



ASSOCIATION
OF BAY AREA
GOVERNMENTS



Technical Assistance
for Local Planning
HOUSING

Let's Talk About Housing

Communications Guide for Local Government

Regional Housing Technical Assistance Program



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Communications Guide Purpose

This communications framework utilizes Bay Area research conducted by EMC Research; Dr. Tiffany Manuel, The CaseMade; the Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California and D&A Communications to help Bay Area policymakers and local government staff hold productive conversations with residents about planning for housing. This guide also includes “Do Say” and “Don’t Say” suggestions to help users navigate some of the most common challenges in talking about housing. The best practices identified in this guide show ways to:

- Elevate the conversation about housing.
- Build awareness and understanding of the Housing Element.
- Reduce resistance to housing protection, preservation and production.
- Enable participants to find equitable housing solutions.

Following is a summary of each chapter.

Know Your Audience

In most Bay Area jurisdictions, you can anticipate speaking to and hearing from community members with a wide range of opinions, beliefs and values: from staunch housing advocates to uncertain or silent “middle” audiences to those who deeply oppose any new housing in their community. The following concepts are best practices for constructive conversations.

- The “why” before the “how.”
- Assess & contextualize residents’ priorities.
- Navigate common assumptions.
- Slow down the conversation.

Communications Best Practices

It is critical that your messaging is simple, succinct and at a level where everyone can understand. Elected officials can expect to speak to a variety of people from different backgrounds, and each person will have a different knowledge base and understanding of the processes surrounding housing planning and equitable housing solutions. Based on research, the strategies highlighted below are the best practices for speaking with community members about both the Housing Element and the new Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing requirements:

- Center Equity and Systems Change
- Attach and Amplify
- Reframe
- Avoid Challenging Different Points of View and Focus on the Facts
- Avoid the Term “Housing Crisis.”

These communications best practices are described in the document text.

The What and Why of AFFH

Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) is one of the more recent additions to the Housing Element update and focuses on overcoming patterns of segregation and fostering inclusive communities. New guidance adopted by the state in 2018 requires jurisdictions to proactively address segregation in programs and activities related to housing and community development.

Communications strategies around AFFH include:

1. Just the Facts
2. Economic Opportunity
3. Racial Equity

Sample Housing Element Meetings Template

The template is available for you to revise as needed to represent the concerns of your residents and incorporate the data and messaging that can best address those concerns. The template puts the tools and tips of the communications guide into practice while allowing the script to be tailored to your community. This is included as part of the Appendices.



Plan Bay Area 2050 Pop-Up @ SF Chinatown YMCA Photo Copyright Noah Berger / 2019

INTRODUCTION

The Impact of “Home”

Where people call home impacts every aspect of their lives. Home is security. Home is safety. Home is opportunity. It is a place of refuge, calm and belonging. It is where we raise our families and create community. Safe and accessible housing has the power to transform communities into thriving centers of opportunity.

The significance and complexity of housing in the Bay Area means there is no one-size-fits-all solution that will bring everyone together when it comes to equitable housing solutions and opportunities. The Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG), in association with the Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California (NPH) and Davis & Associates Communications (D&A), has developed communications guidelines and best practices that can help local governments have meaningful

conversations with their residents about housing. The goal is to transform these conversations about housing from unhelpful and contentious to constructive.

Communications Guide Purpose

Home doesn’t just define our present—it also determines our future. Stable, affordable homes are the foundation of strong, thriving, equitable communities. Good schools, stable jobs, successful businesses and safe neighborhoods all depend on secure housing. It’s important that the people (e.g plumbers, police officers, baristas, teachers) who work and contribute to a community, live in that community versus having to commute hours before they even start their day.

This guide shares a research-based communications framework to help Bay Area policymakers and local



governments hold productive conversations with residents about Housing Element updates. The best practices identified in this guide show ways to elevate the conversation around housing, build awareness and understanding, reduce resistance to housing opportunities and enable audiences to see housing as a broader societal problem that requires equitable solutions.

The question for local governments is: how do we help residents recognize their stake in helping their city or county create solutions to complex housing problems? This communications guide outlines how to understand residents, offers research-based context and outlines communications best practices for conducting productive conversations with residents.

Meeting the Moment

This is a critical moment for the Bay Area. COVID-19 has further exposed the ongoing racial disparities that affect health outcomes and many other aspects of our lives, tested our collective and individual patience and significantly impacted our mental health. From parents working from home trying to juggle the logistics of work and childcare, essential workers whose jobs put them at higher risk for the virus and low-income community members facing the threat of eviction or displacement,

this is a particularly difficult time to discuss the Housing Element process. These challenges make it all the more important to engage in honest conversations about how we can best support each other and ensure that everyone in our community has a safe place to call home.

The Bay Area is also in the midst of its 6th Cycle of the Regional Housing Needs Allocations (RHNA) and the associated Housing Element update process, which, for the first time, includes significant consequences for noncompliance with new state housing laws. This cycle of the Housing Element update is likely to require each jurisdiction to plan and zone for substantially more units than in previous cycles, making it critical for local agency staff to communicate effectively to build broad community support for the Housing Element update process and outcomes.

The research and communications strategies that follow are designed to provide those involved in public engagement for the Housing Element update—whether local elected officials or local agency staff—with new tools to help make these difficult conversations more productive.



Willow VA resident, San Mateo Department of Housing, courtesy of NPH

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE



To help both inform and connect with residents, it's important to know who you will be talking to, and to understand their values and assumptions before getting into the specifics of what you'll say.

You can anticipate speaking to and hearing from community members who hold a wide range of opinions, beliefs and values: from staunch housing advocates, to uncertain or silent “middle” audiences, to those who deeply oppose any new housing in their community.

