



**Bay Area “Shift the Narrative”
Research Findings & Community
Engagement Efforts**

In service of efforts to develop research-driven messaging, materials, and trainings that will support advocates in executing meaningful community engagement and participating in the Housing Elements updates process, **NPH has developed the attached research memo to serve as a summary explainer guide of the robust research program conducted through the Shift the Bay initiative 2019 - 2021.**

This document aims to share what we learned about Bay Area voter and resident sentiments and values around housing during our program and specifically what that can mean for local housing planning during the Housing Elements process. It's designed to unpack and distill our regional research findings into practical advice for local community engagement and conversation.

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As local elected officials respond to RHNA numbers and adopt their Housing Elements, research-driven resources on the regional response and dialogue around housing can offer a critical tool to help advocates develop and refine public engagement and outreach programs and effectively mobilize support for housing solutions.

THE RESEARCH PROGRAM

The [Bay Area Shift the Bay Initiative](#) conducted a robust discovery and research program (2019-20) to understand, explore, and define the dominant narratives on housing around the Bay Area. This research has taken a tactical approach to unearth not just expressed attitudes, but also the values and beliefs underlying these positions. **This research is designed to reveal common values, themes, and opportunities to identify synergy around all-community support and progress for Bay Area housing.** In 2021, tracking polling was conducted to continue to monitor, evaluate, and interpret voter perceptions and values as well as reception to specific messages and policy proposals.

This body of research can offer critical insight and context to support advocates' goals to reach and engage residents around housing as part of the Housing Elements process, as well as motivate and persuade decision makers to take action. Notable details about the Initiative's research program and subsequent [playbook](#) include:

Diverse, collaborative relationships deepened our understanding of Bay Area residents' perspectives and opportunities to advance meaningful dialogue.

- Our research program and overall initiative approach was shaped by a diverse table of organizations from around the Bay Area -- from Sonoma to Santa Clara, From San Mateo to Contra Costa Counties -- and spanning multiple issue areas, to consider and incorporate the housing experience beyond housing advocacy perspectives. (See appendix for list of table members.)

- The initiative developed collaborative partnerships with a number of other research programs -- including the CZI-led statewide narrative learning project and the national narrative project led by Policy Link, Race Forward, and Center for Community Change -- and deepened our engagement by embedding consultants with multi-initiative expertise and existing research (Dr Tiffany Manuel, The CaseMade; Anat Shenker-Osorio, The Race Class Initiative.)

Our discovery and research program ensured broad, diverse exploration of the full Bay Area experience.

- Our focus groups and values-based polling were carefully conducted to evaluate public opinion around the Bay Area, with particular attention to representation in the suburbs as well as racial, income, home status, and family status representation.



- Our field survey and lay of the land, provided through survey and interview of our table members (see appendix for list) included North Bay, East Bay, South Bay, the Peninsula, and San Francisco.
- Our research review included polling from the 9-county Bay Area in English, Spanish, and Mandarin.

Our research program revealed current public sentiment, as well as unearthed the underlying values, beliefs, concerns, and fears beneath those attitudes to create new pathways forward for dialogue and engagement.

- Our discovery and research program identified, named, and defined existing dominant narratives around housing in the Bay Area.
- Our regional research program was designed to deeply and thoughtfully build an understanding of current values, beliefs, and desires around housing among Bay Area residents.
- Our research and [playbook](#) were developed to deepen our understanding of where people are and the motivations behind specific questions or comments they might make. Our research and strategic recommendations support the ability to unpack what’s behind initial questions and comments, so we can truly engage and understand one another.



KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS + IMPLICATIONS FOR BAY AREA COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

If we had to sum up our research findings on Bay Area residents' relationship to, values on, and underlying beliefs about housing issues in the Bay Area, one word would likely be "complex." **If we had to summarize what our research recommends, that word would be "resonance."** That is to say: We've learned that we in the Bay Area don't have to work as hard as in many parts of the country to create sympathy or educate about how bad our housing issues are. Bay Area residents already know this, as demonstrated in how viral the conversation about housing emerges in focus groups; how quickly respondents name housing and homelessness as Bay Area top challenges in polling; and how deeply concerned they are about the issue.¹ The question for us becomes: how do we help them see their stake in helping us to mobilize solutions to this issue?

Our research also unveils our challenge: **That while Bay Area constituents agree that this is a top issue and care deeply about doing something about it, they aren't initially willing to "give something up" for it — whether time, money, or space — based on how they currently view and understand housing as an issue**, in part because of their cynicism that those efforts would ultimately solve the problem. Our task is to help them see a real pathway where we can effect this issue successfully.

This is why our research experts and strategists identified what is traditionally called the "persuadables" as, instead, the "bystanders." In other words: **We don't need to persuade these community members that housing issues matter, we have to focus on telling a solutions story that they see themselves in and understand how it benefits themselves and their communities.**

For community engagement meetings like the Housing Elements process, this is particularly important, given how important community input is to communicating community needs and shaping our local jurisdictions' future for housing. Unpacking and applying these research findings can be the difference

¹ 83% concerned about low-income and disadvantaged families able to find an affordable place to live, EMC Research, June 2021.



The Critical Role of Research in Creating Meaningful Messaging for Effective Community Engagement

Several years ago, [the show "Silicon Valley" humorously highlighted why research is so important](#), showing how one of the characters came to realize the importance of public opinion on his product versus insider feedback.

This point was further emphasized by Shelterforce's Miriam Axel-Lute, who [last year wrote](#):

When I attended a presentation at a Facing Race conference on the Race Class Narrative research in 2018, one of the presenters told those assembled, "You are not the base." I remember the silence and uncomfortable shifting in the room. We all seemed to be thinking "Who are we then?"

The answer: People who had come to a conference on race and sought out a session on messaging were mostly people likely to be *using* racial justice messaging, running campaigns, doing advocacy, or organizing. The base encompasses people in the general public receptive to a certain message and likely to support it; advocates and organizers, the people who live and breathe a given topic, are their own subcategory. They cannot and should not assume that messages that they respond well to are necessarily going to resonate with others, even a majority of the base.

Research is critical as it helps us get outside our own minds and bubbles, to learn truths AND unlearn misperceptions of the people we are trying to reach, motivate, engage, and inspire to action.

We offer this important note because some of the research findings may seem counter or contradictory to your own personal experiences. But remember: You are not the base!

between a community session overpowered by a small number of loud, motivated NIMBYS and one where we've successfully invited, engaged, and mobilized a diverse representation of community voices spanning all walks of life and experiences. It's the difference between residents feeling unheard and unmotivated to help develop and support necessary housing outcomes for our communities, versus one that guides a meaningful conversation where folks' voices are uplifted and they can easily draw connections between their goals and collective community.

It's also important when considering **how we motivate city staff and elected officials during the Housing Elements process to hear our voices, advance our proposals, and champion housing solutions.** While lawmakers and city staff have a distinct role in this process, these research findings and message recommendations apply equally to them as well. This research offers a roadmap to successfully share stories and perspectives during the Housing Elements process that other attendees can agree with, that grab city staff's attention, and lays out a common-sense, values-driven, achievable future.

