

AFFORDABLE HOUSING ADVOCACY

HOW TO:

USE HOUSING ELEMENTS FOR ADVOCACY

GOALS

- Increase the number of affordable homes
- Build support for affordable housing
- Get land zoned for housing

KEY TECHNIQUES

- Address the barriers to creating affordable homes through Housing Elements
- Prepare to address usual community objections to affordable housing at every step of the process
- Follow up with the cities and counties after the Housing Elements are adopted to ensure the promised rezoning actually occurs

What is the Housing Element?

The local plan describing how and where new housing will be built

Every City and County in California is required to have a General Plan, a policy and planning document that guides the jurisdiction in development. One of the seven required sections (called Elements) of the General Plan is the Housing Element. Housing Elements are unique because they are the only component of the General Plan for which there is a legal requirement that it be updated on a specific timetable. The required timetable has been every five years, however, legislation proposed in California would revise it to every eight years.

The counties of the San Francisco Bay Area are all required to update their Housing Elements in June 2009. This requirement supports coordination between jurisdictions, which is important because one of the tasks of a Housing Element update is figuring out where a city or county could build its “fair share” of the housing the region is projected to need over the next five years. The “fair share” allocation is divided by income levels (very low, low, moderate, and market rate), with a specified number of units needed to meet the housing needs at each level.

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Why Do We Need To Be Involved?

This is the best chance to plan for needed new homes throughout the community.

The Housing Element update process focuses attention on the housing needs of the region and each community in a comprehensive and holistic way that is not project-specific, allowing community members, advocates and decision makers to talk about affordable housing as a community component, rather than focusing on a specific development proposal.

This process offers terrific opportunities for affordable housing advocacy and education. Under California law, development in a jurisdiction must be consistent with the policies in that jurisdiction's General Plan. Advocates who use this opportunity to get supportive policy language included in their jurisdiction's Housing Element will have a stronger base from which to advocate for individual affordable housing proposals. For public officials, the jurisdiction's policies as laid out in its Housing Element can offer political cover, when needed.

Because the update process requires public meetings and hearings, there are lots of opportunities to educate decision makers and the public about contemporary affordable housing and to advocate for the adoption of progressive affordable housing policies.

Housing Elements Overcome Barriers Three Ways

- Adopt new regulations
- Commit funding
- Win over decision makers

The critical barriers to building affordable housing are:

- lack of appropriately zoned land,
- shortage of money to subsidize development;
- lack of political will.

The Housing Element process provides advocates with opportunities to deal with each of these obstacles.

Land: Each local government has control over land use decisions within its boundaries. Low income people, including young families and seniors, need housing that is affordable, which usually means apartments and condominiums.

But cities and counties often restrict development of apartments and condominiums through zoning and planning policies, such as limiting the available land or imposing excessive requirements for parking spaces.

Because the Housing Element requires that enough land must be zoned appropriately—usually for apartments—to accommodate all of the city's need for low income housing, advocates can use the Housing Element process to encourage governments to adopt policies more supportive of affordable housing.

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Money: Developing affordable housing usually requires government funding to bridge the gap between what low income households can pay in rent or mortgage payments and what it costs to build and operate decent homes. Some federal and state funds are available but usually affordable housing developers rely on local government funding to get their proposals off the ground. Advocates can use the Housing Element process to push local governments to commit to helping make these funds available.

Political Will: Every proposed affordable housing development requires discretionary approvals from local government. But, many elected officials, city staff and neighbors do not yet appreciate that contemporary affordable housing is well managed, well designed and an asset to the community and may oppose affordable housing proposals. Advocates can use the Housing Element process to educate them and to get the city or county to adopt policies that enable developers to secure local government approvals.

Advocacy Opportunities Every Step Of the Way

- Accurate inventory
- Ambitious goals
- Aggressive policies

State law requires each Housing Element to include three parts. Each part provides advocates with opportunities to promote affordable housing development. Each Housing Element must have:

- **An inventory of local housing needs, current land uses and obstacles to housing development.** Advocates can push cities and counties to be accurate in its statements of needs and existing supply of affordable housing;
- **A set of goals and objectives aimed at meeting the city's or county's share of the regional need for housing.** Advocates can encourage the city to be aggressive in its goals and objectives, especially focusing on the people with the greatest needs
- **A set of programs which the city will conduct to pursue its goals and objectives.** Advocates can ask governments to identify and pre-zone areas for affordable housing and to adopt other policies promoting affordable housing developments such as reducing parking requirements, easing height limits and allowing higher density. Other progressive policies include commercial development linkage fees, density bonuses, expedited permitting, and reducing or waiving development fees.

Follow-up After Housing Element Is Adopted

It is critical that advocates remain involved and attentive to make sure the city follows up on its programs, especially the promised rezoning. Developers should use the Housing Element to support specific new proposed construction. If the city or county fails to adopt a Housing Element in compliance with state law, consider litigation.

ADVOCATES CHECKLIST

- Start planning early. Assemble a team, read the current Housing Element and identify specific policy goals;**
- Meet with the planning department staff, or their consultant in charge of the Housing Element Update;**
- Plan a campaign strategy, including who you can rely on for support;**
- Prepare to deal with objections to affordable housing development. You may need to educate planning staff, consultants and decision-makers about contemporary affordable housing;**
- Find out about the jurisdiction's update process and make sure the affordable housing community is well represented in public meetings and advisory groups.**