



PUBLIC MANAGEMENT



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HOUSING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

DECEMBER 2023
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The Nobility of Public Service Reflected in Local Government Program at Harvard

If I took an inventory of the professional development experiences that have enhanced my leadership skills, my career, and even my personal life, I would put this program at the top of the list.

BY MARC A. OTT

The end of one year and the beginning of the next is always a great time for personal reflection. As I looked over the articles for *PM Magazine* this month, an article about ICMA's annual scholarship for the Harvard Senior Executives in State and Local Government Program caught my eye. If I took an inventory of the professional development experiences that have enhanced my leadership skills, my career, and even my personal life, I would put this program at the top of the list. In fact, superlatives like “amazing,” “transformational,” and “life-changing” coming from fellow managers are what led me to the program in the first place.

A Unique Experience

From the moment I made the commitment to attend, the journey began. I received notebooks full of information detailing the cases we would be discussing and the biographies of the people that would be leading the program. These were the best and brightest in the field of public service—academics and peers—and it was clear they would be expecting those of us selected to join the

program to be ready to contribute on day one. And that was truly the case.

We were segmented into study groups, and I was even assigned to lead one. We were challenged to consider problems that confronted local government leaders from every angle. The faculty demanded that every participant be fully engaged every day. While the professors had data and research to back up their discussion points, we students—elected officials, lawyers, or city managers like me—had real life experiences. Those often-divergent points of view made for a completely absorbing three weeks. You had to be at your best, all day, every day, marshalling all your brain power to be a meaningful contributor to the discussions.

I made lifelong friendships with both the faculty and fellow participants as we engaged in conversation on topical issues, public service policy, and points of views relevant to the very work I was doing at home. Most importantly, it reignited my commitment to and love for public service. It's impossible to walk through the Harvard campus without thinking about the ideals of



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Public Management (PM) aims to inspire innovation, inform decision making, connect leading-edge thinking to everyday challenges, and serve ICMA members and local governments in creating and sustaining thriving communities throughout the world.



democracy and the contributions of great leaders like John F. Kennedy, for whom the Harvard Kennedy School is named.

Relevant to My Community

The ICMA scholarship is one way to finance the considerable expense of the program, and we are grateful to the Ferguson Group for the funding they provide. The application period opens this month. Learn more at icma.org/harvard.

As I was moving into a new position in a new city three decades ago, I was able to negotiate attending the Harvard program as part of my employment agreement. My experience most certainly paid dividends to the city throughout the rest of my career. As we graduated from the program, each of us believed that we were leaving with the capacity to resolve some of the great challenges of the day. When I returned to my city, I was eager to act on the ideas and perspectives gleaned from the program. I can recall my mayor saying, “Slow down, you need to bring us along with you.”

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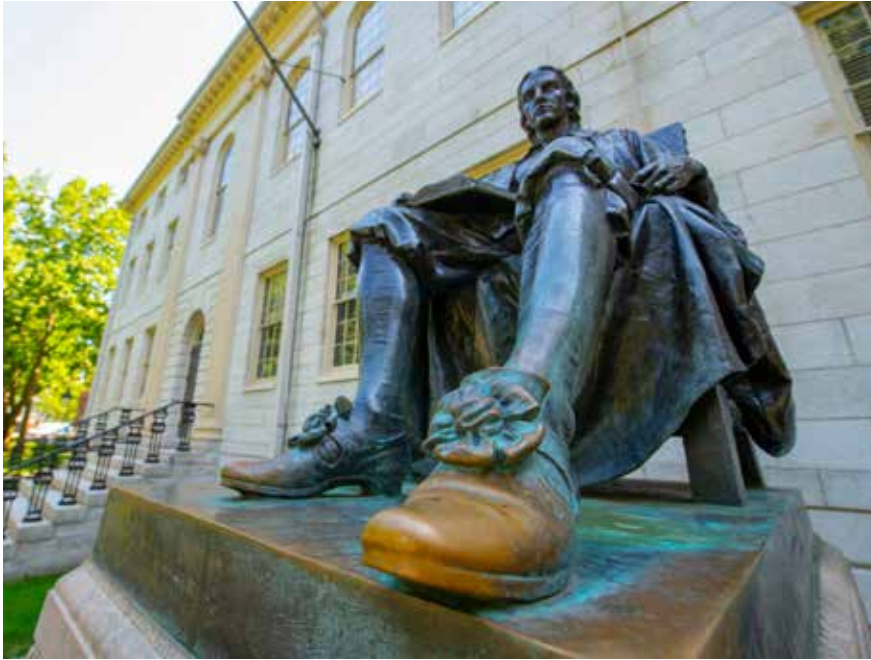
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Superlatives like “amazing,” “transformational,” and “life-changing” coming from fellow managers are what led me to the program in the first place.



move forward quickly in the face of rapidly changing circumstances.

- Keep an open mind. When you are flexible and open to even unorthodox suggestions, you will often find clarity.

I have been back to the Kennedy School a couple of times as a guest and for a refresher. My staff sometimes teases me when I say, “I’m on the edge of my seat,” as we pursue a new direction or take on a wicked problem. That expression comes directly from the time I spent in Cambridge and the feeling that anything is possible when your end goal is to improve the lives of the people you serve. **PM**

There are, of course, process and operational lessons to learn there, but here are just a couple of takeaways from the program that have helped form my leadership philosophy:

- Be prepared to be challenged and to have what you think you know challenged.
- There is not necessarily a right answer. Sometimes decisions must be made in the gray area.
- Take the time to be in the muck where things aren’t clear; those discussions can lead to unexpected breakthroughs.
- It’s important to take a step back, especially when you feel pressure to

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The Senior Executives in State and Local Government Program at the Harvard Kennedy School is hailed as a life-changing, transformational career development opportunity unlike any other.

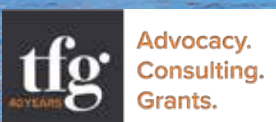
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Deck the Halls: Gifts and Gratuities During the Holiday Season

BY JESSICA COWLES

Strengthening the organization's approach to receiving a gift and advice on creating **effective gift guidelines**

At some point, every local government faces questions about gifts to employees, especially during the traditional holiday season. Left unaddressed, gifting can be a source of embarrassment for the organization when an employee (or local official) accepts something that calls into question his or her integrity.

The issue of who gets what and how much can also be a distraction and a source of discontent among the staff. Doubt that this is true? Ask your staff. You will hear about the department that eats well in December or the supervisor who regularly keeps the crate of fresh oranges for himself. This comes up in ethics training sessions all the time!

Although the questions usually arise during the holiday season, any time is a good time for leaders to review the organization's practices and policies for accepting gifts from appreciative residents, local businesses, and vendors. The best policies or practices should support the organization's values, help staff and officials make good judgments, communicate clear expectations to all, be uniformly and fairly applied and enforced across the organization, and, in addition, build public trust and confidence in the integrity of the staff and organization. When you have completed the organizational assessment, then consider whether you are the role model for exemplary conduct.

Approaches to Receiving a Gift

Local governments address the challenges of gift giving and receiving in a variety of ways, ranging from a pure values-based approach, which empowers the individual to make the judgment call on the basis of shared values, to a stricter regulatory standard.

Regardless of the approach, it is always important to encourage individuals to think about appearances and how their conduct contributes to an ethical culture. Simply establishing a set of rules without explaining how they support good public service values won't be effective in achieving the desired conduct.

ICMA's Code of Ethics expresses a core commitment to seek no favor and offers this guidance on gifts:

Members shall not directly or indirectly solicit, accept or receive any gift if it could reasonably be perceived or inferred that the gift was intended to



influence them in the performance of their official duties; or if the gift was intended to serve as a reward for any official action on their part.

The term 'gift' includes but is not limited to services, travel, meals, gift cards, tickets, or other entertainment or hospitality. Gifts of money or loans from persons other than the local government jurisdiction pursuant to normal employment practices are not acceptable.

Members should not accept any gift that could undermine public confidence. De minimis gifts may be accepted in circumstances that support the execution of the member's official duties or serve a legitimate public purpose. In those cases, the member should determine a modest maximum dollar value based on guidance from the governing body or any applicable state or local law.

The guideline is not intended to apply to normal social practices, not associated with the member's official duties, where gifts are exchanged among friends, associates and relatives.

Advice on Creating Effective Gift Guidelines

Set reasonable standards. If the policy sets a value limit on gifts, make sure that it passes the reasonable-person standard. Is the gift small enough that a reasonable person would assume it was not a reward or intended to gain favor?



JESSICA COWLES

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It is always important to encourage individuals to think about appearances and how their conduct contributes to an ethical culture.

Some jurisdictions set a dollar limit—perhaps \$50. Acknowledging the ambiguity of the reasonable-person standard, other policies set the threshold at zero and permit only token gifts of food that can be shared with others.

Help people make good decisions.

Create a framework for decision making, place value limits on gifts, and implement a disclosure requirement. This provides the guidance needed when the issue isn't clear. A sound policy makes it clear that accepting a gift of any dollar value can give some people the impression of favoritism or susceptibility to influence. It may be helpful to provide examples of “de minimis” gifts (e.g., calendars, books) and examples of gifts that must be disclosed (tickets to sports events or concerts, tangible gifts above an established dollar value).

Be uniform, fair, and aware of roles.

A grateful public rightfully acknowledges the contributions of public safety and other front-line service providers. Leaders need to acknowledge the contributions of all who work to deliver services by establishing

and enforcing a uniform policy across the organization. That said, some employees by virtue of their roles and responsibilities will be held to a higher standard. The city of Decatur, Georgia, expresses it well: although no employee should solicit or accept any gift or gratuity from anyone who has official business with the city, “it is particularly important that managerial employees, contracting officers, inspectors, and enforcement officers guard against any relationship which might be construed as evidence of favoritism, coercion, unfair advantage or collusion.”

Lead by example. We work hard to establish credibility and trust with the public and staff by holding ourselves accountable and paying attention to appearances. If accepting a gift creates the appearance of impropriety or sends the wrong message to your staff, your credibility is at risk. Often the test of whether you should accept a gift is to simply ask, “Do I really, really want this?”

If the answer is yes, you should decline it because your objectivity is already compromised. The best strategy is to just say “no thanks.”

Repurpose the effort. In addition to educating staff and officials about gift policies, be proactive to make sure that residents, businesses, and vendors understand the organization's standards. In a period of dire need, local governments could take the lead in redirecting holiday gift giving—by the business community, in particular—to more urgent causes. Instead of offering the gift to local government employees, businesses could donate to a food bank, to a student scholarship fund, or to any number of the nonprofit organizations that provide essential services. The list of needs is endless. **PM**

This article has been excerpted from ICMA's publication, Ethics Matter! Advice for Public Managers, which is a free download for ICMA members. Learn more at bookstore.icma.org.

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Taking Advantage of New Tax Credits for Clean Energy

BY BENJAMIN POWELL

The IRS has added elective pay/direct pay to Inflation Reduction Act funding.

Local governments and nonprofits can get more than half of their clean energy project paid back with elective pay. In June 2023, the IRS expanded nontaxable entities' access to Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) tax credits with the addition of elective pay (also commonly called direct pay). Elective/direct pay not only allows these entities access to these tax credits, but also multiplies the credit amount to cover a significant portion of the cost of the project. However, the application process is challenging, and payment occurs after project completion. This article will cover eligibility, how the application process works, and future changes.

Eligibility

The IRA created unprecedented funding for clean energy technologies in the form of tax credits. There is both a clean electricity production credit (Section 45Y), which includes hydrogen, carbon sequestration, and nuclear; and a renewable electricity production credit (Section 45), for wind, solar, biomass, hydropower, and geothermal.

As nontaxable entities, local governments and nonprofits were unable to receive these tax credits until the recent addition of elective pay. Until this addition, tax-exempt and government entities could not tap into the IRA funds because they did not owe any federal taxes. Elective pay allows applicable entities to receive a tax-free cash payment equal to the full value of tax credits for their qualifying clean energy project. Under these recent changes, the following entities are considered applicable entities for elective pay:

- Tax-exempt organizations under § 501(a), including §501(c) and §501(d).¹
- State and political subdivisions (local governments).
- Indian tribal governments.
- Agencies of state, including water districts, school districts, economic development agencies, public universities, and hospitals.

