

What is a local housing strategy and why is it important?

Over the past few decades, housing costs have risen faster than incomes in many U.S. cities, towns, and counties. As a result, an increasing number of households struggle to pay their mortgages and rent, while others face eviction and even homelessness.

While local governments cannot address these challenges on their own, they are on the front lines of the housing crisis, and they play a critical role in addressing it. In addition to implementing many federal and state programs, they have tools at their disposal that other levels of government do not, including land use regulations, building and housing codes, and permitting processes. They also have a deep understanding of local needs and market conditions. Local governments are thus uniquely positioned to weave together different funding sources and regulations into a comprehensive local housing strategy – a necessary step in meaningfully tackling the affordability challenges that so many localities confront.

What is a local housing strategy?

A local housing strategy comprehensively describes the approach a city, town, or county plans to take to meet its housing objectives. Often developed by the Mayor's Office (though sometimes by a housing or planning department or other agencies), a local housing strategy coordinates the actions of all of the local government agencies and divisions that administer policies and programs affecting housing, from the department of housing to the planning department, the buildings department, the department of finance, the local housing authority and the homeless services agency. The best local housing strategies utilize the full set of tools that local governments have at their disposal, including zoning ordinances, building codes, permitting processes, property tax abatements, and federal, state, and local housing subsidies. They also engage the private and nonprofit sectors as key partners.

Scope of local housing strategy

There is no one housing strategy that is right for every jurisdiction, and local housing strategies will differ depending on local market conditions, resources, and the political environment. Some jurisdictions have the experience and capacity to develop detailed strategies that include multiple initiatives and programs based on a detailed analysis of local housing needs and resources. Others can develop simpler approaches with fewer policies and programs based on a simpler analysis of local housing needs.

To develop a local housing strategy, cities, towns, and counties should:

- 1. Analyze the jurisdiction's housing needs that illustrate the problems the jurisdiction is seeking to solve.** This analysis could include, for example, data on:
 - Mismatches between growth in employment and the housing stock
 - Rent burdens of different sub-groups
 - Comparison of recent growth in rents and incomes
- 2. Define the policy objectives the jurisdiction hopes to achieve through the strategy.** The call-out below lists some of the objectives jurisdictions may wish to consider.
- 3. Develop a comprehensive approach to meeting these objectives using the full array of resources available to local agencies in the community.** This approach should draw on the broad set of policy tools available to jurisdictions, including:
 - Federal, state, and local subsidies
 - Reforms of:
 - Zoning and other land use regulations
 - Permitting processes
 - Building and housing code standards and enforcement processes
 - Landlord/tenant laws and housing court processes
 - Property tax incentives
 - Housing authority resources and programs
- 4. Identify funding sources and contingencies.** Funding sources might include one-time infusions, such as housing bonds, or dedicated funding streams, such as real estate transfer taxes, city and state pension funds, and property tax incentive programs. Ideally, local strategies would also identify contingency plans should planned funding sources fall through.
- 5. Develop a plan for implementing the recommended approaches.** Such a plan should identify which agencies will administer any new programs, make sure they have sufficient capacity to design and implement the new policies, and communicate the roles to be played by non-governmental partners. Ideally, communities would also develop a timeline for implementation.
- 6. Establish a list of numerical goals and associated milestones to use to track and monitor progress and to uncover shortfalls.** These metrics should ideally allow you to track progress in real time and thereby be able to monitor progress toward all the key policy objectives, highlighting bottlenecks that can be addressed in a timely manner with more resources or policy modifications. One common numerical goal is the number of affordable units to be created or preserved, but no singular metric like this one is likely to be able to measure progress across the whole range of policy objectives motivating/driving your local housing strategy. Additional numerical goals might include a more-detailed metrics such as the number of households or people of different income levels to be served, the size distribution of units of

different sizes and types to be constructed or rehabilitated, and the number of households to be assisted in resource-rich neighborhoods.