Polls and surveys are among the tools available to gauge your residents' feelings before public meetings.¹ Starting with a clear foundation for goals will help communicate across differences and find solid, uniting points to launch the conversation. A good practice before speaking with an individual or group is to consider what you want them to feel, know and do during and after the presentation or workshop.

The answers will differ based on circumstances, timing and needs. Once you have the answers, the best practices below can help in your conversations. The key concepts are drawn from Dr. Tiffany Manuel's *Strategic CaseMaking* guidance and the psychological research of Professor Daniel Kahneman.^{2,3} The concepts and questions are best practices for constructive conversations.

The “Why” Before The “How”

While there is a lot of data that can help inform decisions and opinions about housing, it's best to start any conversation focusing on [why](#) the Housing Element update is taking place. Powerful and compelling arguments about why this work is important will likely get more support.

Some questions to consider before crafting talking points:

- How can the Housing Element process unite and support us?
- Do residents have a personal experience they can draw upon to help introduce the topic?
- Is there ongoing work that Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing may strengthen?
- Are there reasons that fair housing or desegregation is a particular interest of residents?

While community engagement on the Housing Element is mandated by law, there's a bigger reason why the community should participate in the process: the future of the community hinges on these conversations. It's a chance for the community to directly influence how and where housing is allocated, along with general planning.

Assess and Contextualize Residents' Priorities

Connect housing to other issues residents care about. Some questions to consider are:

- What are the big issues your residents are focused on right now?
- How can you connect the Housing Element process and other activities to those concerns?
- How can connecting the Housing Element process to these other issues (i.e. traffic, green space, safe streets) help achieve your vision for the community?

Some of the top concerns of Bay Area residents are homelessness, employment, wages and compensation, traffic and diversity.⁴ This is based on research conducted by NPH and D&A.⁵

Homelessness

Homelessness is a complicated topic that requires careful communication and special attention. In many parts of the country, homelessness is seen as a mental health issue rather than a housing or economic one. Bay Area perspectives on the topic often are more diverse and far-reaching, but no less critical to understanding our

1 RHTA offers a survey template to help local governments better understand their residents' feelings about housing and related issues. For more information, view [Outreach Resources & Translation Services](#)

2 For more information about housing communications research and strategies for framing, see: [Frameworks Institute Housing Communications Reports](#) and [“You Don't Have to Live Here”: Why Housing Messages Are Backfiring and 10 Things We Can Do About It](#)

3 Manuel, Tiffany. *Strategic CaseMaking: The Field Guide for Building Public and Political Will*. Orlando, Florida: The CaseMade Press, 2020. (pg. 13); Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York City, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.

4 Focus groups conducted by Dr Tiffany Manuel, TheCaseMade in 2019.

5 Shift the Bay Initiative. Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California, 2019 - 2020. A collection of resources from the initiative.

residents' views of and relationship with housing. Homelessness is deeply tied to multiple issues including housing, economics, general healthcare and mental health.

Specifically, homelessness is seen by many Bay Area residents as an example of why housing challenges are entrenched and insurmountable. Homelessness is viewed as a concrete outcome of the Bay Area's "failure on housing" while simultaneously a justification for not taking action on economic and housing issues, as it is seen as too intractable and complicated.

Employment, Wages and Compensation

The cost of living in the Bay Area is indisputably high, with most people feeling resigned to having housing take up much of their income. Many workers' commutes are measured in hours as they cannot afford to live near their places of work.

Traffic

With so many people commuting to their workplaces and the Bay Area being largely car dominant, it's no surprise that traffic is a top-of-mind issue for residents. However, traffic as an issue isn't always just about traffic, but is often used as a proxy for population growth and change.

Diversity

Bay Area residents value diversity but are often uneasy talking about race and politics. Anchoring equity and systems change in the conversation can introduce critical context, while ensuring that we use and demonstrate a racial equity lens to keep the conversation focused on what the impacts are today.

Participants in focus groups⁶ talked about their perception of the Bay Area as a diverse place. This was brought up often as one of the reasons they love the area and to qualify the Bay Area as a "progressive" place. Many wanted their children to grow up in an accepting and diverse place.

However, most residents were less willing to confront our region's history of racist and discriminatory public policies than they were to consider reparations-style solutions. When presented with two value statements: "Past discrimination against people of color should not

affect how people are treated today" and "We need housing policy in the Bay Area that makes up for decades of unfair treatment of people of color," respondents leaned more strongly towards the first statement.⁷ Given the goals of AFFH and local Housing Element needs, this finding highlights the need for careful communications to advance the conversation towards solutions. See page 18 for recommended framing.

Position the Housing Element as a Way to Solve Housing Challenges

Starting with a solution invites people into aspirational conversations. We recommend framing Housing Element laws and this process as a way that the community plans for its future and ensures that there is housing for all income levels.

Communities are especially concerned about changes to zoning, community character (i.e., height restrictions, increased homes on lots, new residents) and the impact on parking. Framing the housing element process as a way to address these issues is critical; however it is important that policy makers and their staff navigate carefully to ensure the conversation is constructive, and to avoid getting distracted or disrupted.

One helpful starting point is that residents are already concerned about housing in the Bay Area and its affordability.

- Homelessness and affordable housing were widely identified as top of mind in polling and in focus group conversations.⁸
- Community members are eager to debate housing issues.
- Community members hold deep concerns about housing.⁹

However, the discussion around housing can sometimes devolve into a loop of unproductive conversation often caused by negative disruptors. Negative disruptor topics included drugs, crime, homelessness, finances and traffic congestion.¹⁰ Anchoring the Element as a step toward addressing these concerns is critical in ensuring helpful and solution-focused conversations.

⁶ EMC Research, 2019

⁷ EMC Research, 2021

⁸ Focus groups conducted by Dr. Tiffany Manuel, TheCaseMade in 2019.

⁹ 53% concerned about finding an affordable place to live for themselves; 83% concerned about low-income and disadvantaged families being able to find an affordable place to live, EMC Research, June 2021.

