

Engaging the Public in Planning for Housing



Housing is a basic human need. However, for most people it is much more. Collections of homes form neighborhoods with strong community ties. This can be an important part of people's identity and self-image. For many, a home is also a financial asset, often the largest single investment a family may own.

When a city or county plans for housing, or a developer proposes a housing project, existing residents often have concerns. This can be particularly true if the housing is sited in an established neighborhood, on open space that may have scenic or environmental value, or is designed to meet the needs of families and individuals with lower or moderate incomes.

New residential units in established neighborhoods are known as "infill" housing. Subdivisions on vacant land or open space are often referred to as "greenfield" developments, while projects that provide housing for lower or moderate income people are termed "affordable" housing or "workforce" housing. All three types of projects can generate questions, concerns and sometimes opposition from community residents.

When planning how best to engage the public, local officials have two approaches to consider. The first is to rely upon the formal land use planning and development process, which includes many steps required by law. This path can be sufficient for some local development decisions.

However, the traditional planning and development process may not be sufficient for more complex efforts such as comprehensive general plan and housing element updates, or potentially controversial infill, greenfield, or affordable housing proposals. For example, public hearings typically occur late in the process, after doubts and opposition have had an opportunity to build. The result is often conflict and mistrust.

When trust is an issue or conflict a possibility, local officials can use additional civic engagement methods to complement the traditional planning process. The Institute for Local Government (ILG) has created an online toolbox of techniques that cities and counties are using to engage the public in decisions regarding housing and the growth and development of their communities in ways that can address community concerns, build trust, and develop a shared vision for the future.

What is in the Online Toolbox?

The Online Housing Toolbox (www.ca-ilg.org/document/building-public-support-affordable-housing-toolbox-california-officials) includes individual sections that describe six steps for engaging the public in planning for housing. Here is a quick overview of the issues addressed in each section.

1. Surveying the Landscape

Surveying the landscape includes being familiar with the specifics of a given *proposal* for affordable housing, and appreciating the community *context* within which decisions regarding the housing proposal will be made. Understanding the *stakeholders* is also important. In the broadest sense, a stakeholder is anyone — whether part of an organized group or not — who would be affected by the proposal or whose interests might be advanced or damaged. Finally, it is critical to assess the community's *concerns* — their hopes, doubts, and fears. Each of these issues— the proposal, the context, the stakeholders, and the community's concerns – must be known and appreciated, if local leaders hope to avoid or resolve potential community conflicts over affordable, supportive and market-rate housing.

2. Building to Code

Building to code involves observing the legal requirements governing planning and land use decisions related to affordable housing. It is crucial that public agencies scrupulously follow the substantive and procedural requirements of state and federal law when making planning and development decisions. These include provisions of due process, public disclosure, environmental analysis and findings of fact. There are also a number of additional legal requirements that apply specifically to housing proposals. Public hearings are perhaps the procedural requirement with which members of the public are most familiar. Land use and housing decisions typically involve a number of public hearings. Making public hearings as effective as possible is one way that local agencies can resolve community concerns and build support for housing plans and proposals. For tips on how to improve public hearings and running effective meetings visit www.ca-ilg.org/meeting-resource-center-tools-effective-meetings.

Why Engage the Public?

Increasing public engagement in your community offers many benefits. Engaging the public early in the decision-making process can help local public agencies avoid costly pitfalls and mistakes. Involving residents and others in the process can generate more support for the final decisions reached by city or county decision-makers.

Additional benefits of engaging the public include:

- Better identification of the public's values, ideas and recommendations
- More informed residents – about issues and local agencies
- Improved local agency decision-making and actions
- More community buy-in and support, with less contentiousness
- More civil discussions and decision-making
- Faster project implementation with less need to revisit
- More trust in each other and local government
- Higher rates of community participation and leadership development

For more information and resources on starting and enhancing public engagement efforts visit

www.ca-ilg.org/getting-started-0.

3. Designing a Blueprint for Success

Designing a blueprint for success involves devising a process for engaging the public that is tailored to the unique circumstances of the local situation. This often means going beyond the legal public participation requirements when making local land use decisions. The required process alone may not be enough to build civic confidence and trust when controversial issues arise that prompt public anxiety or animosity. Through effective civic engagement strategies, local officials can broaden the community debate over potentially contentious housing proposals. These strategies can bring in a wider range of opinions and a more diverse group of stakeholders than might otherwise participate in the traditional planning and project review process.

4. Nuts and Bolts: Choosing the Right Tools

Choosing the right tools entails selecting the most appropriate methods to carry out a public participation strategy. There are a wide variety of tools and techniques that are available to help local officials engage the public. Some of the most effective and innovative tools and methods that local and regional agencies in California and elsewhere have used are profiled in the online toolkit. Additional information on the use of technology to engage the public can be found here www.ca-ilg.org/post/technology-tools-and-techniques-reach-your-community.

