



# Build Community Support for Affordable Housing

## Objective

Inform and engage community members on housing needs and the benefits of housing choices.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO BUILD SUPPORT THROUGH COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT?

Increasing affordable and dense housing choices can be a contentious issue in any community. Many projects meet resistance from community members because of common misconceptions about higher density and affordable housing and fears of change. Community members may misunderstand what increased density looks like, or the size of the impact it might have on their community. Additionally, the need for housing choices and benefits to the community may not be fully understood.

Education and outreach can draw attention to and help communities better understand the housing needs of overlooked low- and moderate-income households. Often these housing needs are for teachers, police officers, medical workers, and others that are not thought of as “low income.” Involving and educating the public on housing needs can increase awareness and acceptance, thereby reducing barriers to constructing housing choices and affordable housing. Soliciting and integrating community input demonstrates that the local government is open and responsive to the community’s opinions.

## RELATED TOOLS

[Community engagement plans](#)

[Design guidelines](#)

[Development agreements](#)

[Interjurisdictional cooperation](#)

[Nonprofit partnerships](#)

[Strategies to address NIMBY reactions](#)

## WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW TO GET STARTED PLANNING FOR COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND OUTREACH?

Affordable or dense housing development is often met by community resistance. Many of the reasons behind this resistance are predictable and relate to misconceptions and stereotypes.

A good deal of education and outreach to communities opposed to affordable housing development may involve “myth-busting” common concerns about affordable or new forms of housing built in one’s neighborhood (e.g., it will bring down property values, it is ugly and doesn’t fit the neighborhood character, or crime will increase). Concerns about increased densities include traffic congestion, changes in community character, school overcrowding and aesthetic concerns. Many studies and examples provide evidence that counters these misconceptions, and references are included in the individual tool pages. All of the tools aim to smooth the road to attaining your community’s housing goals.

The tools and strategies selected to create a community education and outreach program will be specific to your community, based on the following four general elements of the process:

### **Set a scope of work and identify resources**

Community education and outreach, like all communication strategies, can be time- and labor-intensive, but have the potential to prevent costs and project delays that may occur further along in the public process. It can be difficult to bring together the right people, engage them, and propose ideas of change. Building support for an affordable housing project or housing strategy can take a long time. Not everyone will agree on every issue. For projects that add denser and newer forms of housing, concerns about shifting neighborhood housing types are often deeply rooted and slow to change.

To transform opinions, your messaging is just as important the facts you present. Listen carefully to divergent voices and understand the specific concerns of each. This will help you craft your response to each key group.

It can be expensive and difficult to raise support for a proactive approach to education and outreach than a reactive response. However, getting ahead of an issue before it manifests — such as championing the need for affordable housing or residential development in a town center before any developments are proposed — can prevent future costs, such as spending time and effort combating resistance to a proposal. Be as proactive as time and budget allow.

### **Define the issue and gather information**

Assess your community:

- Do communities know that (a lack of) affordable housing is an issue?
- Are there any affordable or innovative housing proposals on the table?
- Are there parts of the city zoned for density, but not achieving near the maximum allowed density?
- What are communities’ concerns?
- Who are the supporters and who is skeptical?
- What land is available for development?
- What is the development climate like?
- Are there any regulatory barriers to developing the types of housing you are seeking?



Gather data:

- Gather housing cost and other socioeconomic data
- Find examples of successful projects in similar communities
- Look through your county's Buildable Lands report to gauge whether some zones are building out under capacity

The answers to these questions can help make the case for innovative or affordable housing and identify your outreach audience. If you anticipate resistance to a housing strategy or project, gathering images, figures, studies and reports that debunk some of the common misconceptions about affordable housing and housing types will help you prepare responses. See the [community engagement plans](#) and [strategies to address NIMBY](#) tools for more information on addressing common misconceptions.

### **Engage stakeholders**

You should engage stakeholders at every step of the process, from gathering information, to planning, implementing and monitoring a plan, ordinance, project, or program. Identify key stakeholders that can effectively address your unique housing issue. Stakeholders will vary based on the type of housing concern, program or project. If a specific project is on the table, the developers, residents/block groups/homeowner associations in the neighboring area, potential residents and any associated non-profits or advocate groups should be involved. For example, when workforce housing is an issue, involving labor groups, workers, and major employers would be important. If the housing issue is broader (e.g., an [upzone/rezone](#) or [TOD overlay zone](#)), outreach could be directed to residents and businesses in the areas affected. Involving stakeholder groups will help determine how best to reach out to the wider community.

Engaging residents can be challenging. It can be difficult to spark involvement of the “silent majority.” A vocal minority may be persistent, while representatives from other relevant groups rarely appear at events. This can be particularly true with affordable or diverse housing projects or programs, where it can be difficult to engage the population who would likely be residents. It may be logistically difficult or uncomfortable for members of the population to participate in public meetings or events because of work schedules, childcare needs, or language barriers. These issues point to the need for outreach strategies, materials, messages, and meetings that are channeled correctly and sensitively to the needs of participants and the community.

### **Design education and outreach strategies and enact program**

With stakeholder involvement and input, design a broad-level community education initiative. You should decide whether to reach out to a targeted population or extend the message community-wide, based on the intent of the initiative. If the outreach strategy revolves around a particular development, targeting just the neighboring residents and businesses may be sufficient, but if, for example, your community is developing an innovative housing ordinance, you should cast a wider net. Look to the [community engagement plans](#) and [strategies to address NIMBY](#) tools for suggestions on outreach and education techniques.





The level of complexity of a housing issue and the associated education and outreach initiative may require expertise from outside of your community's planning department. Funds may not be available to immediately hire a consultant to plan the engagement process or assist in outreach efforts. Taking on outreach and education internally can be a long-term commitment and should be planned as such. Key project stakeholders, nonprofits, and community leaders can also contribute to outreach and education.

### **Strategically market your community as a place for investment, programs or projects**

Jurisdictions can actively promote the kind of development they desire by spreading the word that they are friendly to innovative and affordable housing, advertising attractions and development potential, and working to counter any negative or outdated misconceptions about their community.

Marketing can be crucial to a project or neighborhood's acceptance and success. Marketing can be used to attract developers, investors, and residents. It can help gain community acceptance of projects and policies. A successful marketing plan is more than simple promotion; research and data collection are important steps that can inform a jurisdiction about the market potential of their product. Organizing the community in support of affordable housing and engaging them in the marketing process will help entrench community identity and social networks. Getting community stakeholders on board can carry a marketing effort forward and extend outreach efforts.

Finally, you can build on and combine standard community involvement techniques (e.g., meetings and mailings) with other tools, such as charettes, focus groups, social media, and surveys, to get your message out. If relevant to proposed projects, begin drafting comprehensive plan amendments, development code, or program changes.