One of the most important findings from our opinion research (and reiterated by practitioners' field experiences) is that voters hold deeply contradictory feelings and values on our issue. Messaging research also shows that we must be careful not to push people into a backfire (where they dig in deeper to defend their opposing views rather than their aligned views.) **Rather than try to convince someone to drop an opposing viewpoint on our housing policy solution proposals, we must look for existing views that align with our goals and utilize messaging and engagement strategies that help deepen community commitments to this shared vision.**

Core principles from the research-informed narrative strategies available in the "Seize the Narrative" Playbook² that can support this work include³:

- ▶ **Center Equity & Systems Change:** Center equity in all messaging and socialize new narratives that position equity as the pathway to achieving the vision we all share for our region. While research shows we must be careful in how we lift up the history of exclusionary and racist policies, we can and must be direct about the impacts on our BIPOC and low income neighbors today, and

the role of policies and systems to make change. **Critically, we must use active language that puts accountability on our policies and systems, rather than put the onus on impacted community members.**

- ▶ **Attach & Amplify:** Research shows that Bay Area residents are already attaching housing issues to other issues -- we need to make that a strength, rather than a challenge. Our messaging and engagement strategies must identify areas that community members care about and are motivated to protect, and then show how housing is related to this. **Housing as a foundational element to strong, vibrant, equitable communities is an important frame to advance this strategy, while linking to specific issues such as environmental justice, racial justice/diversity, schools, etc.**
- ▶ **Reframe:** Research shows that a number of negative disruptors will emerge in natural conversation if we don't guide the conversation towards a more holistic vision. 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 affordable housing. **Messages that appear most promising here include speaking to the need to act now so we don't lose opportunities for our children/the next generation, diversity, and small businesses.**
- ▶ **Counter:** This is not a 'tit-for-tat' strategy or recommendation for 'myth busting,' as research shows that this can often further entrench false information. Instead, this is about identifying the common misperceptions and unproductive narratives early, and setting the stage early. This can decrease the impact of misinformation and unproductive narrative by undermining their logic, legitimacy, or veracity. **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 systems issue, and that the issue is too big or burdensome to make traction on.**

² Dr Tiffany Manuel, TheCaseMade, 2020

³ Please note that there are additional narrative strategies provided in the Seize the Narrative Playbook that may be additionally useful. The above strategies are uplifted as most critical to anticipated audience engagement specifically in the Housing Elements process.

DETAILED RESEARCH FINDINGS:

1 The conversation about housing is viral:

We have some benefits in the Bay Area in that we don't have to get people to pay attention to this issue -- but **we do have to navigate carefully to ensure that the conversation leads to solutions, rather than gets disrupted or distracted.**

- **One very helpful starting point** is that residents are already deeply engaged in thinking about, talking about, and holding concern about Bay Area housing and affordable housing.
 - Homelessness and affordable housing were widely identified as top of mind issues across all focus group conversations⁴ as well as in open-ended polling questions⁵
 - Community members are eager to debate and discuss the issue of housing
 - Community members hold deep concern about housing⁶
- **However, it often evokes heated conversation that perpetuates an unhelpful, constant loop of unproductive conversation, punctuated by negative disruptors.**
 - Focus group conversations about housing did not naturally 'graduate' to solutions framing, but got stuck in loops of 'how bad is it' stories.
 - Negative disruptors included topics such as: drugs, crime, homelessness; high wages and compensation; and traffic congestion, to name just a few.
- **There are many issues that people attach to housing already.**
 - **Homelessness is a unique topic that requires special attention**
 - In most parts of the country, homelessness is seen as a mental health issue rather than a housing issue. Bay Area perspectives on this topic are unique and critical to understanding our region's understanding of and relationship with housing.
 - Specifically, homelessness for many Bay Area residents is 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 additional action on housing, as it is viewed as too entrenched.
 - **Bay Area high wages & compensation similarly seem to entrench the issue.**
 - People felt resigned to the high cost of housing.
 - People also had less sympathy for teachers, nurses, and other workers than in other parts of the state or country because they hold deep anger at the perceived high wages for public sector workers.
 - Talent retention was a less powerful motivator than quality of life and service loss aversion.
 - **Traffic is not just a conversation about traffic.**
 - Traffic was a proxy for population growth and change, and could be linked to other perceived issues of scarcity such as water.