- The Tennessee Valley Authority.
- U.S. territorial governments and subdivisions.
- Rural electric cooperatives.

How It Works

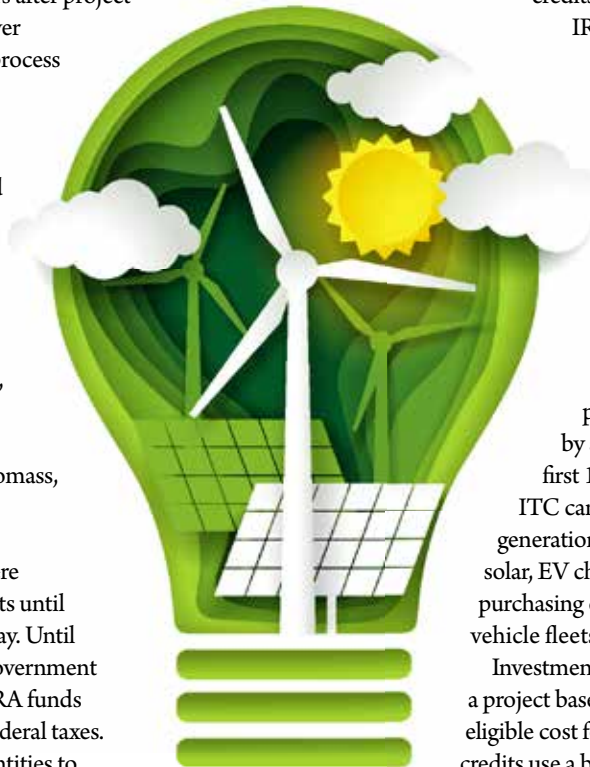
Elective pay allows these entities to access 12 of the IRA tax credits. Of the 12 tax credits, the most relevant for clean energy are the production tax credit and investment tax credit. For the full list of applicable tax credits and technologies, see the IRS's Elective Pay Eligible Tax Credits List.²

The production tax credit (PTC) can be used for clean energy generation and community solar. PTCs are based on the total energy produced and sold by applicable renewable energy facilities. Currently, PTC will pay 2.75 cents per kilowatt-hour produced by a facility every year for the first 10 years of that facility's life.

ITC can be used for clean energy generation, battery storage, community solar, EV charging infrastructure, and purchasing clean vehicles for state or city vehicle fleets.

Investment tax credits (ITCs) refund a project based on a percentage of the eligible cost for the project. These tax credits use a base and a bonus credit structure. The base for ITC is 6% but gets multiplied by five (up to 30%) if following the prevailing wage and apprenticeship requirements. The requirements are extensive, but projects under 1 megawatt are automatically approved.³

In addition, there are three bonus tax credits that can increase this amount further: the domestic content bonus, energy communities bonus, and low-income communities bonus. The credit amount for these can be seen in Figure 1. If combined, these tax credits can refund 60%–70% of the cost of a clean energy project.



BENJAMIN POWELL is an assistant project manager at ICMA (bpowell@icma.org).

Figure 1

Bonus Tax Credit Provision	Amount	Description
Domestic Content ⁴	10%	- Projects or facilities that meet the domestic content requirements can receive a 10% increase to ITC. - If not met after 2024, could result in reduction of PTC or ITC. - Projects under 1 MW are exempt. - Treasury is developing an exemption process application.
Energy Communities ⁵	10%	Projects in historical energy communities can receive a 10% increase in PTC. For a list of these communities, see endnote #6 for an Arc GIS map.⁶
Low-Income ⁷	10% or 20% increase	Facilities located in low-income communities, tribal lands, or federal housing projects, or serving low-income projects, can receive 10% or 20% increased credit.

For a more detailed explanation of the bonus credits, visit the IRS's *Credits and Deductions Under the IRA* page.⁸

The timeline for this repayment program begins after the clean energy project goes into service. Before the tax return year that the project went into service, there is a prefilling requirement done through the IRS electronic portal. After the prefilling, you will receive a registration number from the IRS. File the tax return by May 15 (tax day for tax-exempt entities), and you will receive the direct payment after it is processed. The prefilling requirement is quick and cannot be amended in the tax form.

Future Changes

The domestic content bonus will become a requirement moving forward. If the requirement is not met, eligible projects starting in 2024 receive 90% of the direct payment, projects starting in 2025 will receive 85%, and projects starting in 2026 and beyond will receive no payment. There is an option of getting a waiver if the cost is too great, and we are currently waiting for guidance on this from the IRS.

Beginning in 2025, the tax credits will become tech-neutral. When the current PTC and ITC expire in 2024, they will be replaced with Clean Energy PTC and Clean Energy ITC in 2025. Currently, these tax credits only cover the technologies outlined in the IRS's eligible tax credits document.⁹ This change means these tax credits will be

tech-neutral so that they can apply to any electric generating facility with net-zero greenhouse gas emissions. This will be a huge help for new and emerging technologies, like clean hydrogen, to be included in the funding. In addition, energy storage will now be able to apply for clean energy ITC as a standalone, instead of being an add-on for another renewable generation facility.

Final Notes

The payment amount promised by elective pay is higher than any clean energy repayment program to date. In addition, these tax credits can be tied to bonds, loans, and grants, and added onto accelerated depreciation. However, with steep restrictions and delayed payment, many local governments and nonprofits are concerned about diving right in. Some developers are already leading the charge on maneuvering through the restrictions and requirements to receive the tax credit. The city of Chicago had already planned to put solar panels on some of their libraries and is now adjusting their project to receive elective pay funding. As these developers experience which applications get accepted and which get denied, the tax credits will become more accessible to everyone. ICMA offers resources and assistance with the application process through programs like SolSmart,

Solar@Scale, Technical Assistance to Brownfields (TAB), and the Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Center (TCTAC).

Countries around the world are waiting to see how effective IRA and elective pay tax credits are at increasing green infrastructure in the United States while keeping capital domestic, replacing greenhouse emitting infrastructure, and assisting low-income communities. With these tax credits expected to be usable for a long time into the future, it is important to learn the ins and outs of successful applications.¹⁰ **PM**

ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

¹ <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/exempt-organization-types>

² <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p5817g.pdf>

³ <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/08/30/2023-18514/increased-credit-or-deduction-amounts-for-satisfying-certain-prevailing-wage-and-registered>

⁴ <https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/irs-provides-initial-guidance-for-the-domestic-content-bonus-credit>

⁵ <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-drop/n-23-29.pdf>

⁶ <https://arcgis.netl.doe.gov/portal/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=a44704679a4f44a5aac122324eb00914&page=home>

⁷ <https://www.irs.gov/credits-deductions/low-income-communities-bonus-credit>

⁸ <https://www.irs.gov/credits-and-deductions-under-the-inflation-reduction-act-of-2022>

⁹ <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p5817g.pdf>

¹⁰ See 17:20 time on July 6 WRI video: <https://www.wri.org/events/2023/7/exploring-new-guidance-ira-tax-incentives-clean-energy>

Building Stronger Local Government Leaders through a Life-changing Harvard Program

BY KERRY HANSEN AND KELLY DIMARTINO

The Senior Executives in State and Local Government Program is a transformative learning experience like no other. A scholarship from ICMA makes it even more accessible.

“Deeply impactful”—that’s how Kelly DiMartino, city manager of Fort Collins, Colorado, described the Harvard Kennedy School’s Senior Executives in State and Local Government Program. DiMartino received a scholarship from ICMA, sponsored by The Ferguson Group, to attend a 2023 session of the program. She agreed with past scholarship recipients that the program was truly a remarkable experience. “It caused me to reflect on my assumptions and beliefs and stretch outside my comfort zone, and I formed what promise to be lasting relationships with some truly amazing people from around the globe.”

With the 2024 scholarship application deadline looming—January 31, 2024—prospective participants should act now to learn more about this exciting opportunity.

About the Program

Senior Executives in State and Local Government, a flagship program of the Harvard Kennedy School, provides a balance of both traditional and hands-on learning experiences to help even the most seasoned local government practitioners better address the concerns of their residents and communities.

This three-week program for senior executives in local government mimics a city ecosystem that allows participants to test solutions to various issues in real-time, enabling the participants to:

- Challenge their assumptions about how to exercise leadership in the public sector.
- Develop new conceptual frameworks for addressing policy issues.
- Examine innovative partnerships and new models of collaborative governance.
- Explore the relationship between citizens and their government.
- Understand the behavioral dimensions of decision making.
- Exchange ideas with experienced faculty and a diverse group of colleagues.

The program operates as an interactive classroom, in which participants and faculty work together on real-life

case studies and learn from each other along the way. This classroom setting transforms into an interactive environment that serves as a forum for raising difficult issues, which provokes discussions that lead to change.

Scholarship Opportunity

While this program offers an invaluable, once-in-a-lifetime experience, the tuition fee is still a factor that can influence one’s decision to apply for the program. For those who are reluctant to apply because of the price tag, ICMA awards yearly scholarships covering the tuition fee, which is \$17,400 for the 2024 program. The scholarship recipient will only need to pay their own travel expenses. This generous scholarship is provided by ICMA Corporate Partner, The Ferguson Group. Scholarship recipients may participate in either session: June 3–21, 2024 or July 8–26, 2024.

Kelly DiMartino’s Harvard Experience

Every year, we ask our scholarship recipient to write about their time at the Harvard Kennedy School, sharing what it was like, what impacted them most, and what they would like other prospective attendees to know. (You can read Kelly’s summary on the following page.) In addition, we asked Kelly a few questions to hear more about her experience.

What prompted you to apply for the scholarship?

I am always seeking ways to be a responsible steward of our city dollars. Applying for the scholarship was a way that I could attend this program and preserve limited training dollars for other members of our City Manager’s Office to also participate in regional and national conferences.

What surprised you about your time in the program? What did you enjoy most and what did you find most challenging? I didn’t realize how weighed down I had become from the day-to-day pressures of leading in the public sector. Having this opportunity to connect with others who understand those pressures, and to build relationships through challenging and authentic conversation and experiences, was truly a gift.



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KELLY DIMARTINO is

city manager of Fort Collins, Colorado.

Scholarship Eligibility Criteria

The scholarship is only available to senior executives defined as municipal and county managers and assistants who have been members of ICMA for at least three years. View the complete eligibility criteria at icma.org/harvard.

Is there an aspect of the program you're already incorporating on the job or even personally? Learning to “sit in the discomfort” of unsettling conversations and considering the building blocks of trust when assessing a situation are a couple that I use most regularly.

Learn More

If the Harvard Kennedy School's Senior Executives in State and Local Government Program sounds like the type of rejuvenation your career needs, we encourage you to visit icma.org/harvard for more information on the program and ICMA's scholarship for the program. **PM**

“Sitting in the Discomfort” and Other Lessons from the Harvard Kennedy School Senior Executives in State and Local Government Program

BY KELLY DIMARTINO

In July 2023, I had the honor of attending the Senior Executives in State and Local Government program at the Harvard Kennedy School. I've attended many conferences, trainings, and leadership development sessions throughout the years, yet none have compared to this program or had the impact on me as this program did.

At its heart, the program is about getting to know yourself, stretching outside your comfort zone, building relationships, and expanding your toolbox for the act of leadership.

For me, the experience came at the perfect time in my career. Having spent nearly 30 years in local government and serving as city manager for just two short years, the opportunity to spend three weeks in Boston/Cambridge with 84 leaders from around the world and a group of truly amazing instructors and staff was quite remarkable.

Participants are intentionally selected to include both elected and appointed positions who represent differing parts of the United States, political perspectives, and religious and life views. Colleagues from Brazil, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand added unique insights and perspectives.

In week one, we got to know one another as instructors encouraged us to challenge our own assumptions and brought to light how the patterns and trends from our country's founding have impacted who we are and how we govern today. This led to many polite conversations and a few spirited debates.

