

CMAP



Metropolitan **Planning Council**



Homes for a Changing Region Toolkit Outreach Guide

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Public engagement objectives	1
<i>Identify key stakeholders</i>	1
<i>Form a steering committee</i>	2
<i>Seek proactive input and reactive feedback</i>	2
<i>Inform residents and stakeholders about housing and demographic trends</i>	2
<i>Engage underrepresented groups</i>	3
Activities.....	5
<i>Project kickoff</i>	5
<i>Surveys</i>	6
<i>Visual Preference Surveys</i>	7
<i>Key stakeholder interviews</i>	8
<i>Focus group discussions</i>	8
<i>Mapping activities</i>	9
<i>Homes community workshop</i>	9
Communications	11
<i>Flyers</i>	11
<i>Emails</i>	11
<i>Meetings with community organizations</i>	11
<i>Follow-up with past participants</i>	11
<i>Social media</i>	12
Outreach timeline.....	13
Utilizing public input	13
Measuring public engagement.....	13
Final thoughts.....	14

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Introduction

The ultimate goal of the *Homes for a Changing Region* process is to empower local governments with information and strategies so that development can respond to current and forecasted demand for housing. To achieve this goal, it is essential that the local government staff or consultants driving the process develop a comprehensive strategy that engages residents and stakeholders in the development of the plan.

Good public engagement should create a shared vision for housing in a community, address resident concerns, and result in support for plan implementation. It needs to anticipate that the information that comes out of the *Homes* process may surprise some community residents and stakeholders, who will choose to engage in the process in different ways— with most simply wanting periodic project updates and the opportunity to review draft deliverables, while a few will need to be closely involved at every stage of the process.

This guide is intended to complement the *Homes for a Changing Region* toolkit, by providing a broad overview of the public engagement activities, tools, and communication techniques that communities can utilize to develop an effective strategy as part of the *Homes* process.

Public engagement objectives

At the beginning of the *Homes* process, local government staff or consultants need to facilitate discussions with the mayor, board members, appointed officials, or senior staff members that initiated the process to identify what they hope to achieve through public engagement. Each community will identify slightly different objectives, but there are three core objectives that are typically applicable to all *Homes* projects:

- Provide residents and stakeholders with the opportunity to provide input and feedback that can be used to inform the plan.
- Create opportunities to inform residents and stakeholders about local, regional, and national housing and demographic trends.
- Strive for community input from diverse demographic and stakeholder groups that are representative of the community.

Identify key stakeholders

When developing the public engagement strategy, it is important to identify key stakeholders and have a clear understanding of resident demographics. For the purposes of this guide, we define a stakeholder as an individual or organization with special interest in or influence over a community's housing market. At a minimum, in most communities these will include the

governing board, planning or zoning commission, real estate professionals, developers, and community organizations.

Form a steering committee

It is generally best practice to form a steering committee or advisory group made up of these stakeholders to closely inform plan development. This is important, especially given that these individuals will likely be called upon to implement plan recommendations. Steering committees should be composed of no more than 10-15 members, meet periodically but infrequently (bimonthly or quarterly), and seek to engage stakeholders in project planning, development of plan recommendations, and review of draft deliverables before they are released to the public or reviewed by an elected governing board.

It is imperative that interjurisdictional *Homes* projects include a steering committee. Best practice calls for elected, appointed (e.g. from plan or housing commissions), and staff representation from each local government. In this scenario, the engagement strategy will need to include other means to engage non-governmental stakeholders.

Seek proactive input and reactive feedback

The first public engagement objective for any *Homes* project is to seek both proactive input and reactive feedback from residents and stakeholders. Generally, proactive input should be sought at the beginning of the planning process as information is gathered, data is analyzed, and a vision is created. Reactive feedback should be sought later in the process, as conclusions are drawn and deliverables are drafted. Local government staff or consultants should be asking residents and stakeholders the following questions:

- *What questions do you have about the market analysis and forecasts?*
- *What is your vision for the future of housing in your community?*
- *What strategies would you support to achieve that vision?*

While the first question may seem reactive, it actually helps to build agreement around a data-based understanding of the housing market that will inform the development of the *Homes* plan from the very beginning. The second question is clearly proactive, and should help to spark discussion and new ideas about the future. The third question is asked at a key stage in the process, when the public provides feedback on the strategies recommended by local government staff or consultants. Together, these three questions help to generate discussions that provide invaluable information, build buy-in, and support plan implementation at the end of the process.

