



**MORE HOUSING**  
W I S C O N S I N

HELPING COMMUNITIES DEVELOP  
HOUSING SOLUTIONS.

WHITEPAPER SERIES  
Briefing Paper **11**

**JANUARY 2025**

# Municipal Housing *Solutions*





# More Housing Wisconsin

Wisconsin is experiencing a **significant housing shortage**. A recent study estimates Wisconsin will need to build **over 200,000 housing units by 2030** to accommodate all the people who want to live and work here.<sup>1</sup> More Housing Wisconsin, a collaboration between the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, Wisconsin REALTORS® Association, and the Wisconsin Builders Association, seeks to educate and inform Wisconsin city and village leaders and staff about zoning changes and other strategies communities can use to help **address this state's housing shortage**. Our goal is to bring tools, resources, and best practices to municipalities to help communities initiate housing solutions that meet their unique needs and **strengthen our economy**.





# THIS MONTH'S TOPIC JANUARY 2025

## Neutralizing NIMBYism and building public support for workforce housing.

Zoning code changes designed to allow for more density and additional types of housing with different price points often face resistance from existing property owners. Similarly, it is common for at least some nearby homeowners to oppose new multi-family housing project proposals. Opponents often express concerns about traffic, noise, changes to the character of the neighborhood, stormwater runoff, or that the housing project or zoning changes will reduce property values. “Opposition can be a significant roadblock to building places that encourage a broad tapestry of housing types, price points, and people.”<sup>ii</sup>

Municipalities seeking to increase the number of workforce housing units in their community through zoning reform must develop procedures, methods of communication, and other strategies designed to generate public support for the creation of more workforce housing and counter “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) opposition.

Over the last 30 years, communication experts and housing advocates have developed and refined ways to frame public messaging about workforce and other types of attainable affordable housing. Many organizations have written guides on the best ways to develop public support for zoning code reform and other strategies designed to increase housing quantity and type. These same strategies apply to gaining public support for the approval of specific multi-family housing projects.

A review of studies and commentary makes clear that it takes hard work and requires patience, listening, and creativity for municipalities to neutralize NIMBY type opposition from defeating zoning reform or workforce housing projects. Municipal elected officials and staff, and community housing advocates must devote resources and time to lay the foundation for the need to expand the number and types of housing available in a community before pursuing zoning reform and approving new types of housing. It can be a time-consuming process and may require expert consultation.

“Strategies include community outreach plans, strategic marketing, coalition building, education, and ongoing communication.”<sup>iii</sup> First, “the public must understand the “why” of the need for change to housing policies. This is particularly important since many current [zoning and subdivision] ordinances “protect” single-family detached neighborhoods from change.”<sup>iv</sup>

The following recommendations are taken from the *Zoning Reform Toolkit* published by the Michigan Chapter of the American Planning Association, and *Enabling Better Places: A User’s Guide to Neighborhood Affordability*, written by the Congress for the New Urbanism for the League of Wisconsin Municipalities.

**Framing the message about the need for zoning reform to increase housing options.**

The message will depend on your audience, and there are various audiences to consider: neighbors, business leaders, landowners, developers, and others that have a role to play in increasing housing supply. Also, it is important to bear in mind that “understanding the lived experiences, perceptions, and fears of those who may be in opposition to a housing development or zoning change is important to determine the correct talking points to use.”<sup>v</sup>

Several recent studies and surveys on the most effective ways to communicate with the public about the need for zoning reform suggest that it is most effective to focus on how existing, more restrictive zoning regulations are:

1. **Unfair:** (For example, the message might be that current zoning restrictions limit social mobility by preventing working-class families from getting their kids into good schools or from living near higher paying jobs.)
2. **Impede Economic growth** (For example, the message might be that when local zoning restrictions make modest starter homes impossible to build resulting in a tight housing market and high housing costs, then middle-income earners [like nurses, teachers, police officers, and plumbers] cannot live where they work and often need to spend more time commuting. This situation makes it difficult for employers to recruit and retain employees. Tourist communities reliant upon service workers have found that local businesses are unable to open or must have reduced hours because of a lack of affordable housing for workers. Lower housing costs and a greater variety of housing ensure that people can live in the community or neighborhood where they work, which means employers can remain in their location because they have the workers they need.)
3. **Restrict Property rights** (For example, the message might involve explaining that zoning reform can allow more housing types and/or housing units on a person’s land, provide more housing choice, and that the easing of restrictions will allow the market to determine and deliver in-demand housing. This message resonates with people wanting to see more done with less government rules.)<sup>vi</sup>