The week concluded with a Saturday trip to Thompson Island for an Outward Bound type of experience. We loaded up bright and early and survived a long day of heat and humidity, stretching ourselves through a variety of team activities and challenges.

While I was admittedly a bit skeptical going in, the shared experience at Thompson Island strengthened our bond as a class in unexpected ways, and by week two, the conversations took on a different tenure. Conversations got real. We tackled the tough topics of racial disparity, policing in America, and gender issues.

I will forever remember the moment when a classmate challenged us to “sit in the discomfort” of the unsettling and challenging discussion.

Week three transitioned into working on team projects, applying the concepts we had been learning, and supporting classmates who were struggling with these real-world challenges back at home.

Throughout the three weeks, we were taught, facilitated, and inspired by a host of impressive authors, experts, and scholars. From each of them, I took away nuggets of learning and inspiration, and routinely reflect on their prompts, just to name a few:

- What will make our community 10% better?
- As soon as there is an “us,” there is a “them.”
- The four building blocks of trust.
- Tips to maximize value in negotiations.

And the list goes on.

The off-campus festivities were an important part of the experience, and classmates had plenty of fun during ball games, concerts, walks along the Freedom Trail, conversations over dinner or in a brewery, weekend getaways to Provincetown or Salem, and even some karaoke! The combination of the classroom and three weeks of shared experiences created something truly special. Al Baker, executive director for the New York City Police Department, and our unofficial class bard, said it best, “That there is a ‘we’ that emerges from HKS—that roots for one another, watches one another, is inspired by or brought to learn from one another—is a gift.”

I am deeply grateful to ICMA for the scholarship to attend this program. Leading in the public sector is not easy. Every day we face the pressures of our jobs—high expectations in an increasingly polarized environment, making hard and often debated decisions, and relentless demands. This was a chance to get away from it all, be reminded of why we do this work, explore who we want to be, gain tools to build resilience, form new connections, and reflect on how we can make this world a more beautiful place. **PM**

The United States Housing Affordability Crisis:

NO EASY SOLUTIONS

The many dimensions of the crisis, the impact of the pandemic, and what will (and won't) really make a difference.

As the United States has grown and the quality of the nation's housing has improved, it has also become more expensive and less affordable to much of the nation's population. Millions of Americans today find themselves spending so much for housing that they have difficulty meeting other necessities of life, while many others are thwarted in their dreams of homeownership.

BY ALAN MALLACH



Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis in housing affordability has been a recurrent theme in the media, while solutions have been put forward by organizations and people across the political spectrum. But much of what is written about the problem is often misleading, while the solutions being most widely promoted would have little or no effect on the families most severely affected. In this article, I will describe the elements that make up the affordability crisis, and why they have just recently become so much more severe. Then I discuss the current efforts to address the problem and suggest what may be needed if it is ever to be truly resolved.

1. Breaking Down America's Affordability Problems

There is no one affordability problem. There are many affordability problems, depending on one's income, where one lives, and whether one is an owner or tenant. The most important, though, in terms of the suffering it causes and its significance for housing policy, is rental affordability or cost burden. It affects people of different incomes differently and varies greatly across the United States. A second problem is homebuyer affordability, or the extent to which high housing costs prevent households from becoming homeowners, but which mostly affects families of higher incomes than those whose lives are most deeply blighted by high rental costs. Most of this article will focus on rental affordability.

Households spending more than 30% of their gross income for rental costs, including

utilities, are considered *cost burdened*. Those spending more than 50% of their gross income for rental costs are considered *severely cost burdened*. In 2021, 21.6 million renter households, almost half of all American renter households or one in six American households, were cost burdened. More than half of those, or 11.6 million renters, were *severely* cost burdened. The great majority of these households were very low-income households. While the percentage of cost burdened renters dropped slightly between 2014 and 2019, it has risen sharply since then. Two distinct and separate affordability problems, however, are nested in this total. I call them *systemic cost burden* and *strong-market cost burden*. They are very different.

Systemic Cost Burden

Very low-income families face the most severe rental affordability problems. They must contend with a systemic imbalance in the nation's economy between what low-level jobs pay and what it costs a private landlord to provide a modest but decent rental dwelling unit. For example, the 25th percentile hourly wage (25% earn less and 75% earn more) in the United States for retail workers in 2021 was \$12.43/hour. A worker in such a job, working 35 hours/week for 50 weeks (if she's lucky) will earn a total of \$21,131 for the year. If she is the sole support of her family, she can afford to pay no more than \$528/month for rent without being cost burdened.

Most rental properties in most American communities are either single family homes or a small multifamily buildings. When you add up the operating

costs, including maintenance, reserves, property management, taxes, insurance, water and sewer fees, and allowances for vacancies and collections, they typically run between \$400 and \$600 per year. Assuming the landlord's cost to acquire and upgrade the property is a modest \$100,000 and she aims for a 6% annual return on her investment, or has to pay a mortgage at that interest rate, the lowest rent they can charge and still come out ahead is \$900 to \$1100 per month, *almost double what the 25th percentile retail worker and her family can afford*.

Severe cost burden is concentrated among America's poorest families. Of these families, 87% of renter households earning under \$10,000/year and 67% of those earning \$10,000 to \$19,999 spend 50% or more of their gross income for housing. *The poorest 20% of renters account for 60% of all households with severe cost burden*. These families live in chronic instability. They struggle to pay for food, transportation, and other essentials, while their ability to pay their rent can easily be derailed by unexpected medical expenses or a car breakdown. Cost-burdened households, particularly single mothers with children, are at greatest risk of eviction. They move more frequently than other families and often experience episodes of homelessness, undermining their family life, their children's future, and their neighborhood's stability.

Strong Market Cost Burden

Systemic affordability problems exist everywhere in the United States. But in high-demand housing market areas like coastal California, New York

City, or Washington, DC, the pressure created by strong demand and limited supply leads affordability problems to migrate upward; that is, families at progressively higher income levels experience affordability problems. Renters earning between \$30,000 and \$74,999 (roughly 40 to 100% of the national median) are much more likely to be cost burdened in Los Angeles than, say, in Philadelphia or Cincinnati. These renters are hurting, but the amount of money a family earning \$75,000 and paying 40% of their income for rent has left over for other necessities is far greater than that available to the family earning \$20,000.

Strong-market affordability flows from two intersecting problems: the cost of housing has been bid up by demand from more affluent households and is made worse by the difficulty and high cost of building in these areas. Housing production in areas like Los Angeles or San Francisco is severely constrained not only by restrictive regulations but by many other factors, including natural and environmental constraints. Those constraints, along with extremely high land costs, the high cost of labor and materials, and the effects of rigorous building and safety codes, have led the cost of building to skyrocket. A 2022 report pegged average construction costs in San Francisco at \$439 per square foot. Using this construction cost, adding modest land and soft costs, a small new two-bedroom apartment would cost over \$750,000, and would have to rent for over \$4,000/month to break even. While building enough of those apartments might lead older buildings to filter down in price

to where some middle-income families could afford them, tight land supply means that building enough to make a major difference might be well beyond what is realistically possible in San Francisco and many other supply-constrained strong market areas.

Affordability and the Ability to Buy a Home

Most American families aspire to homeownership. While for many years house prices and household incomes tended to move in parallel, starting around 2000 (except for a dip during the Great Recession) house prices have been rising faster than incomes. In addition to the price of the home, though, a family's ability to afford a home depends on the interest rate on the mortgage, as well as the size of the down payment and the annual cost of property taxes, insurance, and other fees, which vary widely from one part of the United States to another. To measure this, the National Association of Home Builders and Wells Fargo have created a Housing

Opportunity Index (HOI), which combines incomes, prices, and interest rates to estimate what percentage of the houses in any given housing market area are affordable to a family earning the median income for that area. The lower the HOI, the fewer homes that are affordable to such a family. See Figure 1.

The HOI goes up and down. Affordability dropped during the 2000–2007 housing bubble, rose sharply during the Great Recession, and stayed fairly stable between 2013 and 2020. Although house prices were rising during these years, their effect was mostly offset by dropping mortgage interest rates, which bottomed out in 2020. The steep drop in affordability since 2020 comes partly from rising prices and partly from rising interest rates. As with rental affordability, the affordability of homes for sale also varies widely across the country. There are areas where almost all homes are affordable to a median-income household (like Cumberland, Maryland or Elmira, New

York) and those where hardly any are affordable (like Orange County, California). The 11 least affordable housing market areas are all in California, while of the 40 areas (out of 234) where a median-income family can afford 75% or more of the homes, 39 are in the Northeast or Midwest.

The ability of middle-class families to buy a home fluctuates widely over time and geography. Within 15 years, the HOI has yo-yoed from 40% to 80% and back to 40%. But there are still many places in the United States—although not necessarily those where most people want to buy homes—where homes are highly affordable. As we turn to the way the perception of affordability as a metastasizing crisis has grown seemingly overnight, it is important to maintain that perspective.

2. COVID and the Unexpected Crisis

While housing affordability has long been seen as a problem, it took on new urgency during the COVID-19 pandemic. Soon

after the onset of the pandemic in early 2020, rentals and sales prices both began to rise much faster than ever before, even more than during the height of the bubble years. From the second quarter of 2020 to the fourth quarter of 2022, the median sales price for homes in the United States rose from \$322,600 to \$479,500, or nearly 50%. Although prices then began to tail off, the recent decline has been more than offset by rising mortgage interest rates. Rents also increased, by 13.5% in 2021 alone. While sales prices and rental growth are slowing down, they will likely never return to pre-pandemic levels. What can account for this increase, which was largely unpredicted by either researchers or industry professionals?

Many different factors came together in 2020 to create the conditions for sharp price and rent increases, as shown in Figure 3. New housing production has lagged behind demand since the onset of the Great Recession, creating a cumulative shortfall in supply, while new household formation, the main driver of housing demand, which was sluggish for many years, increased significantly during the late 2010s. At the same time, mortgage interest rates, which had been gradually declining since the 1980s, bottomed out at 2.66% in December 2020.

On top of this, the pandemic triggered both even greater demand and even less available supply. Many affluent renters realized that low mortgage interest rates made homeownership more attractive than continuing to rent. With people working from home rather than commuting

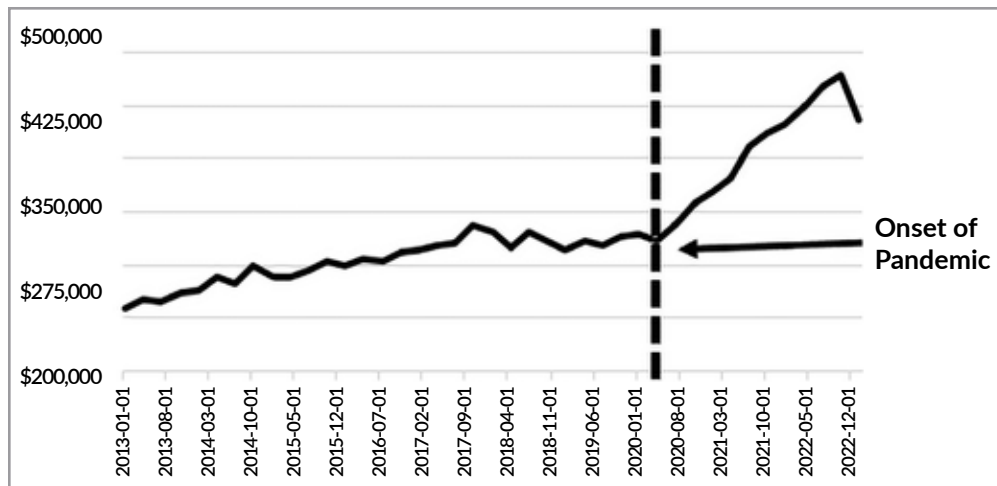
Figure 1: Housing Opportunity Index, 1992 to 2023



Source: NAHB-Wells Fargo Housing Opportunity Index

Note: The Y axis shows the percentage of homes a household earning the local median income can afford.