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

⁵ Homelessness is by far the most-cited top-of-mind concern, with 49% of Bay Area voters mentioning it among the region's top three issues, followed by 'affordable housing' cited by 26%, 'cost of living' cited by 17%, housing crisis by 14%, poverty by 10%. (EMC Research, 2021)

⁶ 53% concerned about finding an affordable place to live for themselves; 83% concerned about low-income and disadvantaged families able to find an affordable place to live, EMC Research, June 2021.

2 Bay Area residents value diversity, though are less willing to confront our history of racism and inequities:

Anchoring equity and systems change in the conversation can introduce critical context, while ensuring that we use and demonstrate a racial equity lens on policy proposals can keep the conversation focused on what the impacts are today.

- **Bay Area residents value our region's diversity, but are often uneasy talking about race and politics.**
 - Focus group participants talked about their perception of the Bay Area as a diverse place. Diversity was brought up often as one of the reasons they love the area and as proof to show that the Bay Area is a "progressive" place. Many participants talked about wanting their children to grow up in this kind of progressive and accepting place.
 - This was echoed in open-ended polling questions, where "diversity" was a top cited "best thing about living in the Bay Area" at 21%. (Only the weather was a higher performer, at 39%)⁷
 - Yet, polling showed that residents, on average, were less willing to confront our region's history of racism and discrimination in policy than they were to consider a reparations-style policy frame. 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 on average leaned more strongly towards the first statement.⁸
 - In focus group settings -- which more closely replicate the setting of a community engagement session -- the uneasiness of speaking to race was true of all participants, Black, brown, and white.

3 Our research shows that Bay Area residents hold deeply embedded views that housing is personal, and that they hold complex and even conflicting viewpoints.

Our research suggests that we need to attach housing to existing issues that people already respond to and believe are solvable.

- Housing is personal, and people did not want to lose what they believe they worked hard for and/or "got lucky" to secure
 - Some of the underlying motivations can be traced back to 'loss aversion.' The feeling of loss is one of the most powerful emotions that can motivate or activate people on social issues. This is a very natural human response, and our research doesn't suggest trying to prevent or limit this from happening, but rather to reframe where the concept of loss might be: What we lose when we don't act, rather than what we lose when we do.
 - When people talked about affordable housing in our focus groups, they often talked about what they stand to lose if we create more housing – property values, parking, view of the park, etc.
 - Regardless of whether these are based in fact or not, **the feeling of loss is incredibly powerful and people will go to great lengths to avoid losing something** (even if that something is not something we particularly value).
 - Our research probed at what folks were afraid to lose if we didn't create more housing and embrace housing solutions, so we could put 'loss aversion' to work to motivate solutions rather than disrupt them.
 - Bay Area residents did not respond positively to messages around losing teachers, nurses, police officers, and others in the caring professions. This is different from

⁷ EMC Research, 2019

⁸ Respondents were shown two values statements and instructed to place themselves on a sliding scale that demonstrated which statement they felt more closely to. "Past discrimination against people of color should not affect..." was scored as 0 (zero) and "we need housing policy in the Bay Area that makes up for..." was scored as 100 (respondents were not shown these numbers.) When responses were aggregated, the average score was 42.13, demonstrating a sizable leaning towards the first statement. (EMC Research, 2021)

most parts of the country, and was tied to the entrenched feeling of high wages and compensation (see above.)

- Folks responded to housing solutions when they considered how it might prevent: children moving away, losing the unique “mom and pop” stores, frustration of falling behind economically and/or being able to prepare for retirement in this market.
- Respondents lack resonance to get from concern/agreement that we need to make progress to supporting actual, specific policy proposals.⁹
 - Research showed that sometimes this is owing to misinformation/confusion based on terminology and technical language. For example, 68% agree with policies that “make it easier to build new housing in transit and commercial areas” while only 37% agree with “building new higher density housing in my neighborhood.”¹⁰
 - Focus groups showed promise when shifting the conversation from housing to issues that the public does think are solvable and connecting them to housing.

