

Addressing Community Concerns about Affordable Housing

At some point in the process you will, no doubt, be confronted with public opposition. This section will help you approach community concerns, work with fear, identify common obstacles, and respond to both irrational and justifiable concerns.

Understanding the community's vision

Most communities in Massachusetts have a master plan with a housing section, or a more comprehensive housing plan in the form of a housing needs analysis or housing production plan (HPP). These plans can provide a useful benchmark for determining whether a particular proposal is appropriate for the community based on data and past public processes.

Yet things change and plans should be seen as flexible. Affordable housing proponents should strive to respect past planning processes, while acknowledging current concerns. This balance is important to promoting efficiency and fairness in local government.

Typical community concerns

The following section outlines a number of typical community concerns that must be addressed in order to build support for your initiative.

Will the development or initiative promote neighborhood safety and security?

Crime and traffic are two common public safety concerns residents attach to new affordable housing initiatives. Fear of crime can be a major factor stimulating opposition. While there are proven ways to design buildings to greatly reduce the potential for crime, the underlying concerns generally reflect assumptions people hold about people who need access to affordable homes. Images of crime-ridden neighborhoods are common in popular culture. Modern affordable housing developments rarely, if ever, conform to these stereotypes. Yet housing advocates and local officials should recognize that concerns about crime are a powerful subtext in affordable housing debates. Proactive local leadership can bring these concerns out into the open so they can be discussed and addressed.

Neighborhood opposition to affordable housing (and other development projects) is also often driven by concerns about increased traffic. Typically, local agency staff will assess the project's impacts on traffic flows and develop measures to accommodate additional traffic. In many cases, however, reducing congestion is not the primary traffic concern. Issues such as speeding, bicycle and pedestrian safety, and noise may rank as more serious concerns. In recent years, the traffic engineering profession has developed innovative "traffic calming" strategies to address the neighborhood impacts of traffic.

Does the project fit within the neighborhood context?

People are emotionally attached to their neighborhoods, which is generally a good thing. In many instances, the prospect that the neighborhood may change is enough to spark opposition to new development. This unease concerning change is not limited to affordable housing developments, though these can intensify the level of neighborhood anxiety.

Density and housing design capture many of the concerns about whether a given project will fit in a neighborhood. The issue of who will live in the proposed housing often touches upon the opposite concerns about housing blight and gentrification.

Will the project impact the community financially in terms of services and taxes?

In preliminary meetings about affordable housing developments, residents and officials often raise concerns about threats to municipal service capacity (e.g., schools, water, sewer, and emergency services). People fear that taxes generated by affordable housing will not offset the increased demand for town services. Recent studies (**see call out box**) have explored concerns that new residential construction creates demand for public services in excess of the benefits of increased housing opportunities for town residents. These concerns, studies have found, disappeared after developments were built and occupied.

Financial Impacts on Town Services

Numerous related studies have found that fiscal impacts vary depending on various factors, including the extent to which the development includes market-rate housing, the population served, local housing values, local school capacity, and the timeframe used for the analysis. They indicate that concerns about impacts on local services are often unwarranted and that mixed-income developments often have a positive fiscal impact (tax revenues exceed impact on municipal services), in part because many developments are responsible for their own road maintenance, plowing, and trash collection.

To read a recent study done by the consulting firm RKG of the impacts of more housing development on the Town of Westford, [click here](#).

Fiscal impacts of affordable housing vary depending on the extent to which a development includes market-rate housing, the population it serves, local housing values, local school capacity, and the methodology used to measure impact. Concerns about impacts on local services are often unwarranted and, in fact, mixed-income developments often have a positive fiscal impact (tax revenues exceed impact on municipal services), in part because many developments are responsible for their own road maintenance, plowing, and trash collection. Increased education costs are attributable to the unique circumstances of a particular project, rather than more general factors (i.e., an increase in the number of families with children). It should not be assumed, therefore, that education costs will negatively impact a community. In many instances, communities have a declining or flat school enrollment and have capacity for additional students without raising costs.

Is there a need?

This is a not uncommon question, especially when the market for homeownership is down. Financing for virtually all affordable housing developments requires a market feasibility assessment performed in accordance with professional standards. These studies should be commissioned well before a specific proposal becomes public. Read it critically and understand what it says about the nature of need. Many communities engage in a process of understanding the housing needs of the community in advance of specific proposals. The [Assessing Local Needs](#) section of the toolbox provides a complete overview of this process.