¹⁰ Shift the Bay Initiative. Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California, 2019 - 2020. A collection of resources from the initiative.

Navigate Common Assumptions

Communications research about housing shows there are many common assumptions and arguments that shape popular beliefs about housing problems and solutions.

What are the assumptions, arguments or reactions that may come up when speaking with residents?

For example, popular assumptions and arguments may include: higher wages in the Bay Area make up for the higher cost of housing; segregation is something that happens “naturally” as a result of individual preferences; traffic is solely caused by increased population; and attempts to solve discrimination and segregation issues through housing policy are bound to fail.¹¹

Slow Down the Conversation

The deliberate, analytical, slow way of thinking helps avoid reactions based on the “fast thinking brain.” In other words, the part of our brain that moves quickly,

unconsciously and automatically to a conclusion needs to be circumvented.

What are ways to tap into residents’ deliberate thinking?

Techniques for slowing people down are the use of humor, surprise, unconventional stories or storytellers, visual aids or experiential learning. We have provided an example of how to do this on page 15.

Sample Housing Element Meetings Template

To assist with housing planning public meetings, a template is available for you to revise as needed to represent the concerns of your residents and incorporate the data and messaging that can best address those concerns. This template puts the tools and tips of the communications guide into practice while allowing the script to be tailored to your community. Please see the appendix for the sample meeting template.



Christian Church Homes, courtesy of NPH

¹¹ Kendall-Taylor, Nat; Manuel, Tiffany. [“You Don’t Have to Live Here”: Why Housing Messages Are Backfiring and 10 Things We Can Do About It](#), 2016

COMMUNICATIONS BEST PRACTICES



Keep it Simple

It is critical that your communications and messaging are simple, succinct and at a level where everyone can understand. Each person will have a different knowledge base and understanding of the processes surrounding housing planning and equitable housing solutions. Thus, it's important to tailor your messaging directly and to fully understand who you'll be speaking to. This includes providing translation and interpretation when requested and required. More information about assessing your audience can be found on page 8.

Talking About Housing

The Nonprofit Housing Association of Northern California (NPH), along with a coalition of organizations¹ focused on advancing housing and racial justice in the Bay Area, created a “[Shift the Narrative Playbook](#)” designed to offer concrete guidance on how to advance housing and racial justice in the Bay Area.

Elected officials and staff can anticipate speaking to and hearing from community members that hold a diverse range of opinions, beliefs and values: from staunch housing advocates, to uncertain or silent “middle” audiences, to those who deeply oppose change and housing production. But research shows us important opportunities to find middle ground, shared values and springboards to successful dialogue during the Housing Element process. One of the most important findings from NPH’s opinion research (and reiterated by practitioners’ field experiences) that can shape your approach is understanding that voters hold deeply contradictory feelings and values about housing. And further, if pushed,

community members may dig in deeper to defend their opposing views rather than find common ground.

What does this mean? It is key to identify existing views residents hold that align with the goals of Housing Element updates, rather than try to navigate opposing information—even when fact-based—as those messages may backfire and limit the window for constructive conversation. This technique demonstrates the pathway forward that accommodates all income levels of housing while strengthening communities and deepening commitments.

Across all constituencies, core principles from the research-informed communication strategies available in the “[Shift the Narrative](#)” Playbook can support this effort, including:²

Center Equity and Systems Change: Center equity in all messaging and integrate new narratives that position equity as the pathway to housing solutions. This strategy aims to explain the racially unjust consequences of maintaining systems of segregation and how cities can deepen their commitment to racial equity and meet their legal obligation to affirmatively further fair housing (AFFH). It is useful for people who see housing as a primary driver of racial inequity. Despite research findings that show some hesitancy on solution options, there was strong support for diversity and around key equity values. For information on framing equity, see page 17.

Attach and Amplify: The idea of housing is tied to emotional, financial and environmental security, so attaching messaging to these issues is a good way to frame housing as a deep-seated need.

It is key to identify existing views residents hold that align with the goals of Housing Element updates, rather than try to navigate opposing information.



Plan Bay Area Outreach @ San Jose (Alum Rock Farmer's Market)
Photo Copyright Noah Berger

¹ [Complete list of organizations](#)

² Shift the Bay Initiative. Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California, 2019 - 2020. A collection of resources from the initiative.

Reframe: We need to move beyond negative disruptors by reminding folks what’s at stake if we fail to act. Further, it’s critical that we demonstrate that the negative consequences of not prioritizing housing as an issue are borne by all of us, not just the people struggling to find housing.

Avoid Challenging Different Points of View: Identify the common misperceptions and unproductive narratives by setting the stage early to correct misinformation and present people with the facts of the issue. While this is not a ‘tit-for-tat’ strategy, it can decrease the impact of misinformation and undermine its legitimacy or veracity.

In addition to these core principles, NPH has found in its research that people strongly agree there is an issue surrounding access to affordable and safe housing, but rarely agree on the solution. Therefore, we are adding one more pillar to our messaging guide:

Avoid Calling It A Housing Crisis: Calling this issue a “housing crisis” feeds into entrenchment and also sounds blameless. Rather, foster resonance by reframing it as creating “equitable housing opportunities.”

Below, we break down each of these core principles and provide specific messaging recommendations for engaging residents with them.

Center Equity and Systems Change

Make equity a touchstone in all messaging and integrate new narratives that convey the importance of housing as a means to economic security and community well-being. While research shows³ that care must be taken in discussing the history of exclusionary and racist policies such as redlining, discrimination by housing lenders, or restrictive covenants, we must be direct about the impacts on Black, Indigenous and people of color and low-income neighbors today and the role of policies and systems to make change. Use active language that puts accountability on our policies and systems, rather than put the onus on impacted community members. This guide includes “Do Say” and “Don’t Say” suggestions to help readers navigate some of the most common challenges in talking about housing such as:

Do Say

Generations of exclusionary zoning have created an unjust housing system which impacts communities of color the most. Strengthening these communities is how we move the whole Bay Area forward. And getting it right means being honest about how we got here, so we can take on the underlying issues. Promoting justice and equity in the Bay Area starts at home.

