corner of Camelback Road and 44th

See **PUBLIC RELATIONS** Page 25

# PR experts smooth communication between developers, residents

## PUBLIC RELATIONS

*Continued from Page 1*

protesting two other proposals at the intersection.

"An absolute must is truthfulness," Smith says in working with neighbors. "You have to be confident of your facts, up front and as honest as possible."

Robert Rakowski of Choice Zoning Group LLC adds, "What I tell neighbors is that I don't care if they're against a project as long as they're against it after having the facts."

Many municipalities require

public input on projects, and Smith and the other community-outreach experts agree that the more neighborhood support, the better when a project comes before a planning and zoning commission or city council.

Ironing out concerns ahead of time also can dispense with emotional outbursts at public meetings where people can feel ambushed by a development they know little about.

"The more successful projects," Smith says, "come as the result of compromise on both sides."

As Ben Patton, a city planner

with design firm DAVIS, formerly known as DFD Cornoy-Hedrick, put it: "To effectively disseminate information, you have to be in an intimate setting where it's about the information and not the emotion."

Chris Gerardo, who does outreach as vice president for leasing and development at The Pederson Group, says that by working with neighbors ahead of time and figuring out what they wanted, local residents got an AJ's Fine Foods instead of a Bashas' at Scottsdale North Marketplace, located at Scottsdale and Lone Mountain roads.

Johnny Basha himself came out to a community meeting to get a feel for the wants and desires of residents, Gerardo says.

Further, Gerardo says he worked for three years to get a Starbucks at Hayden Peak Crossing Shopping Center because locals wanted one. Listening to residents prior to construction of Legacy Village in South Phoenix ensured a Starbucks and sit-down restaurants for the area.

"We always speak very openly and honestly and tell them what we plan to do," Gerardo says. "And what we can't

do."

Martha Moyer Wagoner agrees. She just launched Master Planned Communications LLC with a former Del Webb colleague, and also heads up the Moyer Group Public Relations.

"It's about building relationships, gaining consent and developing a plan that's win-win," Wagoner says. While she admits it might seem dicey to be starting such a business in the current real estate market, being able to help a project from beginning to end by mediating communication between all parties "can be fun."