Figure 2: Change in Median House Sale Price, 2013 to 2023



Source: FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis/U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

to an office, many began to look for larger quarters, while others chose to relocate to communities farther from their workplace. Cities two or three hours from Manhattan—like Kingston, New York, or Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; or

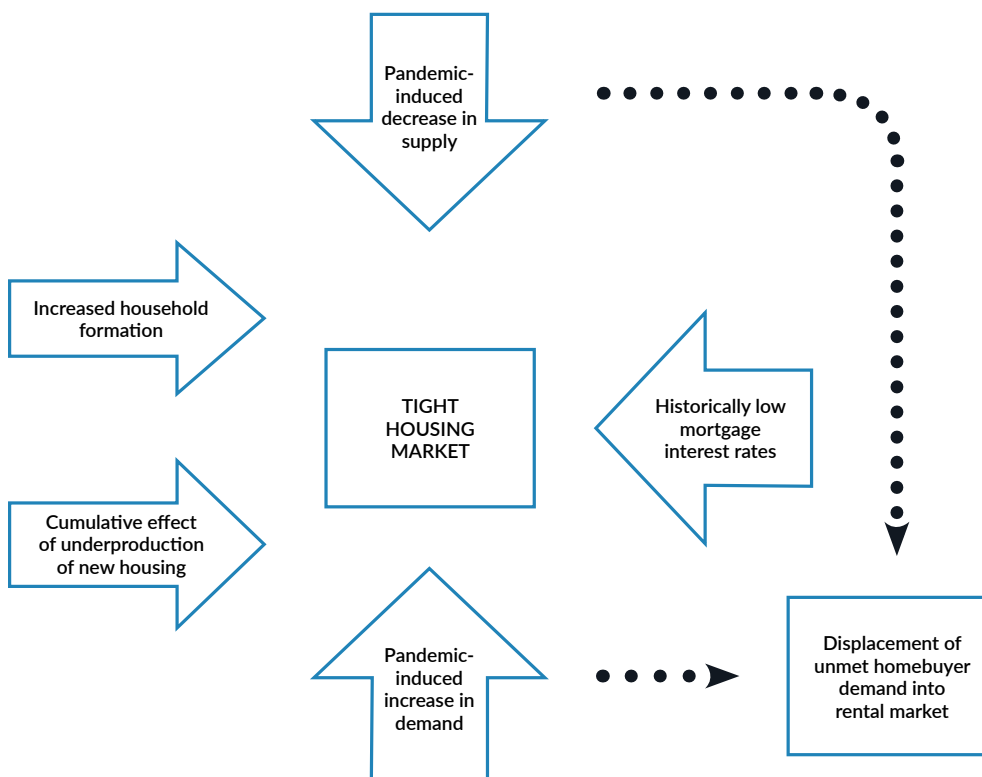
with strong natural amenities like Provo, Utah, or Sarasota, Florida—experienced sharp demand surges. The increase in demand was strongest among high-wage, upper-income households, disproportionately pushing prices upward.

At the same time, the number of homeowners putting their houses on the market dropped sharply. Many reasons have been suggested for this, including older owners' reluctance to move or have strangers in their homes during the pandemic.

As the market further tightened and mortgage interest rates began to rise, owners holding cheap mortgages realized that moving could mean much higher housing costs. Whatever the reasons, available housing inventory, which is highly seasonal, failed to rise as usual during the spring and summer of 2020, and then dropped precipitously during the second half of the year, just as demand was rising. By mid-2023, although the pandemic is no longer driving people's behavior, inventory levels have remained far below pre-pandemic levels.

The increase in house prices and rents, however, has inserted the issue of affordability squarely into the American political mainstream. But what does that really mean for the millions of people impacted by high housing costs?

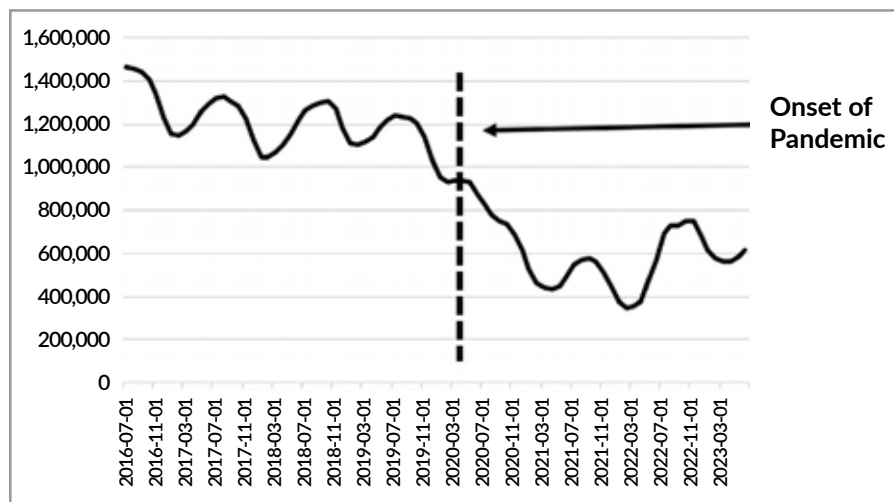
Figure 3: Factors Leading to House Price and Rent Increases During COVID-19 Pandemic



3. Can We Solve the Affordability Problem?

Housing costs have been on the national agenda for a long time. In 1978, the federal government created a Task Force on Housing Costs, whose final report opens by noting, "The high cost of housing is now a major problem for millions of Americans." In

Figure 4: Available Housing Inventory for Sale in the United States, 2016 through 2023



Source: FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis/Realtor.com

1990, President George H. W. Bush convened an Advisory Commission on Removing Barriers to Affordable Housing, while in 2004, president George W. Bush announced the America's Affordable Communities Initiative to "bring homes within reach of hard-working families through regulatory reform."

In some ways, nothing is new. But what people are talking about today is different in important ways. For one thing, the focus is overwhelmingly on a single issue: underproduction of new housing. While an undersupply of new housing, particularly in high-demand areas like coastal California, certainly contributes to the affordability problem, it is far from the *only* contributor to the problem. The focus, moreover, is on one specific obstacle to building more housing: land use regulation. That is, reforming the zoning laws local governments use to regulate the use, density, height, and other features of development.

This focus has brought together an unusually broad coalition, including homebuilders, as well as so-called YIMBY ("Yes in My Back Yard") pro-development voices from left to right, libertarian tech bros, and left-wing housing advocates. However, the voices of those who argue that other strategies are needed, particularly organizations serving very low-income families, are barely heard.

The strength of the coalition pushing for zoning reform has already led to major changes in many municipal zoning ordinances and in the laws of a number of state governments. The latter is most important, since under the American system of government, state law defines how towns and cities regulate land use. Any change to a state's zoning laws, therefore, changes the ground rules for hundreds of separate municipal zoning ordinances.

The first notable state zoning change was in Oregon in 2019, when it amended the state zoning law to abolish

exclusive single-family zoning in cities over 10,000 in population. All such cities must now allow two dwelling units where only one could be built before, while cities over 25,000 must allow at least four. Reforms have since been enacted in California, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, Montana, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, and Washington. Eight states now require municipalities to allow accessory dwelling units (ADUs)—second dwelling units on the same single family lot, either within the existing house or as a smaller separate structure—in single family zoning districts.

Ending the historic practice of exclusive single-family zoning, meaning zones where only single-family detached houses are allowed, has been a major goal of the zoning reform movement. That restriction governs the great majority of residentially zoned land in the United States, including almost all suburban

land and large parts of central cities, including 70% of the residentially zoned land in Minneapolis and 81% in Seattle. Indeed, many people point to the moment in 2019, when Minneapolis amended its zoning laws to eliminate single-family zoning districts and to permit up to three housing units to be built on each individual building lot as the first major victory of the zoning reform movement.

This turnabout on zoning, although still embryonic, must be recognized as a major achievement on an issue that until recently was seen as all but politically untouchable. Yet is it the "solution" to the affordable housing crisis, or even, as has been argued, to homelessness? While some of the reforms will help, usually in small ways, the answer is an unequivocal no. Although the much-heralded Minneapolis reform affects 70% of the city's land area, after two and a half years it had resulted in only 100 new housing units; put differently, it increased housing production in the city over that time by only 1%.

Part of the problem is that, as I have written elsewhere, there are compelling economic reasons why increasing density in already-built-up single-family districts—which describes almost all *urban* single-family districts—not only fails to lead to large-scale housing production, but all but dictates that any new housing will be significantly more expensive than the homes it replaces. Indeed, it is hard to escape the conclusion that—leaving aside ADUs, which are truly helpful—rezoning of built single-family areas is more about symbolism than about substance.

Although rezoning of urban commercial or industrial areas for higher-density residential use may be somewhat more productive, zoning reform in heavily developed central cities like Minneapolis or San Francisco is likely to have only a limited effect on housing supply, if only because of the inordinate cost and difficulty of site assembly and the disproportionately high cost of construction, as discussed earlier. If enough new housing gets built, it may have some effect on reducing existing rents through the filtering process, but in most cases the effect is likely to be quite modest.

Increasing housing production in the suburbs is easier and likely to have far more impact. Vacant or underutilized sites, such as low-density strip commercial areas along arterial roads, are widely available and considerably less expensive to develop than urban sites. Rezoning those areas, along with rezoning underutilized office parks to allow multifamily housing, while changing the zoning of as-yet undeveloped land currently zoned for single family homes, could actually lead to significant increases in housing production.

But the shortfall in housing production is not just a matter of zoning. Many other factors stand in the way of significantly increasing housing production, including non-zoning regulations, the difficulty and cost of site assembly in largely built-up cities, shortages of skilled construction workers and qualified subcontractors, and high barriers to entry for start-up land developers.

The single most important thing we can do to solve the affordability crisis among low-income families is to provide a housing allowance—whether through the current voucher program or a redesigned and improved program—for every household whose income is too low for them to afford modest but decent housing in the private market.

None of these issues have yet been seriously tackled, and some have hardly been discussed. It is important to remember, moreover, that many regulations, like limits on building in floodplains or wetlands, are there for good reason.

All of this, however, fails to address the most urgent question. At best, a program of extensive zoning reform, coupled with other measures to increase housing production, may help ameliorate the problems of some struggling middle-class households squeezed by high costs and limited supply in high-demand markets such as coastal California and New York City. Even those effects are likely to be limited because of the inordinately high cost of the new housing that will be built. It will not begin to meet the needs of low-income families, whose lives are far more devastated by housing cost burdens, because the systemic gap between housing costs and incomes makes it impossible, however many units we build, for costs to filter down to where those families can afford housing in the private market. Even less will it help meet the needs of homeless people, who (more or less by definition) have very low incomes

and who are often further burdened by social, mental, or physical disabilities.

It is widely held that where the cost of an essential public good exceeds the ability of people who need that good to pay for it, the public sector should help bridge the gap. Thus we provide minimum levels of health care and food through Medicaid and SNAP as entitlements for people whose incomes are too low to pay for those goods. But that is not true for housing. Instead of being an entitlement, housing assistance is a lottery. The most widely cited estimate is that only 24% of eligible households in need are able to obtain housing assistance, in most cases through a housing choice voucher, which pays the difference between the full market rent and what a low-income family can afford, while paying 30% of their income for rent. Almost all the other 76% are cost-burdened.

The single most important thing we can do to solve the affordability crisis among low-income families is to provide a housing allowance—whether through the current voucher program or a redesigned and improved program—for every household whose income is too low for them to afford modest but decent housing in the private market.

In many communities, where supply is adequate and prices relatively low, a well-designed entitlement housing allowance program might in itself largely address the affordability problem. In higher-priced strong market areas, it would have to be combined with a program to subsidize construction of affordable or mixed-income housing to provide an adequate supply of moderately priced dwellings where people could use their allowance, including supportive housing for homeless people. This would be expensive, but well within the means of the federal government. It would be a small part of what we currently spend on Medicaid and might well reduce Medicaid costs by improving family health in the bargain. Even then, however, it would have to be a regional, not a local program. Given the cost and scarcity of building sites and the exorbitant construction costs, it is hard to see how some cities like San Francisco could ever create enough housing to meet the needs of their lower-income residents.