Don't Say

There is enough room in the Bay Area for everyone. We need to make room.

Equity—the principle that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to share the benefits and burdens in our community, recognizing that everyone has different circumstances—is an important priority of the people who live in this region. The key is to address this quickly and then address equitable housing opportunities as being a step in the right direction. **It’s important to connect the racial and economic disparities to historic policies and systems, rather than individuals.**

According to research, some of the advantages of living in a racially and economically diverse community include⁴:

- The power of difference: living in diversity enables us to be closer to people/community/issues we wouldn’t be otherwise.
- If folks who work in your town live in your town, they are invested in the community where they spend most of their waking hours.
- Diversity of perspectives leads to better decision making, more productivity, empathy, cohesion (empathy was a recurring theme across many comments).
- Opportunities for mutual aid and cross-cultural learning.
- The next generation can grow up with the belief that integrated communities are the norm.

³ Shift the Bay Initiative. Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California, 2019 - 2020. A collection of resources from the initiative.

⁴ Listening Sessions conducted by D&A Communications; December 3, 2021 & December 4, 2021

Attach and Amplify

Research shows that Bay Area residents are already attaching housing issues to other issues. Thus, making this a strength rather than a challenge is key. When speaking to residents, it's important to understand the issues that community members care about and are motivated to protect and then show how housing intersects. Housing as a foundational element to strong, vibrant, equitable communities is an important frame to advance this strategy, as is linking to specific issues, such as

environmental justice, diversity, schools and other priority issues for your constituents.

Listening sessions conducted by D&A surrounding AFFH community perceptions and research conducted by ABAG⁵ identified several financial, environmental and social issues that impact how focus group members viewed housing⁶. Below are the most common community concerns, along with examples for how to work housing into the conversation in a way that will create a positive dialogue.

| Community Concern | How to Reframe |
|--|--|
| <p>Economic insecurity, from choosing between paying debts or rent; families needing multiple jobs to earn a livable wage; and income inequality.</p> | <p>Some people in the Bay Area bought homes when costs were far lower, and they've been able to thrive. But many current Bay Area residents are being displaced from their homes by rising costs no matter how hard they work. That's why we are creating equitable housing opportunities.</p> <p>Success in life starts at home for all ages and all people. When we have safe, secure places to live, parents earn more, kids learn better, health and well-being improve, our communities are strengthened and our region has the building blocks for a thriving place to live.</p> |
| <p>Public safety, including gun and traffic violence.</p> | <p>Tensions are on the rise—whether they are racially motivated or the manifestation of our society's mental health issues, which are only underscored by the pandemic. No matter where we live or how we found ourselves in the Bay Area, having a safe, stable place to come home to is the foundation for our wellbeing and mental health.</p> <p>Safe, stable homes are the bedrock of strong communities. Quality schools, good jobs, safe neighborhoods—these all depend on housing.</p> |
| <p>Homelessness, whether it's concerns about the pervasiveness of tent cities or the fear of eviction.</p> | <p>Many of the cities in our region have offered new options for people to shelter in-place during the pandemic. By failing to locate new housing or to preserve homes that people from all walks of life can afford around transit and business corridors, we are undermining our region's success and recreating divisions that weaken our collective strength.</p> |

⁵ Fair Housing Communications Worksheet for Local Housing Planners; Association of Bay Area Governments, 2022

⁶ Listening Sessions conducted by D&A Communications; December 3, 2021 & December 4, 2021

| Community Concern | How to Reframe |
|--|---|
| <p>Mental health, including pandemic-related grief, burn-out and added stress.</p> | <p>No matter where we live or how we found ourselves in the Bay Area, having a safe, stable place to come home to is the foundation for our well-being and mental health; it's where we celebrate our good times and recover from everything else.</p> <p>We all thrive when we put people first—making sure that everyone in our region has a decent place to lay their heads at night. Whether you are a renter, homeowner or without a stable place, we know that a stable home anchors our health.</p> |
| <p>Economic insecurity, from choosing between paying debts or rent; families needing multiple jobs to earn a livable wage; and income inequality.</p> | <p>Some people in the Bay Area bought homes when costs were far lower, and they've been able to thrive. But many current Bay Area residents are being displaced from their homes by rising costs no matter how hard they work. That's why we are creating equitable housing opportunities.</p> <p>Success in life starts at home for all ages and all people. When we have safe, secure places to live, parents earn more, kids learn better, health and well-being improve, our communities are strengthened and our region has the building blocks for a thriving place to live.</p> |
| <p>Climate change-related events, such as wildfires and sea level rise.</p> | <p>Residents are being displaced across the Bay Area whether it's due to the rising cost of living or climate change-related events (e.g., the increasing frequency and length of fire season)—and once they're gone, many without the means may never come back. That's a direct threat to the diversity of our communities and everything we love about living here.</p> <p>The availability, affordability and accessibility of housing in the Bay Area will be in increasing demand, even as we face a severe shortage already. With climate change leading to more frequent, more severe natural disasters and other emergencies like COVID-19 reinforcing the need to stay close to our homes, we need a plan to ensure our health and well-being. Housing and community planning helps us address our climate goals.</p> |
| <p>Traffic, not only for commute times but traffic violence and getting around safely without a car.</p> | <p>We all thrive when we can live near our place of work, reducing the stress on our existing infrastructure as well as reducing the time, expense and fatigue of commuting. Less commuting can also leave more time for community, health and family.</p> |