Policy objectives for local housing strategies

Affordability, homelessness, and special populations

Increasing the affordability of rental housing

Preserving the existing stock of dedicated affordable rental housing

Preserving the existing stock of market affordable rental housing

Reducing homelessness and meeting the emergency needs of homeless individuals and families

Meeting the housing and services needs of older adults and persons with disabilities

Homeownership

Increasing access to sustainable homeownership

Stability, quality and safety

Increasing housing stability for renters and owners

Improving housing quality and safety

Enhancing resilience to flooding and other climate-related threats

Inclusion

Reducing housing discrimination

Affirmatively furthering fair housing

Expanding affordable housing in resource-rich neighborhoods

Community development

Strengthening communities through community development activities

Strengthening the resources and opportunities in high-poverty neighborhoods

Encouraging walkable mixed-use development

Energy and transportation

Reducing energy use and decreasing greenhouse gas emissions

Expanding access to public transit

Health and education

Improving the health of children and adults

Improving educational outcomes for children

Why are local housing strategies so important?

In the face of complex housing challenges, comprehensive local housing strategies

serve a number of key purposes:

Coordination: Local housing strategies provide a framework to draw together the many sources of funding and relevant policy strands into a single, coordinated strategy to tackle local housing challenges. They can help ensure coordination and buy in among all of the many government agencies that affect housing costs, quality, and stability, as well as agencies not directly responsible for housing, but whose cooperation is critical – for example agencies focused on education, transportation, and parks. Such centralized coordination serves to minimize duplication and ensure that different agencies and units within those agencies are working towards common goals and not at cross purposes.

Political support: Through the development of a local housing strategy, cities, towns, and counties can help to engage the public and garner political support by demonstrating needs and defining shared objectives. This process may also help to combat community resistance to individual, affordable housing developments as residents may appreciate how proposed developments contribute to the broader objectives laid out in the housing strategy.

Predictability: The explicit, programmatic long-term strategies described in local housing strategies can help to ensure consistent budgetary support for a strategy over multiple years and encourage state legislatures and local legislative bodies to take needed actions.

Should local housing strategies be made public?

Yes! There are many benefits to documenting local housing strategies as part of a publicly released plan:

Communication with partners: Documenting a local housing strategy in a publicly released plan helps to communicate local government priorities to partners in the private and nonprofit sectors whose collaboration is essential to implementing local housing strategies. Where available, the involvement of City Hall, City or County Council or other centralized government officials signals a commitment from the local government to stand behind the plan, provide the necessary resources to implement it, and coordinate the needed players.

Accountability: Publicly released housing plans increase transparency and accountability by setting out measurable objectives that can be easily tracked over time. The ideal measurements go beyond simple counts of units produced to focus on the types of units being produced, the households being served, and the location of new or preserved units.

Distinction from other municipal plans

It's worth underscoring what local housing strategies are not. Cities, towns, and counties are required to produce a number of plans, including Consolidated Plans, Public Housing Agency plans, Continuum of Care plans, Assessments of Fair Housing for HUD, and comprehensive analyses and plans that they must submit to their state (which always cover land use and sometimes include a required housing element that covers a broader array of housing policies).^[1] While local housing strategies may include some elements that overlap with those included in these other plans, they differ fundamentally from these other efforts in that they are not mandated by a higher level of government.

Cities, towns, and counties develop local housing strategies not because they are required to do so, but because they think these will help them achieve their local housing objectives. Furthermore, while many of these other plans are written for the government agencies who are responsible for approving them, the plans that summarize local housing strategies are written to be read and understood by the broad public as well as elected officials who control resources and approve any necessary policy shifts, agency staff who are responsible for administering the programs and policies, and local community-based organizations, housing developers, and partners who are key to implementation.

Local housing strategies also differ in scope from these other plans. They are more narrowly focused on housing than comprehensive plans, but they are broader in focus than any of the individual housing plans required by HUD in that they incorporate and tie together a wide range of local resources, policies and tools as well as federal programs.

While they serve different functions from these required plans, local housing strategies can help communities more readily complete required plans like HUD's Consolidated Plan and state-required comprehensive plans. Similarly, approaches developed as part of those planning processes can help inform the development of a comprehensive local housing strategy.

Resources

Links to some illustrative plans like Seattle, NYC and Boston, together with a less ambitious plan from a smaller city.

Boston's [Housing a Changing City: Boston 2030](#)

Seattle's [Housing Seattle: A Roadmap to an Affordable and Livable City](#)

New York City's *Housing New York: A Five-Borough, Ten-Year Plan*

NYC's *Housing New York 2.0*

Minneapolis's *The Minneapolis Plan for Sustainable Growth: Housing*

Atlanta's *A Housing Strategy for the City of Atlanta*

1. See, e.g., <http://hcd.ca.gov/community-development/housing-element/index.shtml>

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