Notably, research on the best ways to frame the message promoting zoning reform to allow for a greater range of housing options shows that focusing on affordability and racial justice are less effective.<sup>vii</sup>

**Building a coalition.** To create the best opportunity for success in implementing code changes allowing more density and housing choice it is crucial that a coalition of allies be mobilized to advocate for those changes in the public process. It is important to involve local employers and other business leaders, housing advocates, developers, builders, and the people who want to live somewhere and cannot. Ideally, everyone who has a stake in the success of the community should be a part of the conversation. “A robust community engagement process begins with getting the most diverse group of perspectives involved at an early stage. A focus should be placed on engaging renters, young people, and people who work in the area but cannot afford to live there.”<sup>viii</sup> Targeted engagement efforts can be used to reach out to specific groups that are not usually present in the decision-making process and provide them with opportunities and tools to engage.

When a community is ready to propose a code change to allow, for example, quadplexes by right in certain residential districts, community leaders and staff should talk with organizations and people who are concerned with housing shortages. Line up supporters early in the process so that the first thing elected officials and the public hear is not objections from people opposed to such a change. Have conversations early and often, and outside of city or village hall or in planning meetings and hearings. Make sure to build champions within the governing body. Without strong advocates among elected officials, a contentious hearing can have unexpected and unfortunate results. However, if there are coalition members on the governing body, they can gently push back against opponents by articulating the need for zoning changes to allow for more workforce housing. Elected officials are frequently pressured by the vocal minority and do not hear enough from zoning reform supporters. They need sufficient housing data and testimony in support to be able to withstand pressure from the NIMBY community.<sup>ix</sup>

Additional tools to consider when engaging the public about zoning reform necessary for increasing the supply and variety of housing include:

- Allow public comment at times other than during a public meeting through a website dedicated to housing issues.
- Hold pop-up events at libraries, grocery stores, liquor stores, bars, parks, playgrounds, farmers’ markets, street festivals, church events.
- Hang posters with leading questions and space for responding in public places such as bus stops, laundromats, bars, churches, parks, playgrounds.
- Make sure that meetings are held in non-intimidating, accessible public spaces.

- Hold online conversations as well as in-person meetings.
- Convene listening sessions and public hearings at different times and on different days.
- Follow local pages on social media and engage directly with active users of those pages.
- Provide online engagement opportunities such as visual preference surveys and housing issue surveys.<sup>x</sup>

**Show what workforce housing looks like.** Pictures speak louder than words. When asking residents to permit more housing choices, neighbors are typically curious as to what that will look like. Abstract discussion about adding more density or changing the Floor Area Ratio does not translate into a general understanding by the public of what to expect.

When municipalities propose allowing up to three units on a single lot, a common step up from single family zoning, it is important to create standards that will ensure that these new buildings will be about the same size and bulk as the existing single-family houses. Create illustrations showing clearly what adding these buildings to the neighborhood will mean. Choose a vacant lot and have renderings made showing how a new multi-unit building will fit in. In addition to drawings, show photographs of existing buildings within the community or neighborhood that match what is being proposed.<sup>xi</sup>

For example, in Arlington, Virginia, where new regulations allow duplexes and triplexes in formerly single-family-only neighborhoods, planners led a successful zoning reform effort in part by sharing photos from dozens of Arlington neighborhoods with examples of missing middle housing.<sup>xii</sup>

Similarly, when proposing the allowance of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), provide illustrations that show garage apartments and backyard cottages. In the same way, if front and side setbacks need to be adjusted to allow adding ADUs or adding another building, create illustrations to show what this will look like on existing lots. Without illustrations community members might not understand what increasing density entails. An instinctive response by residents is that an increase in density implies buildings bigger than currently permitted, which is why illustrations are a key tool for educating the community.<sup>xiii</sup>