| Community Concern | How to Reframe |
|--|---|
| <p>Jobs and Employment, including inability of employers to recruit or retain employees. Meanwhile, employees are facing disillusionment from companies and feeling disconnected from work.</p> | <p>The simple truth is that we haven't built enough homes to keep up with the demand or job growth [note: customize based on your jurisdiction's job data] over the last decade. This means we now have more people trying to find homes they can afford near transit, their jobs and good schools. The consequence of our inattention on this issue drives up costs for everyone and we simply cannot afford to ignore this issue anymore.</p> <p>For the thousands of small businesses struggling to stay afloat, to attract customers and skilled employees, making housing more affordable is critical.</p> |
| <p>Racial justice, including increased racial and religious tensions in the US and abroad.</p> | <p>People in the Bay Area value diversity. Yet, the lack of affordable housing disproportionately affects communities of color, the result of decades of policies that created structural inequality. We can't advance diversity and racial equity without providing equitable housing opportunities.</p> <p>We need to work together to build a Bay Area that moves us all forward. You can't separate racial justice from equitable housing opportunities. Generations of exclusionary policies have created an unjust housing system which impacts communities of color the most, whether through redlining, discrimination by housing lenders, or restrictive covenants. Strengthening those communities is how we move the whole Bay Area forward. And getting it right means being honest about how we got here, so we can take on the underlying problems. It means taking on the way that bigotry, racism and inequity are baked into the structure of how housing is developed and delivered in our communities.</p> |

Reframe

Research shows that without guidance, a number of negative disruptors will emerge in natural conversation. We need to move beyond negative disruptors by reminding residents that the outcome of the Housing Element update impacts the future of the community and that inaction is not an option. This strategy comes in handy when you are talking to people who believe that housing inequities are rooted in the bad choices individuals or families have made or when people believe that changes to land use or housing policy will have a negative economic impact on them personally or their whole community.

It's critical that we demonstrate that the negative consequences of not prioritizing housing as an issue are borne by all of us, not just the people struggling to find affordable housing.

One promising strategy to demonstrate how housing issues impact the entire community involves reframing the conversation to focus on how we need to act before we lose opportunities for our children or the next generation, diversity and small businesses.

People are used to thinking about what they might lose if their community has more housing opportunities, but they don't always think about what they can lose if they don't. Reframing this issue highlights the consequences of passive behavior, and triggers loss aversion if we do not address equitable housing opportunities. In reframing the conversation, it's also important to communicate that not everyone will get everything they want while explaining what is doable. Examples of community concerns and how to address them include:

| Community Concern | How to Reframe |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Character of the Neighborhood | Remind residents that participating in the Housing Element allows them to have a say in their community's future. While few will get exactly what they want, their input helps maintain the neighborhood's character. |
| Traffic | Emphasize the benefits of living near our place of work, reducing the stress on our existing infrastructure and reducing the time and expense of commuting. Less commuting can also leave more time for local shopping, building community, health and family. |
| Losing Parking | Highlight the importance of housing that is situated near transit. Not only does it help to eliminate traffic, but it also eliminates greenhouse gasses, making our community cleaner and more healthy. |
| Losing Green Spaces | Access to green spaces is important to the health and character of every neighborhood. Existing green spaces can be preserved and new green spaces can be worked into new housing development (e.g., rooftop gardens, atriums, community gardens). |

| Community Concern | How to Reframe |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Demographic Changes | It's important to focus on the advantages and benefits of having a wide swath of housing choices in one's community. Our diversity is one of the greatest strengths of the Bay Area. It's an important part of how we build vibrant communities, how we create jobs and how we have made this such a special place to live. Planning for housing is a chance for us to continue to be leaders while increasing the resilience of our community and advancing equity and opportunity for all. |
| Property Value Decreases | The cost of living in the Bay Area is the highest in the country. That makes it harder for people to save for their future, to afford college and to retire. We all thrive when Bay Area residents have strong pathways to building wealth, whether they are renters or homeowners. But with the current housing market, residents and small businesses are being displaced all over the Bay Area—and once they're gone, they may never come back. |
| Housing Density | Ensuring that a diverse mix of homes is available at all price points across our region is one of the smartest investments we can make for our children. This investment in our region pays dividends that our region desperately needs in times like this—it strengthens our resources for wellness, it improves our competitive advantage in a national economy that is rapidly changing, and it helps us end the long legacy of disinvestment in neighborhoods that we can no longer afford to leave behind. |
| Access to Transportation | By failing to locate new housing or to preserve existing homes that all people can afford around transit and business corridors, we are undermining our region's success and recreating divisions that weaken our collective strength. Centering housing around transit also helps reduce traffic, mitigating congestion and curbing air pollution. |



Plan Bay Area Public Meeting in Concord. Photo Copyright Noah Berger

In addition to speaking to specific concerns while reframing the conversation, you can continue to elevate and uplift the critical role of the Housing Element process in our ability to collectively plan for our future.

Do Say

As we look ahead, one thing is certain: if we do not plan today for the housing needs of the people in our communities—the people that make this region what it is—we will lose what we value about living here.

Don't Say

We must provide access to affordable housing for everyone in the Bay Area no matter what.

If housing is a “predictor” of outcomes, we need to highlight the consequences of ignoring the housing needs of communities and the benefits of having diverse communities. Having a diversity of perspectives leads to

better decision making, more productivity, empathy and cohesion while allowing us to think and act locally.

Do Say

Diversity has always been a part of what makes the Bay Area special, vibrant and successful. The diversity of cultures, art, restaurants, outdoor activities and parks and neighborhoods is what makes the Bay Area like nowhere else in California.

Protecting that legacy and building a better future for our children means strengthening our Bay Area community. We need to work together to build a Bay Area that moves us all forward.

Don't Say

We need to ensure that we address the continuing housing crisis and provide homes for all who need them.