Common obstacles

Because affordable housing initiatives commonly trigger conflict, it is important to consider obstacles, as well as meaningful responses, in advance. This not only helps you understand how vulnerable your proposal is to resistance but also prepares you to respond unemotionally. Along with the following obstacles that commonly surface with affordable-housing initiatives, it could be helpful to review the messaging data and recommendations compiled by [Enterprise and FrameWorks Institute](#).

We don't know the new neighbors (we don't know anyone who would use this housing). Many citizens and communities see homeownership and housing for seniors as worthy goals but tend to marginalize non-elderly renters.

Possible response:

Use this as an opportunity to educate the general public on the demographics of your community. What percentage of your households are non-elderly renter households? How much of their income do they spend on rent? Affordable rental housing is especially important for retaining the young adults whose

educations communities have invested in. Furthermore, most communities rely on workers willing to do jobs that don't allow for homeownership.

We paid market rate for our homes. Many believe that fairness means not “changing the rules.” Some residents are moved by themes relating to fairness and are reluctant to grant anyone breaks that they did not get themselves.

Possible response:

Local zoning restrictions and tight housing markets make modest starter homes impossible to build in most communities. Having limited low, moderate and middle income housing puts pressure on the local economy, making it challenging for employers to retain high quality staff. It means municipal employees like teachers, coaches and support staff often struggle to live locally. Having diverse housing options strengthens our communities by allowing the people who support the community to also live there.

This will hurt our property values. It is a common assumption that affordable homes, even in small numbers, will negatively impact surrounding property values.

Possible response:

Well-designed and managed affordable housing often *increases* property values, particularly if created in an underutilized or empty building. Additionally, many multi-family developments are also mixed-income, balancing any possible market impacts. Several studies have considered the possible impacts of multi-family and affordable housing developments on property values, including [this one](#) by the Center for Housing Policy.

It won't make a difference. Many view lack of housing as symptomatic of other compelling problems, such as lack of education and health care or economic stagnation. Some believe that efforts to improve housing conditions are futile in the face of overwhelming political and economic forces.

Possible response

Secure and affordable housing is central to improving outcomes in educational attainment, health care and economic security. Once a family or individual has home stability, attention and resources can be invested in other areas to improve the long-term outcomes of the household.

We don't need it. Many community residents may not know people who struggle to pay for housing or understand how high home prices negatively impact the local economy. Business leaders are often not involved in addressing concerns with restrictive zoning policies and the local housing market.

Possible response:

This is another opportunity to educate folks about community demographics, helping people to understand the local need for diverse housing options. And recruiting employers who are sensitive to the cost of housing can help make your case to the broader community. One town had a banker on the Municipal Affordable Housing Trust who spoke often and eloquently about wanting housing in town that her employees could afford to live in.

Not in my backyard. Finally, many are strongly influenced by negative images of traditional public housing. They fear irresponsible tenants, unwanted density, unattractive buildings, and reduced home values.

Possible response:

Point to other developments with affordable homes in the community, or similar communities, that are well designed and managed. Perhaps schedule a tour of these developments with key decision makers in your community. Compare home values in neighborhoods near affordable housing and those further away, taking into account home sizes and amenities.

Working with fear

When you look deeply (or sometimes not so deeply) behind most resistance, you will find fear: fear of change, fear of the unknown, fear of losing something valuable, or fear of creating insecurity. The following provides some thoughts for working with fear effectively in building support for affordable housing.

The role of fear. You will undoubtedly find that a significant amount of public opposition to affordable housing is based on misperceptions and exaggerated fears about its impact on communities. Fear draws on racial and class prejudice. Fear can spread like a virus and unite an otherwise disjointed neighborhood against a common enemy.

How fears are expressed. Fears related to affordable housing can be expressed in a variety of ways and are sometimes well disguised. Personal security fears can be communicated as concerns about operating procedures or increased traffic, decreased parking, and infrastructure problems. Some opposition leaders deliberately stir up fear in flyers and statements at community meetings to organize opposition. The media can inadvertently fuel and multiply fears by perpetuating rumors and misunderstandings. Sophisticated opponents can even come across as kind and compassionate as they describe neighborhoods as unsafe or unsuitable for the target clients.

Guidelines for Overcoming Fear

There are several useful strategies for combating a community's fears about the perceived negative impacts of affordable housing.

- Educate thoughtfully.
- Humanize the target of others' fear.
- Enlist support from trusted authorities.
- Build relationships with the skeptics.
- Take action when necessary.

These require time and resources, as well as patience, preparation, and self-discipline. As a vocal proponent of the "object of fear," you may be treated like an enemy, and it's hard not to take a defensive—or even an offensive—stance. Opponents' allegations are likely to be seen as true, while developers' statements, even with supporting facts, are almost always treated with suspicion.