Inform residents and stakeholders about housing and demographic trends

The second public engagement objective is to make sure residents and stakeholders are aware of—and can ask questions about—national, regional, and local housing market dynamics. These

subjects can be sensitive or intimidating to residents who may not be accustomed to thinking about housing in the context of population forecasts and their impact on development. It may be helpful to define a few basic concepts and describe a few general trends in the early stages of outreach. For example, the *Homes for a Changing Region* process defines “affordability” as when a household contributes less than 30 percent of its monthly income on housing costs. This should be explained early and reiterated often.

Likewise, residents may not be aware that research increasingly points to recent changes in the type of housing that is most in demand. For example, although housing markets vary by location, national trends suggest that more people are looking for smaller housing units with walkable access to basic amenities like grocery stores; in addition, demand for rental housing has been increasing. Policy experts and analysts can be called upon to provide comment or serve as guest speakers at presentations, which can help lend credibility to the applicability of national and regional trends such as these.

In communicating with residents and stakeholders about broad housing trends and concepts, it is important to take care to communicate clearly about how the *Homes* plan will influence (or be influenced by) other local plans, such as the municipality’s comprehensive plan or any subarea plans that may inform local land use and development policies. “Planning fatigue” can set in when too many planning initiatives have occurred recently or are underway concurrently, especially when the public feels as though their participation in the past has not yielded tangible results.

Engage underrepresented groups

The third public engagement objective is to make special efforts to engage demographic groups that have historically been underrepresented in planning efforts in the community. As previously discussed, Census data should be used to identify all of the different demographic groups represented within a community. In developing a strategy for resident engagement, local government staff will need to identify which of these groups have not been well represented in previous planning efforts and why. There may be language barriers, lack of access to broadband internet, difficulty in accessing meeting locations, or lack of trust in government institutions. These groups may also simply suffer the same conflicts of time and family more acutely. To reach many of these underrepresented groups, it can be helpful to build relationships with the leaders of local religious or community organizations, which may be able to disseminate information, host meetings, or provide translation services.

Renters are typically underrepresented in planning efforts, and often belong to other underrepresented groups. Historically, there has been a popular perception that renters are transient and therefore less interested in participating in local government. But recent surveys suggest that, while most continue to aspire to homeownership, they also believe that renting is an equally valid option and that homeownership is more challenging. The demand for rental housing has been high since the beginning of the recession and housing experts expect that its popularity will continue to rise. Therefore, it is important to seek input and feedback from

renters. Local governments with rental licensing or registration programs can easily circulate project information to landlords or tenants using the contact information they have on file, and some apartment buildings may have common rooms that can be used to post information or host meetings.

Activities

There are a variety of tools for engaging residents and stakeholders to achieve the three public engagement objectives. Many of these tools can be deployed in different ways, including in-person, mail, phone, email, or internet. In addition to the tools described below, a [list of 50 tools for on-line public engagement](#) has been compiled by the Community Matters Partnership, a collaboration of seven national organizations in the community-building field committed to sharing learning and best practices.

It is important to keep in mind that, while no group is monolithic, different tools work better for engaging different populations. For example, today's seniors typically prefer in-person interactions to those that take place on the web. Across the nation, communities are experiencing demographic change. As the baby boom generation continues to age, the percentage of seniors will continue to rise across the country. Latinos are also expected to become a larger share of the overall population in northeastern Illinois. Local government staff or consultants should consult housing and demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau before they design a process to engage residents in plan development.

Project kickoff

This section focuses on outreach activities that local governments and their consultants will undertake to engage residents and other stakeholders in the development of a *Homes for a Changing Region* plan.

Local government staff or consultants should begin by bringing together executive staff (the Village Manager, for example), the mayor, elected members of the governing board, and appointed commissioners with an interest in housing issues. This can be done through a kickoff meeting attended by a core group of these local government stakeholders (ideally about 8-10 people).

At this meeting, the local government staff or consultant lead will need to lay out the project schedule, indicate key points at which input will be sought, clearly differentiate the role of local government officials from that of the steering committee (if one will be created), and engage in an open-ended discussion about housing in the municipality. Although existing conditions data can provide helpful context, the project lead may want to minimize or not include it at this first meeting, as it tends to focus discussion on specific issues prematurely.