Avoid Challenging Different Points of View and Focus on the Facts

Research shows⁷ that attempts to ‘myth bust’ or counter claims can often further entrench false information. Instead, this guidance demonstrates how to advance the conversation by identifying the common misperceptions and unproductive narratives and setting the stage early to avoid them. This can decrease the impact of misinformation by undermining the logic, legitimacy or veracity of these narratives. Messages that appear most critical here include challenging the need to “be lucky” to afford housing here, that housing is a personal budgeting/finance issue rather than a systemic issue, and that the issue is too big or burdensome for individuals or groups to affect change.

Focusing the issue in terms of individual communities and then breaking it down into small manageable ideas, such as having lower-income employees live in the communities in which they work, allows for streamlined, easily digestible messaging.

Do Say

You shouldn't have to be “lucky” to find a safe, clean and affordable place to live in the Bay Area. Seniors shouldn't have to be “lucky” that they bought their homes early enough to benefit from their investments nor should families be crammed into studios made for one person, simply because they are not “lucky enough” to find rental homes that meet their needs.

When our housing system operates better, we don't leave the survival of so many people to “luck” or chance. Our systems should help us plan for and provide the critical things that people need to live, work and thrive.

Don't Say

We need to stop gentrification.

Do Say

Many people don't realize that having employees live far away from their workplaces contributes to traffic and air pollution. If we have enough housing opportunities near our places of work, traffic will be reduced.

Don't Say

It's important that we have lower income individuals live close to their workplace.

Avoid the Term “Housing Crisis”

NPH has [found in its research](#)⁸ that people strongly agree there is an issue surrounding access to affordable and safe housing, but they rarely agree on the solution. Calling this issue a “housing crisis” feeds into feelings of entrenchment and also sounds blameless. There has been success in reframing it as an issue of creating “equitable housing opportunities.” An example of how to frame this would be:

The Bay Area is at its best when people from all backgrounds can start a life here, raise a family here and thrive here. Many of us who grew up here, or who came here seeking a better life, have been able to build something meaningful. Let's not close that door of opportunity to our neighbors who are struggling. Let's not slam it shut to the next generation of Bay Area residents. Creating that opportunity and building the future they deserve depends on having a decent place to live.

Voters hold deeply contradictory feelings and values about housing. Messaging research also shows that if pushed, community members may dig in deeper to defend their opposing views rather than find common ground. Instead of convincing residents to drop an opposing viewpoint, it's important to identify existing views residents hold that align with what you're trying to articulate, using communications and engagement strategies that help deepen community commitments. For example, it's possible for a resident to believe we should build more affordable homes while opposing a proposed housing development. To get buy-in, it's important to strengthen belief in the first view, rather than trying to change the second view.

⁷ Shift the Bay Initiative. Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California, 2019 - 2020. A collection of resources from the initiative.

⁸ Shift the Bay Initiative. Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California, 2019 - 2020. A collection of resources from the initiative.

Do Say

Wherever we look to lift our community, having a safe place to call home is important. Our whole community is at its best when everyone has good, safe and equitable housing opportunities.

There is no “us” and them”—we all need housing to live happy and safe lives. The goal with framing this issue as one of a lack of “equitable housing opportunities” is to move away from housing as something that is provided by one group for another. Instead, talking about safe and accessible housing as a value and strength of a community highlights it as something to benefit everyone.

Don't Say

We must address the continued housing crisis by providing access to safe and affordable housing for everyone in the Bay Area.



Plan Bay Area Outreach @ Fremont Photos Copyright Noah Berger / 2017

THE WHAT AND WHY OF AFFH



Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) is one of the more recent additions to the Housing Element update process and focuses on overcoming patterns of segregation and fostering inclusive communities.

While RHNA has always focused on increasing housing access to those who need it, the new AFFH requirement makes this more explicit.

AFFH is a provision of the 1968 federal Fair Housing Act requiring all recipients of federal housing funds, including the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to take steps to proactively address segregation in programs and activities related to housing and community development. In 2018, the California legislature included this requirement in state law via AB 686. This legislation is being implemented as jurisdictions update their Housing Elements. There is still much work to be done to understand the background and AFFH implementation in the Bay Area.

People who live in less economically advantaged neighborhoods are more likely to live in substandard housing, attend lower quality schools, have less access to neighborhood amenities and face higher rates of unemployment, crime and health issues. Often, racially concentrated neighborhoods are the direct result of decades of housing and racial discrimination that still deeply affects historically excluded communities. Decades of redlining still impact land use policies, where the historic and present racial segregation correlates directly to a differing quality of life in communities (i.e., homes placed near industrial zones and freeways vs. those close to green spaces). The new AFFH requirement addresses this and works toward undoing past discriminatory practices, allowing for equitable housing solutions.

For strategies on how to tackle tough issues relating to AFFH, see page 15. More information and additional resources are on the [RHTA website](#).

Communications Strategies

All the tips and techniques discussed above also apply to communications around AFFH. We've called out the strategies below to help talk more specifically about systemic segregation.

Do Say

It's not enough to just do no harm, but we should actively work to undo past discriminatory practices in housing policy. While this process is required by law, this is an opportunity for the community to participate in its own future planning.

Don't Say

This is a requirement by law.

Just the Facts

Anchor your communications on the State of California's [regulations \(AB 686\) and AFFH guidelines](#). This strategy is useful for people who want to know how the state is talking about this issue and what they are required to do to meet the requirement.

Economic Opportunity

When talking about housing, focus on the economic costs to all of us maintaining systemic segregation. This strategy comes in handy when talking to people who believe housing inequities are rooted in the bad choices individuals or families have made, or when people believe that changes to land use or housing policy will have a negative economic impact on them personally or the city as a whole.

Racial Equity

Explain the unjust consequences of maintaining systems of racial segregation and how cities can deepen their commitment to fairness. It is useful for people who see housing as a primary driver of racial inequity and are concerned about the ripple effects of disparate outcomes, such as poor health and achievements in education.