4 Bay Area residents are willing to name a responsible party - but we have some work to do to get them there in a productive way.

This is deeply important and helpful for Housing Elements work. People-caused problems are problems that can be people-solved, and when we show the engaged players as part of the solution, lay out a clear plan, and show examples of past success, we can motivate people to support those proposals.

- **Focus groups uplifted how deeply personal community members believed housing problems were.** Though there was some understanding already that affordable housing was a macro-economic and structural problem, participants presented individualized solutions such as individual budgeting and financial literacy.

- Focus groups also revealed a strong belief that corporate greed is real, but we won’t fix housing by getting corporations to have a conscience. Focus group participants agreed that Big Tech helped create the problem and that developers exacerbated the problem -- but they viewed these industries through a capitalistic lens and didn’t expect them to deviate from their business model.
- Fortunately, there was an opening in that focus group participants were willing to accept that the problem belongs to the government. Unfortunately, they also brought deep cynicism and distrust alongside this view and a belief that government was already flush with cash.
 - It’s critical that we uplift government’s responsibility and commitment and show where we have made progress, in order to secure trust in additional, future policy proposals and investments.
- **We also need to make sure that all community members see themselves not just in the solutions that government creates for us , but also as part of the mechanism to make it happen.** Avoid positioning the goal of this work as exclusively “affordable housing,” which many people do not see themselves reflected in, or the government’s responsibility as a separate entity. Demonstrate the “we” of “we the people.”
 - Community engagement during the Housing Elements process, especially, will benefit from uplifting how participation in this process is meaningful, especially given new legal requirements that jurisdictions include community input.
 - Challenge directly the notion that someone needs to be “lucky” in order to have stable housing and that they need to accept responsibility.
 - Demonstrate opportunities for community strengthening.

⁹ While 82% respondents expressed concern about housing for others, only 61% supported housing in my neighborhood (EMC Research, 2019; Lake Research, 2019). The policy proposals with the highest support were the most abstract/vague, and still didn’t score as highly as concern: 77% agree that “we should make sure that current affordable housing continues to stay affordable to those who need it” (EMC Research, 2021)

¹⁰ EMC Research, 2016

¹¹ EMC Research, 2019 Polling Review. Recommendations from Anat Shenker-Osorio, 2019 Shift the Bay workshop and Race-Class Narrative Research.

5 Words matter.

- People have vastly different understandings of what home means. **Be precise** with our language because what we see in our minds when we say “build more housing” or “in this neighborhood” may not be what people are picturing¹¹.
 - **Watch out for the passive voice.** When we say “rents have skyrocketed” and “people have been displaced,” for example, we essentially cede that things are out of our control. Present problems as people-created, so that they can be people-solved. See section #4 for more.
 - **Be aware of how conceptual metaphors influence perception.** On average, we use metaphorical speech in American English every six to seven words. For example: Research showed that when individuals were presented with factual data and statistics about crime, when it was primed with a virus metaphor language versus opposition language, people were more likely to look for preventative solutions and recall positive data.
 - **Address race and class explicitly.** Establish cross-racial solidarity. Name race directly when establishing shared values: It’s not enough to say ‘everyone’ and ‘all of us;’ we have to make clear that we’re being inclusive of people across the racial spectrum to confront existing perceptions that other races are different from our own.