5. Addressing Community Concerns

Addressing community concerns is the key step. It may not be possible to fully resolve every potential objection to a housing project or plan. However, local officials can facilitate a good-faith effort to initiate a dialogue about community concerns. Once the housing proposal is properly understood, including its potential impacts, the community can be engaged through an open, informative and authentic process.

6. Laying a Foundation for the Future

Laying a foundation for the Future can be the final step — or perhaps an important first step — in building long-term community support for affordable housing. Once a housing proposal has been approved, it is important to ensure that the proposal is implemented well and that the commitments made to the community are kept. By developing a planning framework that incorporates affordable housing, local communities can create an environment receptive to affordable housing over the longer term. For tips on how cities and counties can plan for public engagement see www.ca-ilg.org/document/three-orientations-local-government-public-engagement-passive-active-sustaining.

Helping Communities Adapt to Change

California is growing – in recent years, about one half-million people are added to the state’s population annually. That’s like adding a new city the size of Long Beach every year. Rapid growth is bringing rapid change, and change can be unsettling.

Change can be physical. New subdivisions appear on undeveloped hillsides or open land that was once used for agriculture. New shopping centers or schools are built on the edge of town. Old buildings in existing neighborhoods are adapted for new uses, or torn down to make way for new offices, shops or housing. Often these new developments are larger – with greater “density” – than the buildings they replaced.

Change can be social and cultural. California’s population is the most diverse in the nation. We see that diversity reflected in the people living in our neighborhoods, attending our schools and working in our communities.

Change can impact our quality of life. As California strives to accommodate its changing population, the strains sometimes show. Traffic may get heavier and roads more congested. Schools can become crowded faster than new classrooms can be built. Basic public services – such as water, sewer, parks and libraries – can be stretched to near the breaking point, while investments to improve or expand them may lag behind demand.

While local officials can’t keep their communities from changing, they can help residents better understand the changes they face. Local agencies can work with residents to involve them in the process of considering new plans and proposals for housing and other development. As the final decision-makers, local officials have a responsibility to ensure that their decisions are informed by a firm understanding of the issues involved in debates over housing. Equally importantly, they can insist that the information needed to bridge disagreements or clear up misunderstandings is developed and made available to the broader community before making a decision.

SB 375 and Housing

Senate Bill 375 creates a formal process that builds on the experience of voluntary regional visioning initiatives in California, often referred to as “Regional Blueprints.” SB 375 relies on regional collaboration by local officials to address California’s goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from automobile travel. The law coordinates three important planning activities into a new integrated planning process:

- The regional transportation plan (RTP) and sustainable community strategy (SCS);
- The regional housing needs assessment (RHNA); and
- The update of the housing element of local general plans.

In addition to aligning the schedules for each of these planning processes, SB 375 requires that all three share a common set of reasonable land use assumptions for the region. These land use assumptions are contained in the “sustainable communities strategy” that each metropolitan region is required to prepare as part of the regional transportation plan. A sustainable communities strategy provides a regional

framework for growth that identifies the “general location of uses, residential densities and building intensities” within the region as well as areas sufficient to meet the region’s housing needs and a regional transportation network sufficient to serve that growth. The sustainable communities strategy must identify areas sufficient to house all economic segments of the region’s population for an eight-year planning period.

In addition, SB 375 modifies the process for environmental review of projects that are consistent with regional strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Taken together, these changes provide important opportunities for local officials to engage with their colleagues and the public and proactively chart the pace and character of development in their region.

SB 375 Public Participation Opportunities and Requirements

State law has charged the regional council of governments with developing the regional housing needs. During this process they must involve the public by accepting public comments on the proposed plan for at least 60 days and holding at least one public hearing. For more information on Councils of Governments see www.ca-ilg.org/metropolitan-planning-organizations-375-updates.

Many agencies find it beneficial to go beyond these minimum requirements for public participation. Effectively engaging the public in critical decisions, such as long range planning for housing, can ensure that agency decisions consider public preferences and priorities and have broad public support. Early public involvement, diverse and targeting recruitment efforts, culturally appropriate engagement practices and partnerships with community groups are just a few approaches that local agencies have found useful. For tips on planning and delivery of public engagement activities when participants’ deeply held views and values make successful outcomes more of a challenge see www.ca-ilg.org/DeeplyHeldConcerns.

More Resources

Understanding SB 375: Public Participation Requirements

www.ca-ilg.org/document/understanding-sb-375-public-participation-requirements

Understanding SB 375: Opportunities to Engage the Public in Regional Planning

www.ca-ilg.org/document/understanding-sb-375-opportunities-engage-public-regional-planning

Understanding SD 375: Regional Planning for Transportation, Housing and the Environment

www.ca-ilg.org/document/understanding-sb-375-regional-planning-transportation-housing-and-environment

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