D&A conducted focus groups with numerous Bay Area housing-focused community organizations to better understand needed conversations and difficult topics surrounding planning for housing. These sessions brought

much-needed context, insight and clarity to the above communication strategies and were integral to their creation. More information around these focus groups can be found in Appendix C.

Conclusion

Community engagement is essential to building a future where all have the opportunity to live and thrive in the Bay Area. And good community engagement starts with good communications. This guide shares a research-based communications framework to help Bay Area policymakers and local government staff

hold productive conversations with residents about planning for housing. This collection of data points, best practices and suggested language is meant to be customized to fit the needs of each jurisdiction. We hope this guide will help staff and elected officials throughout the region work with their residents to envision how their communities can grow and develop for the benefit of all their current and future neighbors.

More resources can be found on the [Regional Housing Technical Assistance](#) website.



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APPENDIX A — STATE LEGISLATION DRIVING COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

When talking to the community about the Housing Element, it's important to recognize the legislation in place to guide the process. While the process has a history of more than 50 years, this is the first time California has imposed significant consequences for non-compliance with state laws.

Explained: Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA)

Local governments are critical in developing equitable housing solutions for all residents, regardless of income. In 1969, California mandated that all cities, towns and counties must plan for the housing needs of their residents via the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) process. This involves distributing a state-defined number of homes that the Bay Area has to plan for—at all income levels—in order to ensure that residents of all backgrounds and incomes are able to find homes. ABAG conducts this process every eight years as required by California state law.

Since ABAG's adoption of the [Final Regional Housing Needs Allocation \(RHNA\) Plan: San Francisco Bay Area, 2023-2031](#) in late 2021 and state Housing and Community Development Department (HCD)'s certification of the ABAG RHNA Plan, each local government in the Bay Area must now update the Housing Element of its general plan and associated zoning to demonstrate how it meets the RHNA requirements. Housing Element updates are due to HCD by January 31, 2023. For more information, please see [ABAG's RHNA website](#).

Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing, or AFFH for short, (more on page 24) is a recent addition to Housing Element and RHNA requirements. AFFH focuses on overcoming patterns of segregation and fostering inclusive communities. While RHNA has always focused

on planning for housing at all income levels, the new AFFH requirement makes this a more explicit requirement of the RHNA process and local Housing Element updates. [Visit the AFFH webpage for more resources.](#)

Recent Legislation Overview

AB 686 (2018): Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) is a provision of the 1968 federal Fair Housing Act requiring all recipients of federal housing funds to take steps to address segregation in programs and activities related to housing and community development. In 2018, the California legislature passed this into state law via Assembly Bill 686, which enshrines prior federal AFFH regulations into California law. This reinforces the obligation of California jurisdictions to actively overcome patterns of segregation and foster inclusive communities.

AB 215 (2021): Assembly Bill 215, which was signed into law September 29, 2021, requires the first draft of a housing element to be made available for public comment for at least 30 days. Any public comments must be incorporated into the draft(s) within at least 10 additional business days before submitting it to HCD. It also requires a local government to post any subsequent draft revision on the website and to email a link to the draft revision to individuals and organizations that have requested notices relating to the local government's housing element. HCD's review and report back on a draft element or draft amendment must occur within 90 days of the draft's receipt or within 60 days of its receipt in the case of a draft amendment.

If the housing element or housing element amendment does not substantially comply, or if the local government has taken action or failed to act in violation of the law, HCD will notify the local government, and the Attorney General's office, that the local government is in violation.

Existing law authorizes the Attorney General to bring suit for a violation of those provisions.¹

Additional information about these pieces of legislation are [available online](#).

¹ [AB-215 Planning and Zoning Law: housing element: violations.](#)

APPENDIX B — SAMPLE MEETING TEMPLATE

| OPENING: This is your chance to make your audience feel like they are in the right place. Connect with their values and make sure your goals are clear. | |
|--|---|
| Sample Communications Template | Rationale and Reference |
| <p>Thank you for joining us! We are here as part of our housing planning, which is a regular process to review, assess and plan for the future of our communities. Specifically, to make sure that we're developing equitable housing solutions for all residents—no matter their race, class or income. We need your input to develop a pathway for strong, thriving and equitable communities to ensure that residents have a place to call home.</p> | <p>Establish goals that can help to reframe and/or counter misconceptions early. Present the facts. (See more research and guidance for these strategies on page 14 of this guide.)</p> |
| <p>We're all here for the same reason: to preserve what we love and strengthen where we have weaknesses. We want to live, work, play and raise our families here. We cherish the unique community and culture that makes the Bay Area diverse and special. Housing is a key determinant in whether or not people have the resources to live healthy lives and achieve their full potential.</p> <p>Our task today is to listen, learn, collect information and help set a pathway for the future. We aim to meet our community's housing needs in a way that creates a stronger, more vibrant and equitable future for our city.</p> <p>To start the conversation, we want to review together what we want to protect, preserve and/or strengthen about our community.</p> | <p>Provide the "why" before the "how." (See more on page 8.)</p> |

ENGAGEMENT EXERCISE #1: Effective community conversations occur when participants understand they have a personal stake. Use this exercise to get your audience actively participating so they understand this is a shared effort.