This is not an either-or proposition. Zoning reform is long overdue, and recent reforms are a good step forward. But they address only one small piece of what is a complex systemic problem. Treating it as the solution is not only dangerously misleading, but ignores the urgent needs of millions of low-income families for whom zoning reform by itself is little more than a cruel hoax. **PM**

ALAN MALLACH is a senior fellow at the Center for Community Progress, Washington, DC.





ALL HANDS ON DECK

Ports Offer Models for Housing Production Partnerships

BY SARAH SIELOFF

In some communities, ports are showing up as partners to meet housing demand and promote housing stability.

Local governments understand that addressing housing needs is essential to a healthy and resilient community and requires an “all hands on deck” approach. That means looking for partners in new places. Sometimes, those partners might be public ports.

Ports and housing may seem like odd bedfellows, but running a healthy port requires a secure workforce, which in turn requires healthy and securely housed people. Housing impacts workforce availability, quality, and equity: housing cost burdens and

unstable housing are associated with negative health, economic, and educational outcomes for both adults and children.¹ These also tend to disproportionately affect marginalized populations, including low income and communities of color.

From many ports’ perspectives, the current housing gap is therefore both a short-term emergency and a chronic issue in need of a strategic solution. Housing shortages can negatively impact port operations and productivity today and into the future. Ports have a compelling



Blaine Public Pier and Marina in Blaine, Washington, USA, operated by the Port of Bellingham.

Ports have a different risk profile compared to local governments, which offers a comparative advantage—they can try new things and leverage funding in new ways.

interest in helping the communities they call home broaden entrée to accessible, high-quality housing, which is why some are showing up as partners to meet housing demand and promote housing stability.

In Savannah, the Georgia Ports Authority is a financial contributor to the city's affordable housing development fund. The Port of Cincinnati buys and sells houses, and works closely with both Cincinnati city management and Hamilton County management to champion infill development and promote homeownership. The Port of Portland, Oregon, is using its expertise as an industrial developer to turn a former marine terminal into a housing innovation hub focused on making housing affordable, sustainable, and a job-generator for communities statewide. Farther up the west coast, the Port of

Bellingham, Washington, has planned for housing as part of waterfront redevelopment. It put these plans into action by selling former industrial land to a nonprofit affordable housing producer, with support from the local community foundation.

Ports approach housing differently depending on their communities' needs. Their stories, however, share a penchant for creative partnerships that bring new resources and networks to the housing realm, highlighting novel possibilities for housing production and preservation.

Georgia Ports Authority: Investing in Savannah's Housing Fund

The Port of Savannah is the largest port operated by the Georgia Ports Authority. In 2021, it clocked in as the nation's fourteenth largest port, handling about 10% of U.S.

imports and exports. A 2021 study estimated that the ports authority generates one job for every 10 containers it handles, with direct and indirect economic impacts reaching 560,000 Georgians.²

In September 2023, the ports authority pledged \$6 million over eight years to Savannah's Affordable Housing Fund. The fund, which is managed by the nonprofit Housing Savannah, supports the production, preservation, and improvement of housing for Savannahians at all income levels.

The Georgia Ports Authority's contribution constitutes the fund's single largest infusion since its founding 12 years ago. This investment will support home repairs for low- and middle-income residents, plus down payment assistance for qualifying buyers, and it will target the near-port communities that a significant portion of the Port of

Savannah's workforce calls home. "This is an investment in our people and our neighbors, and the quality of life around us," says Jamie McCurry, chief administrative officer at the Georgia Ports Authority.

Savannah was founded in 1733, and established itself early as a trading center. The port and city of Savannah grew together, with all the give and take that requires around issues like environmental impacts, traffic management, and infrastructure needs. While the port has historically been engaged with city management and neighborhood associations, its support for housing is new. "In terms of big-dollar investments, this is certainly the first when it comes to housing. It's important and innovative," says Jay Melder, city manager of Savannah.

When Melder joined the city two years ago, housing and homelessness were top priorities. Then in May 2022, Hyundai announced it would locate electric vehicle and battery manufacturing facilities near Savannah, bringing over 8,000 jobs—Georgia's single largest economic development project ever.³ Combined with the ports authority's February 2022 announcement of its intent to expand the Port of Savannah's container capacity by 60%,⁴ these exciting developments heightened demand for immediate strategic action on the housing front.

Meeting Savannah's housing needs required more support from institutional partners, and Melder set out to bring them to the table. He toured Savannah with Jamie McCurry and Georgia Ports Authority CEO Griff Lynch, highlighting housing needs as well as progress the Savannah

It's estimated that the Georgia Ports Authority generates one job for every 10 containers it handles, with direct and indirect economic impacts reaching 560,000 Georgians.

Affordable Housing Fund had already made. "It was a three-hour tour, like Gilligan's Island," laughs Melder, "but stepping off the bus, there was an immediate commitment to bring this forward with the board and partner with the city."

Four key partners form a tight-knit web that makes much of Savannah's affordable housing happen, and key for the ports authority was understanding how and where it could plug into existing efforts. The nonprofit Community Housing Services Agency (CHSA) finances housing projects, issues mortgages, and manages the Savannah Affordable Housing Fund, of which every dollar spent leverages an average of \$9 in private investment. The city's housing department facilitates projects via direct development or by waiving permitting fees and providing infrastructure. The Chatham Savannah Land Bank Authority—Melder calls it a "secret weapon"—acquires properties via donations and tax sales, which can significantly lower the total cost of

construction. Finally, Housing Savannah, Inc., a nonprofit created out of the city's 2021 Housing Savannah Action Plan, raises private capital to support the Savannah Housing Action Fund.

These four partners created a clear landing spot for outside investment. "We found the right structure and partners to work with," says McCurry. "Being able to be a part of not letting those neighborhoods continue to deteriorate, but hopefully continue to improve was a priority for us."

From the city's perspective, "We're hoping to create something that people can't resist being part of," says Melder, "...and when we think about the last year, our record for private investment has been broken three times," with the Georgia Ports Authority's \$6 million contribution setting the new bar. "[People] see that success and want to make sure it continues." For Melder, the lesson here is about deliberately finding points of commonality with major institutions and working together for mutual benefit to redefine how work around housing happens. "When you can identify a common goal, then you can start to be optimistic about what partnerships can mean," he reflects.

Port of Cincinnati: Driving Redevelopment and Neighborhood Revitalization

The Port of Cincinnati has no maritime operations. Instead, it's a brownfield redeveloper, community financier, and neighborhood revitalization resource with a board jointly appointed by the city of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, and funded via a

complex mix of fees for service, grants, and income from real estate assets.

The port is effectively working to unwind the lingering impacts of the 2008 financial crisis, and is clear about its intent: "Our organization, in talking with our community partners, has really decided that it's more about wealth building than permanent affordability," says Port of Cincinnati Executive Vice President Philip Denning. In 2021, Hamilton County home values finally returned to their 2006 levels. The neighborhoods where the port works are disinvested, comparable sales are low, and homes are systemically undervalued—all reasons why the Port of Cincinnati does not focus on affordable housing in its neighborhood revitalization work. "To put a cap on all these properties forever is going to cement a lot of the realities of those neighborhoods for a much longer period of time," says Denning, "so we're really focused on homeownership and wealth creation."

Since about 2014, the Port of Cincinnati has directly supported housing development. In its first major effort, the port acquired 20 homes from the local land bank in a neighborhood of 8,000 people that hadn't seen a home sale in nine years.⁵ The port renovated those homes and sold them at market rate, losing about \$2.5 million. And then it went back for more. "We lost a little less every time," reports Denning, and eventually these properties sold at a profit. Then the port ran out of neighborhood homes to rehabilitate. With the neighborhood's housing market resuscitated, the port stepped



A house before and after renovation by the Port of Cincinnati.

out, leaving the private market to step in.

In 2020, the port embarked on a new approach to housing preservation when it learned that over the past six years, more than 4,000 single-family homes in Hamilton County had been purchased by just five institutional investors, who were using them as rental stock. Institutional investors snapping up single-family homes had been a topic of national discussion for several years, but as Denning notes, it was still “a crazy thing to learn.” When one institutional investor’s portfolio entered receivership later that year, the port suddenly had the opportunity to bid on 194 tax-delinquent, renter-occupied single-family homes in Hamilton County. It was timely, but there was a hitch: “All the work we had done before in housing never had a tenant—it was all vacant,” says Denning. What kind of reputational risk might accompany acting as a landlord? What if the port had to evict renters?

The port immediately engaged tenant advocacy organizations, and “all those advocates said...no, this is really a moral imperative. We want

you to move forward with this,” Denning recalls. The plan was for the port to purchase the 194 properties, provide financial counseling, and give tenants the ability to become homeowners, with the goal of selling all homes within five years. With the help of 30-year bonds, the port could break even on its investment while creating meaningful change in the local housing landscape and stemming the tide of institutional investors moving into Hamilton County and Cincinnati.

The port offered \$14.5 million, or about \$75,000 per house, bidding against 12 institutional investors. Due diligence for all bidders was limited to touring 30 homes that had been pre-selected by the receiver. The port was in it to win it: “Our board was so supportive that in the middle of the diligence process they had us up our bid, which is a strong demonstration of the risk profile and the mission of our board,” Denning notes.

The port won the bid and closed on the properties, at which point “everything was really just in chaotic disarray,” relates Denning. The port had anticipated ten vacant houses,

when there were actually 60. Of the approximately 150 tenants occupying the 194 homes, 90% were more than one month delinquent in rent, and 25% were more than six months delinquent. The quality of the homes was also much worse than anticipated, which would require the port to nearly double its original estimate in home improvements. With acquisition costs, that would raise the cost per home to at least \$150,000—30% or more above comparable market sales for the target neighborhoods. Banks would be anxious about backing mortgages on these properties: “Now we have this appraisal gap problem that we’re working to try to understand and fill and fill within a lot of these neighborhoods,” says Denning. Unwinding the impacts of 2008 requires nothing less than remodeling some neighborhood housing markets, not unlike a home renovation.

Two years have passed since the port purchased its first receivership portfolio. The port is now offering financial counseling and homebuyer training to tenants, while renovating around 45 single

family homes. Four have sold so far, all at market rate and with a five-year deed restriction that requires the owner to sell to another homeowner. Over the next few months, another 18 properties will hit the market, and while this project began with a great deal of uncertainty, “it really opened a door for us,” says Denning. The port recently closed on another receivership portfolio of 70 properties in Cincinnati.

For Denning, who previously served as director of community and economic development for the city of Cincinnati, what sets the port apart is its perspective and orientation: the port goes where the private market won’t and municipal government often can’t. “The port has all the public tools and capability, but having the flexibility and the risk appetite and the speed to act like a private institution is the difference maker,” says Denning.

Port of Portland: Fostering R&D to Support Housing Production and Social Equity

The Port of Portland, Oregon, is the state’s largest industrial developer and a regional economic engine that manages three airports, three marine terminals, and six business parks. Now, the port is transforming the former marine Terminal 2 (T2) into a Mass Timber Campus, all with the goal of jumpstarting a new industry while building housing affordably, sustainably, and innovatively.

Mass timber consists of prefabricated wood panels such as cross-laminated timber that make construction and renovation more efficient, use



Port of Savannah in Savannah, Georgia, USA

sustainably produced wood, and can also be disassembled and repurposed. The mass timber industry is growing rapidly, and T2 is a critical part of the port's bid to harness a regional resource and traded-sector industry *at home* to build *more* homes. "Mass timber manufacturing technology holds the potential to accelerate production of high-quality homes at lower costs and to generate good-paying jobs at the same time," says Port of Portland Director of Business and Properties Teresa Carr.

Leasing at T2 has already begun, and at completion, the campus will be home to mass timber research and development facilities, a university laboratory, and housing producers working on a variety of modular and mass timber methods and products. It will also host incubator space for startups working at the intersection of housing, mass timber, and climate change. "T2's evolution into a housing and mass timber innovation hub is more than a development project—it's a way to bring the port's mission and vision to life by creating powerful opportunities for working Oregonians and small business owners and revving Oregon's economy," says Carr.