Instead, the primary role of the project lead at the project kickoff is to facilitate a discussion to better understand the perspectives of key government leaders about their housing stock. Some questions that have been useful in driving this discussion include:

- *Why do families choose to live in your community? What are the advantages of living here?*

- *What concerns do you have about your housing stock currently? What about the building stock (non-residential) generally?*
- *Which areas of the municipality should be preserved as they are today? Which areas could benefit from rehabilitation or reinvestment?*
- *How would you describe recent housing development activity in your community?*
- *How would you describe the public schools that your residents attend?*

Finally, if the project lead is a consultant, it is best practice to conclude this discussion with a tour of the municipality. The goals of the tour should be to familiarize the consultant with the locations identified in the previous conversation and provide the opportunity for additional discussion between officials and the project lead.

Surveys

Surveys can fulfill several needs over the course of a planning process. They can allow communities to collect demographic data and contact information for residents and stakeholders interested in participating in the planning process. They can provide an opportunity to collect more complex input and allow residents to voice their preferences on specific topics.

Local government staff and consultants should prioritize the information they hope to gain from the survey. Generally, the shorter the questionnaire the more residents will respond. Open-ended questions should be kept to a minimum; although they can yield helpful quotes to support findings, they are often more difficult to analyze. It is important that the survey include a detailed introduction on the *Homes* process, so that residents fully understand why their input is important and how it will be used.

Surveys for interjurisdictional projects entail special considerations that will need to be addressed in developing the survey questionnaire. For example, it is necessary to include items asking respondents to identify the municipality where they work **and** where they live. This will ensure that results are valid for each participating community. Local government staff or consultants analyzing the data will also need to determine how they will aggregate the feedback, since some communities may generate more participation than others.

Basic text-based surveys can be collected through the mail, on-line, or in-person. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses. **Mail surveys** typically have the lowest response rates, but they may reach groups less likely to have internet access. Local government staff and consultants should consider staff capacity when utilizing mail surveys, since ensuring that there is sufficient staff time to duplicate, distribute, collect, and analyze survey results is crucial to the

success of this public engagement method. Also, postage can also be costly and return postage is also typically pre-paid.

If mail surveys are used, local governments should consider attaching a very brief questionnaire to a newsletter or water bill. To increase the response rate, local governments may want to provide an incentive, such as entry into a raffle prize. Mail surveys should also be distributed at key locations throughout the community (municipal buildings, public libraries, apartment complexes, etc.) and at existing community events or meetings (board meetings, community festivals, homeowners association meetings, school events, or others).

On-line surveys do not reach residents who are less web-savvy or who do not have consistent internet access, but they typically solicit higher levels of participation and are less expensive to produce. In addition, while survey URLs are typically circulated through email, they can also be included in newsletters or local media to encourage participation.

There are several free or inexpensive resources for developing web surveys, such as [SurveyMonkey](#) and [Google Forms](#). These are simple tools that allow relatively inexperienced users to create questionnaires and collect input from residents online. If local government staff or consultants need more complex survey functionality, such as the use of graphics or allowing respondents to skip questions that do not pertain to them, it may be necessary to contract with an experienced web development firm. [Screen shots of a sample Homes outreach website](#) are included in the toolkit.

In-person surveys are another option. While they can be conducted by using paper and pencil or in a formal interview format, neither of these are considered best practice for most planning projects. A better method is [keypad polling](#), an effective means of collecting anonymous survey responses at public meetings. Typically, multiple choice survey questions are administered through a PowerPoint presentation, with each participant using a keypad device to submit their responses and the results of the survey revealed instantly on the screen in real time. This approach has the benefit of giving each participant an equal voice, even if some are more vocal than others. It also allows for on-the-fly customization (since the presenter can edit, skip, or add questions at-will) and the ability to use graphics or videos in survey questions, such as in a visual preference survey (please see explanation below).

Unfortunately, it is relatively costly to purchase the software and hardware needed to administer keypad polling. It can be purchased or rented through a variety of vendors nationwide, and in some cases may be available for loan through community planning organizations or private firms. Presenters would be well advised to practice using the tool as it is prone to human error.

Visual Preference Surveys

[Visual preference surveys \(VPS\)](#) present residents and stakeholders with [a variety of photographs depicting different housing types](#). Participants are asked to rate their assessment

of each image. This tool has been used in nearly every *Homes* project thus far. Typically, three responses are used with each image:

How does this building fit within the village?

- *I'd like to see this in my neighborhood.*
- *Not in my neighborhood, but elsewhere.*
- *It wouldn't fit anywhere in the village.*

Local government staff or consultants will want to choose the images very carefully. It is important to use a mix of housing types, including single-family detached, townhome, multifamily, mixed use, and transit-oriented residential developments if appropriate. Likewise, images should be selected that depict attractive housing options at all price points. If a local government is considering taking an active role in the development of subsidized, income-restricted housing, then images that depict such units should also be used in the VPS.