| Sample Script | Rationale and Reference |
|--|--|
| <p>Let's start by hearing from you. What is it that you love about your community?</p> <p>Sample exercise format: Develop interactive exercise with a map, stickers, pins, and a worksheet that people can use to visualize their community and add their input.</p> <p>Ways to facilitate in-person and/or in virtual environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person: Have constituents participate on a physical board in the meeting space with post-it notes, or share verbally • In-person OR virtually: Use a program that allows participants to text messages that appear on the presentation screen. • Virtually: Interactive white boards | <p>Engage and invite feedback and participation by positioning the housing element update as a way to create solutions. (See more on page 9.)</p> |
| <p>Thank you for sharing these priorities. There's a clear picture here of how we share a love for our neighborhoods and a desire to strengthen them.</p> <p>We can also start to understand how planning for housing influences and impacts all areas of a community. No matter where you look—from COVID response and public health to schools; from small businesses to traffic; from racial justice to environmental resilience—housing is at the root of our ability to respond.</p> <p>Today, we're hearing residents focus on a few key priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Example: We heard a number of people identify traffic as a top concern. No one likes traffic—the wasted time, the pollution, the congestion. It really underscores how important this planning process is, as we know that we all thrive when more of us live near our place of work. Planning adequate housing will reduce the stress on our existing infrastructure as well as the time and expense of commuting. Less commuting also leaves more time for community, health and family. • Example: We heard a lot about jobs and small businesses, too. The simple truth is that there aren't enough homes to keep up with the demand. This drives up costs for everyone, including our favorite small businesses and restaurants that aren't able to find local workers. We need to ensure that everyone has the economic opportunity to grow. | <p>Affirm shared values and positioning the housing element as a way to create solutions. (See more on page 9.)</p> <p>Attach and Amplify housing's role and the goals of this meeting to the needs of the community. Two examples are provided here and you can find many more throughout the guide. (See pages 17-21.)</p> |

ENGAGEMENT EXERCISE #2: Another technique for community engagement is to slow down the conversation through stories and/or surprises. Use this exercise to invite participants to digest the implications of the Housing Element in a personal way while identifying the role of collaborative planning.

| Sample Script | Rationale and Reference |
|--|--|
| <p>We've talked about what we love about our communities. Now let's talk about housing specifically.</p> <p>Sample Exercise Format:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First question: What does home mean to you? • Second question, delivered only after the first reflection: What would it mean for housing to be equitable? <p>Ways to facilitate in-person and/or in virtual environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person: Have constituents participate on a physical board in the meeting space, or orally • In-person OR virtually: Program that allows participants to text messages that appear on the presentation screen. • Virtually: interactive white board | <p>Slow down the conversation and encourage deliberate thinking with a surprising reveal. (See more on page 10.)</p> <p>Note: In focus groups, respondents surprised themselves when they realized they had dramatically different answers to the two questions.</p> |
| <p>We're here today to determine how to make sure that our ideas of home become an accessible option for all community members, especially historically excluded-residents.</p> <p>Generations of exclusionary policies have created an unjust housing system which impacts communities of color the most, whether through redlining, discrimination by housing lenders or restrictive covenants. Strengthening these communities is how we move the whole Bay Area forward. And getting it right means being honest about how we got here, so we can take on the underlying issues.</p> <p>One part of planning for housing is a requirement to "Affirmatively Further Fair Housing" to make sure we're actively addressing historic wrongs. In other words: it's not enough to just do no harm, we also have to actively work to undo past discriminatory practices in housing policy.</p> | <p>Center equity and systems change. (See more on page 13.)</p> <p>Understand the regulations and address the "what and why." (See more on pages 23-24.)</p> |

CLOSING: This is an opportunity to demonstrate listening, reinforce shared goals and affirm how housing solutions create a stronger future for our communities.

| Sample Script | Rationale and Reference |
|--|--|
| <p>Thank you all for being here. In closing, we want to reflect on some of the themes heard tonight...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Example: How many of you referenced your children or the next generation? We heard your desire to pass on the best Bay Area to the next generation. That’s what we’re here for as well. • Example: Many of you spoke about your own experiences about moving here and what it took to make sure you had the stability you needed. We want to set policies that help residents just like you—who work hard, have family here and love this area—get the same opportunities. | <p>Research-informed best messaging, uplifting attachment strategies and reframing negative disruptors. (See more on pages 12-27.)</p> |

CLOSING: This is an opportunity to demonstrate listening, reinforce shared goals and affirm how housing solutions create a stronger future for our communities.

APPENDIX C — AFFH LISTENING SESSIONS

During listening sessions hosted by D&A (December 2021) with representatives from multiple Bay Area community-based organizations (CBOs), participants had very different reactions to the question what does “home” mean to you versus what does “fair housing” signify. To many, home equals security and peace of mind. Meanwhile, the idea of “fair housing” brought participants to a more policy-driven space. Participants recognized that fair housing goes beyond the regulations for AFFH, with individuals noting that the concept evokes equal availability regardless of race or ethnicity, both opening doors to new areas, and investing in historically disinvested communities. Some stated that AFFH raises questions surrounding the nature of the word “fair.”

We asked participants to share what the term fair housing brings to mind for them via a virtual whiteboard exercise, and the ideas that got the most agreement included:

- It’s important that people have a range of housing choices that are not constrained by discrimination or cost.
- Fair housing is critical to removing barriers to opportunity and correcting historical injustice.
- Housing policies should protect residents against discrimination and actively work to dismantle redlining and other inequitable practices.

Participants identified the government's role in creating equitable housing opportunities as:

- Investing and creating policies that further the full breadth of their policy goals (e.g. both/and approach to fair housing).
- Enforcing strong affordability mandates.
- Providing funding.
- Helping citizens stay informed.
- De-commodifying housing and protecting housing from the speculative market.

However, participants recognized that it isn’t just the government’s job to identify, maintain and advocate for affordable housing. Participants felt that residents, CBOs, impacted communities, developers and average citizens should be involved in creating equitable housing opportunities as well. There was much discussion around the notion of home and housing being deeply rooted in stability and security, so it is everyone’s job to ensure that housing is affordable. While participants recognize that it isn't just the government's job to identify, maintain, and advocate for affordable housing, research¹ does show that there is a strong sense from Bay Area residents that the government is the chief responsible party.

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1 Strategic Assessment: Strengthening Public Support for Renters & Affordable Housing in the San Francisco Bay Area, TheCaseMade. (2019-20)