**Only the beginning.** The process of creating an effective community education and engagement plan in support of zoning reform for the creation of more housing options is more detailed than described above. Visit the links below for more comprehensive guidance and specific steps for creating a public education and engagement plan and



strategies to address NIMBY. “Public engagement is a time-intensive activity. You may not see results immediately. The goal is to create a foundation for dialogue and dissolve barriers that prevent the construction or addition of affordable and diverse housing in your community.”<sup>xiv</sup>

## RESOURCES AND EXAMPLES

1. A good example of a public communication effort in support of zoning reform and other local government action to address housing needs is Dane County Wisconsin’s Regional Housing Strategy. <https://rhs.danecounty.gov/>
2. ***Enabling Better Places: A User’s Guide to Neighborhood Affordability***, written by the Congress for the New Urbanism for the League of Wisconsin Municipalities in 2022 includes advice on educating the public about the need for zoning reform.
3. A *Zoning Reform Toolkit* published by the Michigan Chapter of the American Planning Association contains lots of helpful information about how to talk with the public about housing and the need for zoning reform.
4. Local Housing Solutions provides a comprehensive list of resources on building public support for affordable housing. <https://localhousingsolutions.org/plan/resources-on-building-public-support-for-affordable-housing/>
5. Local Housing Solutions also provides background information on engaging the community in a local housing strategy. <https://localhousingsolutions.org/plan/engaging-the-community-in-the-development-of-a-local-housing-strategy/>
6. The Puget Sound Regional Council Housing Innovations Program has prepared three informative pamphlets:
  - a) *Build Community Support for Affordable Housing*
  - b) *Strategies to Address NIMBY Reactions and Community Opposition*
  - c) *Community Engagement Plans*





7. The North Carolina Housing Coalition's ***Housing Carolina Resource Manual*** contains a wealth of information and guidance on conducting a public education initiative about affordable housing. It includes information on messaging and communications to use when talking about affordable housing; a NIMBY guide; and a media toolkit providing sample documents to assist in communicating housing and NIMBY issues.
8. Housing Toolbox for Massachusetts Communities: Addressing Community Concerns about Affordable Housing (2020) <https://www.housingtoolbox.org/assets/files/resources/MA-Housing-Toolbox-Addressing-Community-Concerns.pdf>
9. National Multifamily Housing Council (NMHC): NIMBY Objections (2020) <https://www.nmhc.org/advocacy/resources-to-promote-apartments/nimby-objections/>
10. Center for Housing Policy. *Don't Put it Here! Does Affordable Housing Cause Nearby Property Values to Decline?* (Reviews evidence of the impact of affordable housing on property values and could be used to refute community opposition based on property value reduction concerns.)

<sup>i</sup>Forward Analytics, ***A Housing Hurdle: Demographics Drive Need for More Homes***; January 2023.

<sup>ii</sup>[https://www.planningmi.org/aws/MAP/asset\\_manager/get\\_file/886923?ver=0](https://www.planningmi.org/aws/MAP/asset_manager/get_file/886923?ver=0)

<sup>iii</sup><https://www.psrc.org/media/2050>

<sup>iv</sup>[https://www.planningmi.org/aws/MAP/asset\\_manager/get\\_file/886923?ver=0](https://www.planningmi.org/aws/MAP/asset_manager/get_file/886923?ver=0)

<sup>v</sup>Ibid

<sup>vi</sup>Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup>Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup><https://www.lwm-info.org/DocumentCenter/View/5566/WI-Zoning-Guide-Final-2-2022>

<sup>ix</sup>Ibid.

<sup>x</sup>Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup>Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup>Patrick Sisson, “Saying No to NIMBYs: A Planner’s Guide to Mastering Pushback and Passing Zoning Reform”, ***Planning***, November 2023

<sup>xiii</sup><https://www.lwm-info.org/DocumentCenter/View/5566/WI-Zoning-Guide-Final-2-2022>

<sup>xiv</sup>The Puget Sound Regional Council Housing Innovations Program, “Community Engagement Plans,” August 2020