The cost of a mail-back VPS will likely be prohibitive for most local governments, but in previous *Homes* projects, this method has been successfully deployed both online and in-person using keypad polling technology. To conduct an online VPS, local government staff or consultants will likely need to partner with a private web development firm.

Key stakeholder interviews

It may be beneficial for local government staff or consultants to identify a small number of people to interview one-on-one. This tool can be a vehicle for all three public engagement objectives discussed at the beginning of the guide, and can help gain input from stakeholder groups not represented on a steering committee. If a particularly influential stakeholder consistently questions, doubts, or expresses concerns over the basic assumptions of the planning process, then it may be beneficial to interview him or her as a means to hold a more focused and comprehensive discussion; a reputable housing market analyst or policy expert may be useful in such a discussion. If one of the goals of the interview is to build trust with a stakeholder group, then there may be benefit to conducting it in-person; otherwise, telephone interviews will usually suffice. Regardless of the method, it is important for local government staff or consultants to understand their objectives before the interview begins, but keep the conversation as informal as possible.

Focus group discussions

The reasons for engaging in focus group discussions are relatively similar to those identified for key stakeholder interviews. Focus groups allow a small number (typically 6-10) of similar participants to talk about particular topics relevant to the study. This method can be helpful in fulfilling the third objective (engaging demographic groups that have historically been underrepresented in previous planning efforts), particularly if a demographic group has not been reached through other means. Group discussion allows participants to bounce ideas off of one another, thereby providing richer, more detailed input, and can also allow participants to identify consensus on important ideas and themes.

Mapping activities

A mapping activity can be a fun and interactive exercise for in-person public engagement (it can also be conducted individually on-line, but not without the help of a consultant or specialized software). Mapping exercises typically bring together small groups of people to draw on (or otherwise mark-up) a map. They encourage community conversation, consensus building, and long-term thinking about the future of a community. Activities can focus on one specific neighborhood, key residential or mixed-use development areas, or the community as a whole. Whatever the focus area, it is important that each small group be populated with diverse participants, not simply a homogenous group of residents or stakeholders that attend the event together; this way, the exercise simulates the types of compromises that must be made to make policy as a local government.

In the past, *Homes* mapping activities have included asking participants to mark areas for preservation and revitalization using markers. Then participants must choose to accommodate some or all of expected population growth, by laying down stickers representing different housing types, parks, commercial, and mixed use development.

Homes community workshop

Community workshops allow residents and stakeholders to gather face-to-face to discuss housing topics, identify specific issues and opportunities related to the *Homes* project, and participate in simulated decision-making activities with other interested community members. While all of these activities can be completed online, a specific in-person *Homes* workshop has been developed that meets all three public engagement objectives while utilizing a combination of the methods mentioned above.

A group of municipalities developing an interjurisdictional *Homes* plan may opt to conduct one workshop in each community, one collaborative workshop, or both. If the steering committee opts for a collaborative workshop, then participants should be identified from among various stakeholder groups and seated so that each table brings together stakeholders from each community. The goal should be to encourage collaborative vision setting and build trust among stakeholders who will need to work together to implement interjurisdictional plan recommendations.

A typical *Homes* workshop begins with a brief presentation that explains the history and objectives of the planning process, an overview of local, regional, and national housing trends, and a data presentation based on results of the *Homes* model for the community. Following this series of information, it is common to engage participants in a visual preference survey using keypad polling technology. If keypads are not available, the same exercise can be completed via paper survey or a combination of paper survey and PowerPoint.

The final piece of the *Homes* community workshop includes a series of mapping and survey exercises. These exercises have been detailed in the step-by-step [workshop guide](#) included in the *Homes for a Changing Region* toolkit. The workshop guide also provides instructions on how

to utilize [community maps, development chips, and other workshop materials](#) to complete decision-making activities that can help form a consensus-driven housing vision.

In preparation for the community workshop, project staff will need to recruit and train a group of table facilitators. Facilitators should include a diverse representation of community staff, community leaders, and key stakeholders that have experience connecting with the public on topics related to housing or community development. The number of facilitators that are needed will vary based on community size and anticipated participation, but a core group of volunteers should be established that is familiar with the workshop guide in order to accommodate a meeting of any size.

Communications

Local government staff or consultants will need to publicize opportunities for stakeholders and residents to provide input and feedback. They will also need to provide periodic and consistent project updates to maintain public engagement and increase awareness. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways.