The port understands increased housing production not only as a job creator, but as a tool for combatting economic, social, and racial inequities. The vision for T2 includes strengthening and deepening the state's workforce to support the growth of the mass timber and housing industries, while foregrounding social and economic equity. Working with Portland Community College and other partners, the port is fostering the development of urban and rural workforce training programs statewide to connect people with jobs in forestry, fabrication, and manufacturing, with guidance from a port-established social equity workforce oversight board.

The port envisions T2 both as a hub for building homes and for building wealth through high-quality jobs and secure housing. As Carr notes, T2 will be "providing skills training and professional development opportunities for women, people of color, and people from low-income communities, and creating opportunities for small businesses to be part of an emerging industry."

T2 received a crucial catalytic investment in 2022, when the federal Economic Development Administration awarded the

port and its partners in the Oregon Mass Timber Coalition a \$41.4 million Build Back Better Regional Challenge Grant.⁶ The award funds work on mass timber supply chains, development codes, design testing, forest restoration, and workforce training. The largest piece—\$10 million—supports development of infrastructure for the future Mass Timber Campus at T2.

The Port of Portland's transformation of T2 illustrates the profound connections between housing and economic development. Ports can repurpose and revitalize underutilized assets to attract advanced manufacturers that address housing shortages, create jobs and economic security, and build new economic clusters and synergies. The Port of Portland is well positioned to expand on the expansive opportunities T2 presents. As Carr observes, "There could also be a trade aspect, as many ports move the raw materials of housing. Why not move more finished valued-added goods as well?"

Port of Bellingham: Planning for Housing and Setting the Table

Washington is home to 75 ports, a significant percentage

of the nation's total.⁷ They vary from large and mid-sized maritime facilities to smaller, non-maritime ports that support economic development with investments ranging from business parks to recreational amenities.

Like ports around the country, Washington ports are promoting economic development amid a housing shortage. Their relationship to housing, however, is circumscribed by state law. As Washington Association of Public Ports executive director Eric Ffitch describes, "Our ports only have those powers that are granted by the legislature, and while those have expanded over the years, they remain open to wide interpretation and analysis by ports and their legal counsel."

As a result, Washington ports are approaching the question of housing in multiple ways. "Ports undertake their analysis independently and arrive at conclusions based on their specific circumstances, and I have confidence that our commissioners will always act in the best interests of the communities they serve," Ffitch notes. For some ports, housing may not be an option, especially if it conflicts with heavy industry. Some focus

on job creation to facilitate economic mobility and home ownership. Others have planned for housing as part of waterfront redevelopment projects, working with for- and nonprofit housing producers to bring these plans to life.

The Port of Bellingham offers one example. Located along Western Washington's Salish Sea, the port supported heavy industrial development throughout the twentieth century, including coal mining and timber. Like many ports nationally, Bellingham is in the business of growing local industrial capacity, while also remediating past environmental impacts.

In 2005, the Port of Bellingham acquired a 137-acre contaminated brownfield site from paper manufacturer Georgia Pacific. Its goal was to redevelop the property into a mixed-use waterfront district. Following years of environmental cleanup, the port used a 2019 state grant to evaluate the appropriateness of a 3.3-acre former warehousing parcel for potential future housing development. In 2021, and with support from the Whatcom County Community Foundation, the port sold that parcel to Mercy Housing Northwest, a nonprofit affordable housing developer that has produced more than 200 affordable homes in Bellingham to date. In a press release, Mercy Housing Northwest's president, Joe Thompson, observed, "This project would not be possible without partnership," and cited support from the city, port, and community foundation as essential.

Phase I of the new Millworks project will bring 83 affordable, family-sized apartments to

In Cincinnati, the port is a market maker. In Savannah, the Georgia Ports Authority is an investor. In Portland, the port is catalyzing a new traded-sector economic cluster. And in Bellingham, the port is expanding housing and revitalizing its waterfront through innovative and focused planning.

market, as well as an early learning center that will serve about 100 children. The project will also feature a food campus designed to incubate value-added food products that will supply local restaurants and further strengthen Bellingham's food and beverage industry. Construction of Phase I is underway, and in April 2023, the Port of Bellingham Commission voted to proceed with Phase II, which will add another 80 workforce rental and ownership units to the site. The port has also sold or extended exclusive development rights to for-profit developer Harcourt on 9.4 acres.

Cleanup continues on other sites around the Bellingham waterfront, with the end

goal of incorporating parks, open space, residential, commercial mixed-use and light industrial development into a new waterfront for the twenty-first century.

Ports as New Partners in Housing Production and Preservation

Ports are economic engines, and they approach that work in different ways. "Many ports maintain the traditional 'working waterfront' model which, for economic and safety reasons, means the port complex is reserved for transportation and logistics. Other ports are reinventing themselves, though... Density is the watchword for many port districts in growing urban areas," explains Cary Davis, president and CEO of the American Public Ports Association.

That includes rebuilding disinvested areas and catalyzing the development of new economies around housing development. In Cincinnati, the port is a market maker. In Savannah, the Georgia Ports Authority is an investor. In Portland, the port is catalyzing a new traded-sector economic cluster. And in Bellingham, the port is expanding housing and revitalizing its waterfront through innovative and focused planning.

Like any business or institution, ports frequently balance mission, or community benefit, versus margin—traditional economic development seeking a return on investment. What sets ports apart is that unlike private companies, ports don't relocate: they live where they are, and many of their workers are neighbors. Ports also have a different risk profile compared

to local governments, which offers a comparative advantage—they can try new things and leverage funding in new ways. Ports can make investments the private sector can't, and pave the way for private sector investment in the process.

Partnerships and an awareness of an organization's comparative advantage transcend all these examples. As Savannah City Manager Jay Melder put it, addressing the housing crisis is hard: "You have to create a big, big toolbox to be able to apply all the tools, sometimes all at once, to make it work." No institution, public or private, has the answer or the capacity to single-handedly address the housing crisis. If complex projects require all the right people rowing in the right direction, partnerships with ports just might bring all hands on deck to achieve full speed ahead. **PM**

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Climate-resilient Housing Strategies for our Aging Population

From the book, *Climate Resilience for an Aging Nation*, consider these approaches to housing that better protects older adults in the face of a growing climate crisis.

BY DANIELLE ARIGONI

Two trends are underway that could radically reshape how we design and manage our communities: the ever-growing risks associated with climate change and an increasingly large population of older adults. The way we provide housing in our communities could help address both trends—and mitigate risks for those who are most vulnerable.

The United States is experiencing more billion-dollar disasters (24 so far this year) than in prior years (18 in 2022, and an average of eight per year for decades prior), including extreme heat, more-powerful storms, drought, and devastating wildfires. At the same time, the share of older adults is soaring; people over age 65 are the fastest-growing demographic in the United States, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. By 2034, our country will be home to more people over 65 than under 18—for the first time ever.

These dual trends intersect, compounding risks for older adults because of their unique mobility, health, and financial needs. Creating a more climate-resilient future for the growing share of older adults in our communities means planning for more people who don't drive (20% of older adults), those living with dementia (one in 9 people over 65), those who live at or below the poverty line (roughly 15% of people over 65), and those who don't use in-home internet as a means to stay informed (nearly 25% of older adults).

Housing is critical to the climate resilience of older adults. But the United States already fails to provide housing stock that meets the needs of our people. It's a nation where workers earning minimum wage can't afford a market-rate, two-bedroom rental; where nearly half of households over 75 are housing cost-burdened; where accessible housing remains elusive and undersupplied; and where more than 600,000 people (of whom more than half are single adults over age 50) are unhoused on any given day.

Compounding that are rising utility and insurance costs that drive the true cost of housing ever-higher, as changing climate conditions call for more heating and cooling and higher flood and/or homeowners insurance premiums. An effective and sustained housing response is long overdue. But it is even more urgent now, as we endeavor to build climate-resilient communities that better serve an aging nation.

What would it look like to build housing that better responds to both our growing climate crisis and our aging population?

First, local and regional leaders would seek to foster a greater diversity of housing choices, including smaller, attached units that reduce energy consumption while cultivating the social connectedness that research has shown is critical to survival in times of crisis. They would also double-down on efforts to retrofit existing homes and incentivize construction of new climate-resilient, affordable housing. Strategies like greater use of renewable energy and electrification can reduce or eliminate utility costs for residents and keep the power on during outages for those who require in-home medical equipment. Finally, leaders would assess climate risk facing areas where older adults reside with a clear-eyed view and then take steps to manage their risk, whether that means investing in green infrastructure to mitigate flooding or brush clearing to minimize wildfire risk. Leaders can also help drive down the cost of insurance premiums by investing in strategies that improve the risk profile for whole communities.

To build housing that better protects older adults in the face of a changing climate, consider these three strategies:

Strategy #1: Build More Small and Attached Homes that Reduce Energy Burden and Encourage Social Interaction.

For decades, roughly 60% of all housing units in the United States have been single-family detached homes,¹ with the size of the homes growing larger over time and nearly doubling since 1975.² But zoning changes and incentives for greater production of small, attached, and adjacent homes—which Dan Parolek has called “missing middle” housing—can advance climate goals and enhance resilience.

Not only do smaller and attached homes require less energy to heat and cool than single-family detached homes, but they also can facilitate more social interaction among residents in ways that reduce risk. Resilient housing strengthens social connections by providing opportunities for residents to bump into each other informally in ways that foster community. Whether through shared driveways, foyers, clustered mailboxes, or communal courtyards, smaller and attached housing encourages residents to watch out for one another during times of disaster.

Research shows that there is a protective effect at work in senior villages and communities (such as 55-plus or retirement communities) that fosters interaction, leading residents to more frequently check on neighbors during heat waves and ultimately delivering better health outcomes.³

Congregate and community-focused housing also delivers efficiencies in disaster relief efforts, making it easier to distribute supplies, establish cooling centers, or transport individuals as needed—rather than doing so in a decentralized, house-by-house manner.

A wave of local and state policy change to diversify housing stock is underway across the country, from Minneapolis, Minnesota, which effectively outlawed single-family housing in 2018 through the Minneapolis 2040 plan, to California, which now permits up to four housing units on parcels previously designated for only one home following passage in 2021 of the California Housing Opportunity and More Efficiency (HOME) Act.

Accessory dwelling units (ADUs) are another way that communities can create accessible, resilient housing for older adults and people with disabilities. ADUs are particularly well suited to the needs of older adults because they provide opportunities for people to downsize in existing communities, to house family members or caregivers, or to generate rental income. ADUs and smaller homes can also meet “universal design” standards, with wider doorways, wider hallways, and kitchens designed to serve people in wheelchairs. Indeed, the single-story nature of many smaller units is ideal for those with mobility challenges, particularly when they thoughtfully integrate and account for accessibility and resilience needs.⁴ Following Hurricanes Harvey and Ike, students at Prairie View A&M University in Texas designed a prototype ADU, Prairie

Dwelling 360/H House, that is capable of withstanding hurricane-level winds and generating renewable power on-site.⁵

Strategy #2: Provide Policy and Funding Support for Resilient Multifamily Housing.

Many communities would benefit from increased production of multifamily housing in addition to the “missing middle” housing previously described. Whether market based or subsidized—including through HUD’s Section 202 and Section 811 programs, which serve low-income older adults and people with disabilities, respectively—multifamily housing provides benefits for residents and the community. These higher-density developments use less energy and land than single-family homes, and offer sustainable, resilient, and decarbonized housing solutions that can pave the way to a more climate-resilient future for all.

At a minimum, local zoning must allow for the construction of multifamily housing. Also helpful are policy and funding incentives that support the integration of green and resilient features in affordable housing.⁶ Increasingly, large-scale affordable housing developers—such as National Housing Trust,⁷ Mercy Housing, and Winn Development—recognize the need to bring sustainability solutions to their residents in order to reduce energy cost burden, improve indoor air quality, and reduce climate risk for low-income households least able to rebound from disaster.