- Keep values in mind when developing communications -- the below values are not necessarily the best *messages*, but it’s critical to understand these underlying views to support community conversations.
 - The values that have broad appeal throughout the Bay Area include:
 - Having a decent place to live is a basic human right,
 - Housing policy can make a significant difference and help to control the cost of housing regardless of the economy,
 - Like public education and healthcare, everyone should have access to housing
- **Specific messages that tested well are those that speak to themes of commonality, legacy, racial justice, and the role of policy/systems in creating change.**

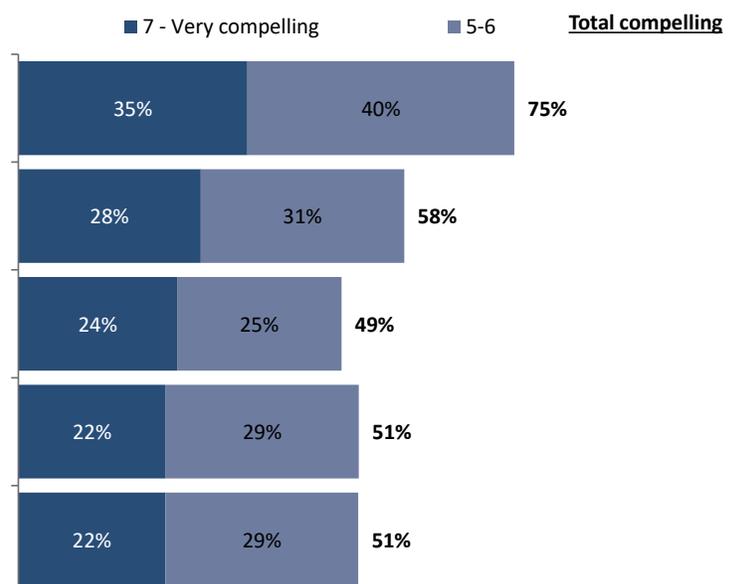
Whether we pay rent or a mortgage, we all want a stable place to call home. We are all invested in the future of our communities. By working together, we can come up with policies that benefit renters AND homeowners.

The Bay Area is known for its wealth and prosperity, but with remote work here to stay, high wage jobs won’t be enough to attract and retain our workforce. We must invest in long-term housing solutions so that more people can afford to live and thrive here.

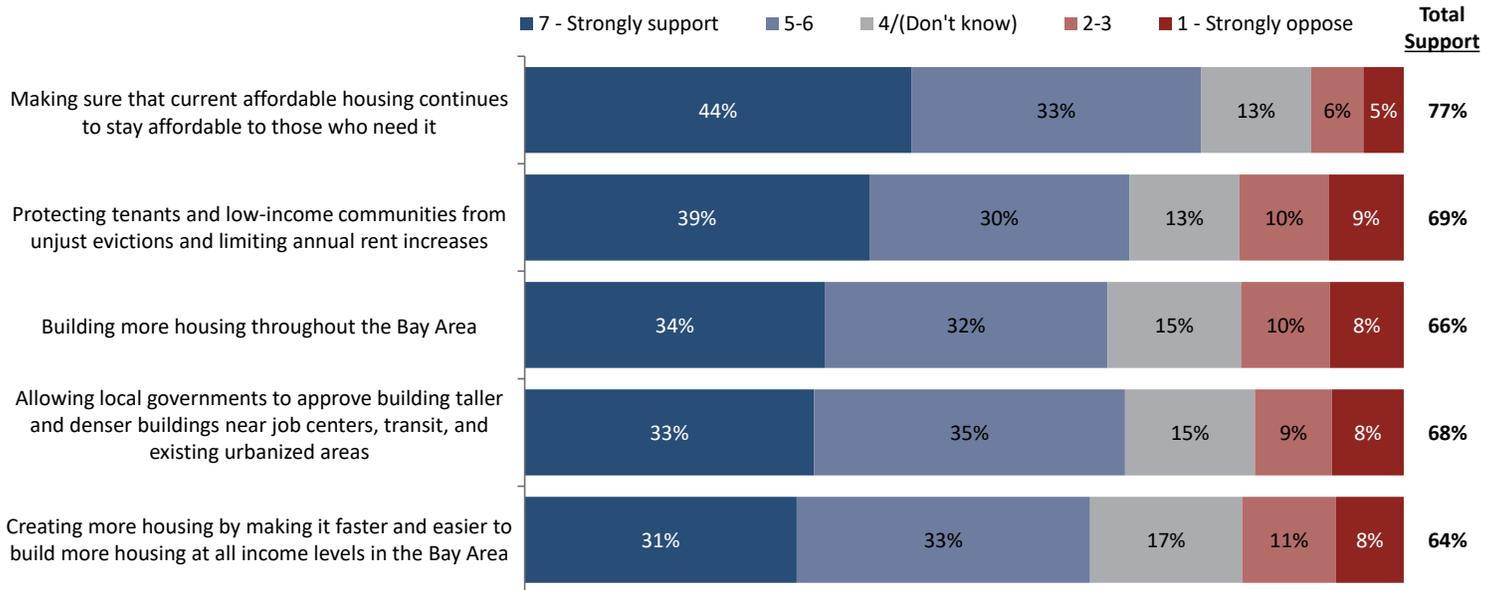
Housing policies like single family zoning were put in place decades ago with the intention of excluding groups of people. These zoning laws have contributed to racial segregation in our communities. We have the opportunity now to do better and promote policies which make our communities more inclusive.