Flyers

Depending on the audience, flyers can be made accessible in print or digital formats. Flyers should highlight the details (date, time, location) of a community workshop and provide any links for online engagement opportunities. Communities should distribute and display print flyers in key locations throughout the community (such as municipal buildings, libraries, community centers, train stations, coffee shops, nonprofit organizations, social service organizations, banks/credit unions, schools/universities, post offices, churches, and other high traffic areas). Digital flyers can be uploaded and linked to websites, social media (Facebook, Twitter), community newsletters, or anywhere else a link could be accessed.

Emails

Emails are a useful tool to ensure that you are continuously communicating with residents and stakeholders regarding the *Homes* process and public engagement opportunities. The *Homes* toolkit provides [a comprehensive set of email templates](#) to communicate information on the project to local residents and stakeholders. These can be sent intermittently throughout the *Homes* process to highlight specific phases of the process, as well as provide background information and project context for interested parties. One email should specifically focus on the public engagement process and include meeting details or links to online engagement opportunities, information on how input will be used to inform the plan, and staff contact information for additional questions. These emails can be sent to elected officials in addition to community constituents.

Meetings with community organizations

Engaging with stakeholder groups at regularly scheduled community and civic meetings can be an effective way to spread the word about upcoming engagement opportunities. Examples include local churches and meetings at chambers of commerce, civic clubs (Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, etc.), parent groups, cultural organizations, human service providers, as well as gatherings of real estate professionals, developers, or landlords. A brief presentation to any of these audiences about the *Homes for a Changing Region* project and engagement opportunities can result in increased participation by a diverse and representative collection of community residents and stakeholders.

Follow-up with past participants

Reaching out to residents and stakeholders that have been previously involved in planning or local project work can successfully bring residents and stakeholders to the table. Revisiting attendance sheets from past public meetings, planning processes, and community events

provides a strong base list of residents or stakeholders who can be reached out to via phone calls, email, water bill mailings, or flyer distribution. In addition, connecting with those who have previously been involved will help these key residents and stakeholders feel invested in the process of shaping the community, building ongoing community support for public processes and projects in the future.

Social media

Utilizing social media to collect input or market public engagement activities can be useful for communities. The use of tools such as Facebook or Twitter can reach a broad spectrum of constituents and create an established following for *Homes* as well as for future community projects or events.

Outreach timeline

There are key points where outreach to elected officials, community staff, and community residents and stakeholders will be necessary. The [sample project timeline](#) included in the toolkit provides a suggested outline of the outreach process and activities, including when they should occur.

Utilizing public input

Input collected throughout the process will be instrumental in informing the final *Homes* plan. Alongside input from elected officials and municipal staff, housing trend data, and future housing projections, the feedback and preferences community residents and stakeholders should be considered in order to determine priority areas, housing recommendations, and density specifications in the community.

Local government staff or consultants should prepare a memo that summarizes public engagement and input for the steering committee and elected officials. [A typical outreach memo](#) includes:

- A brief description of the *Homes for a Changing Region* project.
- Outreach and engagement goals of the project.
- A schedule of completed outreach events, including a brief description of marketing and communication efforts.
- Detailed data received through community workshops or online tools, including:
 - Maps and workshop activities
 - Paper survey results
 - Key pad polling results
 - Data received from online tools
 - Demographic information
 - Themes emerging from workshops or online engagement
 - Next steps for keeping the community engaged

Measuring public engagement

For public engagement, each *Homes* project will need to determine its own definition of success. At the onset of the process, staff and the project steering committee should decide what factors are important to the process and set achievable goals accordingly. Communities should also consider to what degree they were able to satisfy the three public engagement objectives of the *Homes* process.

Possible goals could include:

- Engaging a certain number or percentage of the total population.

- Increasing public understanding of housing policy and trends.
- Engaging residents or stakeholders from a specified community area, age cohort, housing tenure or demographic group.

Possible metrics could include:

- Total number of participants engaged.
- Responses to pre- and post- involvement surveys about basic housing issues.
- Demographic makeup of those who participated.

Local government staff or consultants could also measure success by whether the process has helped develop new community partnerships that can assist in the implementation of plan recommendations, or by the level of commitment of steering committee members to continue working on *Homes* recommendations as a core planning initiative of the community. Ultimately, while there is no single measure that will determine if public engagement has been a success, it can be difficult to show measurable results without defining what success looks like at the outset.

Final thoughts

Participation in *Homes for a Changing Region* should be informative, productive, and fun for community residents and stakeholders. Local government staff and consultants should strive to create engagement opportunities that maximize potential for input and are easily accessible for residents and stakeholders.



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