For example, one of the nation’s largest organizations dedicated to affordable housing,

Enterprise Community Partners, has developed a comprehensive set of standards to encourage the multifamily affordable housing industry to build more sustainably. The Enterprise Green Communities (EGC) and EGC Plus (EGC+) certifications use criteria to evaluate the sustainability and resilience of multifamily affordable buildings by assessing community engagement, location efficiency of the site, energy and water efficiency of the building, integration of sustainable and healthy materials, and much more. The criteria also encourage net-zero investments that significantly reduce energy use, as well as consideration and integration of climate-related hazard risks.⁸ Together with other third-party building standards—such as the U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design); Passive House; and Energy Star Multifamily New Construction—these programs offer a clear road map to bring sustainability and resilience investments to residents of affordable multifamily homes.

Enterprise also supports a valuable online tool, “Climate Safe Housing: Strategies for Multifamily Building Resilience,” to foster greater integration of climate resilience into multifamily housing, as a complement to its EGC certification.⁹ The online tool helps building owners identify and address climate risks in order to guide effective resilience investments. It thoughtfully identifies the level of “criticality” of a range of building functions—from access to potable water to resident elevator access to sump pumps—and offers solutions for each.

The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 offers unprecedented opportunity and funding for climate investment in affordable housing—if the programs are designed to allow it.¹⁰ The complex requirements of affordable multifamily housing merit a clear understanding at the federal and state levels of how new funding programs for energy efficiency, renewable energy, resilient retrofits, and more can best be integrated into the development or rehabilitation of affordable multifamily homes. Without an intentional focus to ensure that these resources can be accessed by owners and developers of affordable housing—including Section 202 and Section 811 properties for older adults and people with disabilities—there is a risk that this generational investment in climate resilience will bypass those best positioned to benefit from it.

Strategy #3: Map the Risk Exposure of Housing Across Communities and Implement Programs to Mitigate Risk in the Most Vulnerable Areas.

Efforts to map and manage the most climate-vulnerable locations are an essential strategy to reduce risk and build community-wide resilience. Steps such as these can reduce the cost of flood insurance available to area residents, which is particularly important for older adults who may lack adequate financial resources to insure their homes and who face rising insurance premiums.¹¹

Federal agencies serve as the front line of such mapping efforts, although several private-market tools (such as Risk Factor) have begun to emerge as well. The Federal

Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) maps flood vulnerability in its effort to show minimum standards for floodplain management and identify the highest-risk areas so that appropriate rates can be established for the National Flood Insurance Program.

Increasingly, FEMA has encouraged homeowners and local officials to take action on the basis of flood map data through its comprehensive risk mapping, assessment, and planning effort.¹² Actions can include elevating homes, acquiring and relocating homes in the floodplain, and ensuring that open public or private floodplain parcels will be kept free from development.¹³

But risks extend well beyond flooding. The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) launched a new tool in July 2022 that allows communities to explore their vulnerability to a range of risks, including wildfires, cyclones, winter storms, and more, at the census tract level.¹⁴ NOAA joined forces with the National Drought Mitigation Center and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to map areas at risk of drought throughout the United States at the Drought.gov website.¹⁵

State, regional, and local land use planners should enhance resilience by taking steps to reduce or eliminate construction in areas subject to these risks. That may include withholding public infrastructure from such areas to discourage construction or utilizing public resilience funding to buy out landowners and homeowners and institute easements to prevent future development. These areas can also serve as focal points



for more stringent building requirements—including fortified homes, elevated buildings, and stronger stormwater management practices—that directly mitigate risk for residents.

These efforts won't result in an overnight shift in the risk that older adults bear in the face of climate change. But leaders who take these steps can be assured that they are incrementally and collectively positioning their communities to be far more resilient for our climate future by accounting for the housing needs of a growing—and vulnerable—segment of their population. **PM**

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Hear more from Danielle Arigoni in the ICMA podcast, **"EP40 Affordable Housing: Open the Door to Economic Mobility for Your Residents,"** at icma.org/podcast-ep40.

How 15-Minute Cities Can Bring About a Culture of Community

With so many benefits to residents, this community planning concept is something local government managers should consider.

BY CELESTE BENITEZ GALICIA

The 15-minute city has become a popularized urban planning concept in countries around the world, and many in the United States have begun to take an interest. Carlos Moreno, the professor and researcher who coined the term, saw the need for people-centric city planning back in 2016. He looked around modern cities and asked: why should residents be the ones adapting to the largeness of a city rather than city planning adapting to the needs and wants of residents?

This planning concept aims to provide residents with everything they could presumably need to live a prosperous life, all within a 15-minute walking or biking distance. This would include necessities such as medical services, educational institutions, places of business, third places (spots for social interaction other than home or work), and accessible public transportation. But, a 15-minute city does a lot more than just provide services and resources proximate to residential housing. It also has the potential to bring about a culture of community, returning to the town square model of living that was foundational for city planning prior to the Industrial Revolution.¹

According to a 2023 National Association of Realtors (NAR) Community Survey, roughly 78% of participants in the United States said they would be willing to pay more to live in a walkable community.² In that same survey, just over 50% of respondents said they would purchase a home with less yard space if it meant they did not need to rely on a car to take them to places of business or work. This survey was conducted post-pandemic after we all were placed in situations that prompted us to rethink our priorities and wants in relation to how we choose to live. While the 15-minute city is not a one-size-fits-all model, investing in walkable infrastructure can benefit everyone, from local government to community members.





Annapolis, Maryland, USA



Gengenbach, Germany

Benefits of the 15-minute City

Although life has returned to a level of normalcy, many are left wondering if American cities can be reconstructed to be better. Researchers have identified a loneliness epidemic in the United States, much as a direct result of isolation and a lack of community.³ Simply put, Americans are lonely and desire real human connection.⁴

Being intentional with how we design or redesign our cities can encourage engagement between residents. In walkable cities, you are more likely to interact face-to-face with community members and form relationships with others. Walkable infrastructure also encourages residents to spend time in their communities, whether that be through walking or biking to work, utilizing necessary services, or occupying third spaces like parks, restaurants, and libraries. This gives residents a sense of ownership and attachment to their community and encourages them to interact with each other. Investing in people-centric city planning and third spaces also gives marginalized communities, such as the elderly, the opportunity to stay connected to others.⁵

The 15-minute city, despite its size, is a feat that can provide residents with a higher quality of life and bring about a culture of trust and connection. According to recent Gallup polls, Americans tend to trust local governments

more, when compared to other levels of government, because of their responsiveness and proximity.⁶ Fifteen-minute cities provide greater opportunities for local government leaders to interact and engage with community members simply by the city design. Residents are also more likely to be politically and publicly engaged when living in a walkable community.⁷ Increased interaction can help build trusting and meaningful relationships that serve as the foundation for strong communities. Through these cultivated relationships and increased public engagement, local government leaders can better understand community needs, increase responsiveness, and develop a deeper trust with city residents.

Investing in walkable and bikeable infrastructure also encourages healthier and stronger communities for all residents. The 15-minute city can have positive health benefits for an individual and the community overall. At the individual level, residents in 15-minute cities have the option to walk or bike around their community, which research shows can improve physical and mental health.⁸ Cities that prioritize protected bike lanes and sidewalk access can also reduce hazards faced by all pedestrians. The 15-minute city would not remove cars entirely but rather reduce reliance on vehicles and encourage residents to walk, bike, and even take

public transportation. Investing in accessible and green public transportation can provide residents with additional transportation options, especially for residents who may not be able to afford a vehicle. Through this type of transportation investment, cities can reduce urban pollution and their carbon footprint.

Along with health benefits, 15-minute cities and investment in walkable infrastructure can positively impact the attractiveness of city spaces and the local economy. Constructing cities to be more people-centric and lively can encourage relocation and tourism. For those living in these cities, walkability can encourage residents to explore their neighborhoods and support the businesses in their area. Public, people-centric infrastructure and revitalizing communities can also encourage private investment opportunities, as seen through the “high line effect” in New York City.⁹ With a relatively small investment from local government, it can result in a substantial return on investment. This promotes job creation, increased property values, and the economy.

Conclusion

While the 15-minute city model is neither perfect nor claims to be, it is one option to consider as we seek to expand and recreate our cities. It may not be feasible in its entirety in your area, but perhaps some elements of the model can be incorporated into your existing infrastructure. Communities in cities like Portland, Oregon, were designed to give residents access to necessary services within a 20-minute walk or bike ride. These services include parks, schools, private businesses such as grocery and retail stores,

and public transportation.¹⁰ The city of Salinas in California has also adopted a pedestrian-centered vision by revitalizing its downtown to create a stronger and more engaged community.¹¹

As we continue to work toward our shared goal of building stronger, healthier communities, we should look to innovative and creative ways to adapt and make changes. The 15-minute city is just one of the many ways we can better serve our communities. **PM**

ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

¹ <https://www.cnu.org/publicsquare/2023/07/28/hierarchy-centers-15-minute-city>

² <https://www.nar.realtor/newsroom/new-nar-survey-finds-americans-prefer-walkable-communities#:~:text=New%20NAR%20Survey%20Finds%20Americans%20Prefer%20Walkable%20Communities,-June%2027%2C%202023&text=The%202023%20Community%20%26%20Transportation%20Preferences,community%20attributes%20they%20find%20desirable.>

³ <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/02/1173418268/loneliness-connection-mental-health-dementia-surgeon-general>

⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sophieokolo/2023/02/24/why-americans-are-lonely-and-what-we-can-do-about-it/?sh=77b8f07f2dbf>

⁵ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/third-places-as-community-builders/>

⁶ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/512651/americans-trust-local-government-congress-least.aspx>

⁷ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1532673X19852370>

⁸ <https://www.peoplepoweredmovement.org/benefits-of-biking-walking/>

⁹ <https://www.arup.com/perspectives/walkonomics-the-high-line-effect>

¹⁰ https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/handle/1773/49275/Simon_washington_0250O_24448.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

¹¹ https://www.montereycountyweekly.com/news/cover_collections/how-urban-planning-transformed-downtown-salinas-into-monterey-county-s-most-walkable-streetscape/article-f6f70a18-bdec-11ed-a799-83eb3312f9ff.html

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Tarboro, North Carolina, USA

Reimagining Housing Roles for SMALLER COMMUNITIES

How three local governments in ICMA's Economic Mobility and Opportunity Cohort are addressing housing challenges for lower-income residents.

BY LAURA GODDEERIS

For smaller communities with limited resources and staff capacity, it can be especially challenging to address an issue as complex as housing in a meaningful way. But three local governments in ICMA's Economic Mobility and Opportunity Cohort are taking tangible steps to support their residents, particularly those with limited incomes, in attaining safe, stable housing options.

Tarboro, North Carolina: Establishing an Evidence Base for Next Steps

The town of Tarboro was within the region of North Carolina impacted by Hurricane Matthew in 2016, with flooding displacing many town and county residents. "We had FEMA putting people up in hotels because there was zero rental housing, zero houses to buy, nothing," recalled Tarboro planning director Catherine Grimm, "So it was close to a year that we had people living in hotels

because there was literally nowhere else to go. It really highlighted the need across all segments of the housing market for us."

Concerns about the town's housing supply existed before the hurricane and have only mounted since. "But we couldn't explain to anyone in detail what that actually meant; it was just nebulous," she said.

The town has leveraged available tools and resources to try and chip away at the situation. Many of these functions reside within the town's planning department, including funding from community development block grants and other sources. The town also updated its zoning map and made an intentional effort to expand where multi-family housing is allowed and encourage density in redevelopment.

Meanwhile, the potential for a significant development project three miles out of town, and another \$3 million in downtown property turnover in just the last year, suggested an increasing

need for more market-rate housing. But staff were constrained in their ability to discuss with prospective developers just what types and how much the town could and should accommodate. “Is there a need for apartments? Would people here even like a townhouse or condo—would that be aesthetically acceptable? Do they need a garage?” were some of the questions they couldn’t answer without data.

Further complicating the picture were the results of the 2020 Census, which Tarboro believes relied too heavily on extrapolation and resulted in an undercount of their population. While the official Census numbers suggest Tarboro’s population is declining, the town’s municipal utility data seem to indicate otherwise, and leadership is considering next steps after an initial appeal was declined.