Many homeowners in the Bay Area got lucky. They bought their homes when it was still relatively affordable to do so. But today, the price of renting or owning a home makes both options unaffordable to many who currently live in the Bay Area. Policy that produces, preserves and protects housing options for [renters/tenants] and homeowners across the region, means that more of us can be “lucky.”

Ordinary people working toward justice is the only thing that has EVER really solved issues of economic security for working people. That’s why it’s time for us all to come together to address our housing crisis.



- Describing policy proposals based on the outcomes of the proposal secure high support scores:



- Focus on people and outcomes, not process.

Outcomes/Benefits vs. Process/Mechanics



Focus on outcomes...

Housing for seniors, veterans, people with disabilities, teachers, first responders

Reducing traffic and congestion

Living close to where you work

Keeping young families from getting squeezed out

...not on the process

% affordable housing

Number of units

Increased height limits

Protection from gentrification

5 The message is around a shared community experience. But the forum may benefit from some separation.

Renters and homeowners in the Bay Area experience similar fears and hopes for the region, but they do not speak the same language about who and how to make progress.

- In renter-only focus group, renters were vocal about their shared experiences, including shame and stigma.
- In mixed renters and homeowners focus groups, renters became muted. Many began to rationalize their own experiences and even agreed that homeowners deserved more benefits and financial support and held greater burden.
- While renters were significantly less stigmatizing and empathetic to the common disruptors (see #1), they would wield the disruptions that emerged in similarly harmful ways.
- Homeowners became more sympathetic to renters when they were asked first to think about their own challenges with affordable home repairs. Common ground/empathy came in the context of homeowners having a space to think first about their own vulnerabilities relative to home maintenance costs (which is often extensive with a housing stock as old as often found in the Bay), before they were seen able to extend that empathy.



APPENDIX: SHIFT THE BAY TABLE MEMBERS

NPH is the proud anchor-organization of the Bay Area Shift the Bay Initiative, a coalition-driven initiative to advance housing and racial justice in the Bay Area.

In partnership with a diverse range of organizations from all over the Bay Area and spanning multi-industry, issues, and audiences, we are working to advance research-driven and field-practiced strategies, tactics, and messages that will help us seize this powerful moment to drive new narratives for our movement.

Our 2021-22 table members are:

[Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment](#)

[Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative](#)

[Eastside Arts Alliance](#)

[East Bay Housing Organizations](#)

[Great Communities Collaborative](#)

[Hamilton Families](#)

[Housing Leadership Council of San Mateo County](#)

[Monument Impact](#)

[Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California](#)

[North Bay Organizing Project](#)

[PICO California](#)

[Public Advocates](#)

[Urban Habitat](#)

[Sacred Heart Community Service](#)

[San Mateo Anti-Displacement Coalition](#)

[Tech Equity](#)

[Working Partnerships USA](#)