Tarboro leveraged the small grant opportunity provided as part of the EMO Cohort to commission a housing study, which it felt was needed to reconcile all of this information and provide a foundation for the town in setting priorities and next steps. And even relying on the lower Census population figures, the study was able to quantify in detail the perceived housing shortage.

The data paint a more nuanced picture of housing affordability across the income spectrum, highlighting that thousands of households are paying significant shares—often more than 50 percent—of their incomes toward housing costs. And it helped illustrate the cost burden on owner-occupied homes as well as renters, prompting thoughts about additional complications and possible interventions

given the high costs of taxes, insurance, and utility bills for older homes that may have been inherited but were far behind on maintenance.

Importantly, the study enables a better understanding of what workforce or affordable housing means in Tarboro. It pulled together data on median home prices and household incomes, as well as the most common occupations and associated wages. Grimm said that having all of that information laid out together was extremely helpful in contextualizing for Tarboro what is known to be a national issue. “It highlights that our local employers’ wages are insufficient for citizens to be able to buy a house or to rent decent housing,” she said.

Meadville, Pennsylvania: Recognizing Needs and Roles for Municipal Action

Meadville is home to around 13,000 residents, one of few non-rural areas in Crawford County in northwest Pennsylvania. A majority of its current council ran on a platform of improving access to safe, stable, affordable housing. But there has been debate amongst community and regional stakeholders as to what the city’s precise role should be in advancing that priority.

Renna Wrubleski, Meadville’s director of community development, agreed that as a small local government they value their county and local partners, including their redevelopment authority, playing an active role in planning for and supplying housing. She sees an opportunity for the city to complement those roles



Meadville, Pennsylvania, USA



by helping to set objectives and direction, and to foster an ecosystem of policies and programs that help housing developments thrive (much like incentive programs are a part of economic development).

She also likened the state of housing in Meadville to a public safety issue. “As a local government, we have a responsibility to provide public safety. Well, where do we draw the lines on where public safety begins and ends? Is it just at police and fire? Do we expand that into making sure that the homes that are in our community are safe for the people who are living in them?” She noted that of their residents, “Sixty-three percent are renters who do not have direct control over the properties they are living in. They’re dependent on someone else to ensure that safety.”

The city had been hearing complaints from renters, including those in public housing units, about a lack of responsiveness from their landlords. Issues ranged from insufficient heating and cooling to bed bugs and mold to basic repairs of elevators or appliances. While not practical for the city to actively mediate landlord-tenant issues, it realized that a more proactive approach to rental inspections could help ease some of the burden on renters. In 2022, its council authorized a new rental inspection program, requiring all rental properties to register with the city and undergo an inspection every two years rather than just in cases of emergencies.

A next step, supported through ICMA’s grant, was development of a housing action plan. Like Tarboro, leadership aimed to get a

handle on housing data and conditions in Meadville, but they also wanted to use the process to explore the possible roles the city could play going forward in coordination with other housing stakeholders in the region.

Staff leveraged their local knowledge in making intentional efforts to engage a broad range of perspectives in the “discovery” phase of the planning process. This included both one-on-one meetings and surveys of key stakeholder groups such as boards and commissions, community anchor institutions, regional housing and planning agencies, nonprofits, realtors, and landlords. To reach residents, they went to laundromats, coffee shops, and other businesses and community gathering spaces. They made special efforts to connect with their renter population at neighborhood meetings and a tenants-rights workshop, recognizing that those voices were often underrepresented through traditional outreach channels.

This process helped to gather information but also to build trust and a foundation for future collaboration. Meadville city planner Peter Grella pointed out a number of semantic differences aimed to signal a different, action-oriented approach to planning in Meadville. “We’re not calling them design teams. We’re not calling it a steering committee; we’re calling it a partnership,” he cited as examples. They have been trying to uphold a sense of mutual accountability, asking partners to join them in committing to specific actions.

“And that makes things a bit uncomfortable, because

that accountability is difficult,” Grella said. “Being able to demand that commitment, get that commitment, and return to that commitment produces friction, especially when everybody who is sitting at the table really does have their own missions and priorities that they deal with, even if our greater goal is all the same.” But, he and the team are hopeful the end result will lead to something greater than any of the individual actors have been able to produce so far.

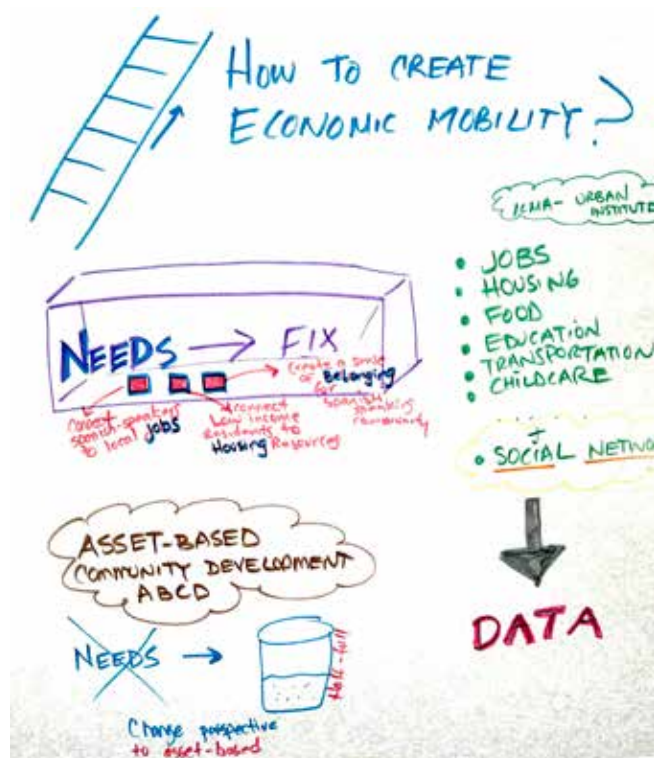
Morgan Hill, California: Elevating a Shared Understanding of Affordable Housing

Morgan Hill is a generally affluent city of around 45,000 located at the southern tip of California’s Silicon Valley. Like other parts of the region, it is known as a home to technology and other manufacturers, as well as wineries and natural amenities. At first blush this might have been a surprising choice for inclusion in an economic mobility initiative. Edith Ramirez, assistant city manager for development services, is aware of that, noting that a typical house in her community costs around a million dollars.

But Morgan Hill is going through a growth spurt, Ramirez observed. Part of that is due to shifts in the region as people move further south of Silicon Valley in search of lower-priced housing, yet still commute through Morgan Hill to jobs further north. Within the city, she said, “The housing stock has been overwhelmingly single-family with only about 5% rental product, which skews to certain demographics.” But the need is real, she noted, as 5,600 families are considered



Morgan Hill, California, USA



low income and 28% of all residents are on some form of public assistance.

Like their peers, the city is using planning and policy tools to boost the supply and quality of more affordable housing across the city. And

more recently, they are using a blend of data and personal perspectives to elevate the conversation around affordability and who makes up the community in Morgan Hill.

Part of this process is increasing their understanding

and supporting the needs of their lower-income residents. Staff have been collaborating with the school district and hosting dinners in low-income apartment complexes to create opportunities for conversation in a friendlier setting, in addition to maintaining a presence at community events and celebrations. They also convene monthly meetings with local service providers to share information and triage acute housing challenges to prevent residents from falling through cracks in the system.

And the team has pored over data about a wide range of issues impacting economic mobility of residents. “You need data to tell people that 12% of our children are considered unhoused because of their living conditions,” said Ramirez.

But data require analysis and interpretation, she cautioned, and often multiple data sources are needed to make sense of root causes. They’ve seen data, for example, that suggest that Spanish-speaking residents do not have a trusted organization they can turn to. “If people do not trust the government, how good can the data be?” Undocumented residents, housing director Rebecca Garcia adds, are especially hard to capture in the data.

A parallel strategy is educating the broader population—even local leadership—about what “affordable housing” looks like and means to the Morgan Hill community. “The reality is that what makes this community amazing and clean and beautiful is everybody that is working in the background,” Ramirez says—everyone from retail and hospitality service

workers to cops, firefighters, nurses, and teachers, all of whom could qualify for affordable housing.

Her team is working to advance a campaign, including video testimonials, on who affordable housing is for. Garcia points out, “Residents often do not realize they themselves are eligible for affordable housing. There are so many myths and so much false information that it takes an ongoing intentional effort to change the narrative with facts and truth.”

Housing coordinator Christie Thomas underscored the power of storytelling. She described a recent presentation where she was able to identify familiar faces, like the local librarian, as residents of affordable housing, and she shared real examples of how fragile the housing situation is for some Morgan Hill families. Many affordable housing opponents approached her with follow-up questions, saying “We need to get this information out to the community; we need to tell the stories about our own community members,” she recalled. “Once we give them that knowledge, it does change the way they think about housing.”

Ramirez says it’s been a challenging conversation, but “the concept of creating a community where people can live where they work is a paradigm that we’re working toward.”

Additional Takeaways

Beyond the specific strategies already described, the three communities’ experiences yielded additional recommendations for other smaller places

looking to address local housing challenges.

Advocate for what you identify as necessary steps and processes.

For Tarboro, it was important that their study be conducted externally, but part of the challenge was aligning a budget and timeline with potential consultants. They’ve had similar challenges in scaling procurements for housing programming as well, with a lot of smaller consultants having been absorbed by larger engineering firms that don’t typically bid on projects of this scale. It took a bit more proactive outreach to specific firms to convince them to consider the opportunity. But in the end, they were able to negotiate an affordable basic price and menu of a la carte options—prioritizing an in-person presentation of the results so the community and its leadership would be able to hear directly from experts offering unbiased, fresh perspectives.

In Meadville, it was time to push from planning and waiting to action. “There is still some skepticism about the city’s ability to do this work, recognizing capacity issues from both a staffing point and a budgetary perspective,” said Wrubleski. While some argue, “‘Just stick to your basic things that you absolutely have to do and don’t spend money on these other ancillary things.’ At some point, we have to do something.”

Celebrate small wins.

Morgan Hill’s housing team quickly pointed to the latest individuals its members had helped to place in stable housing situations—in one

recent case, a person that had been unhoused for 15 years, whose number finally came up but needed assistance in getting to the DMV to obtain necessary identification.

“We’re a small city, so sometimes it may look like ‘Hey, we’re just doing a safe park that can only house eight families.’ But we can make a huge difference in those families’ lives and keep it going,” said Thomas, “And the program just ends up growing itself.”

In Meadville, as staff coordinated outreach around their housing study, they were excited to see an uptick in community feedback. While a couple hundred responses to a community survey might not be huge relative to their overall population, Wrubleski noted, it was significantly higher than responses to recent surveys on other topics. “We saw that as a step in the right direction.”

Keep humanity at the heart of the work.

For staff, especially those directly engaging with lower-income residents facing most extreme housing challenges, this work can be especially taxing.

“This work requires one to go out on a limb, be bold and brave, and speak on behalf of the community that is too busy working three jobs to tell their stories.” Localize the faces as you do your campaign, suggests Garcia. “Doing this work is hard and often unpopular so I stay grounded in what I know to be the right thing to do, not for me but for the mission. We all fail if we don’t figure out the housing shortage.” **PM**

LAURA GODDEERIS, AICP, is director of research at ICMA (lgoddeeris@icma.org).



THE POWER OF NEIGHBORHOODS

A Conversation with an Expert on Fragile States

BY POOJA BACHANI DI GIOVANNA
AND PETE PETERSON

Dr. Seth Kaplan examines what makes a neighborhood fragile and how a focus on the local level makes all the difference.

We all live somewhere. Our houses make up blocks which make up streets which come together to form towns and cities. In terms of physical structures, where we live is a composite of buildings, landscaped areas, and recreational spaces. Insert true human connection, engagement, relationships, and a collective desire for a flourishing space and you have a vibrant neighborhood and community.

Our neighborhoods are the places we call home, and they are the primary building blocks of our cities, counties, and states. What if the political and policy challenges and polarization we're seeing at the national level are actually originating at the neighborhood level? Amidst a variety of policy failures we're witnessing at the local level across the country, there have been questions

about the fragility of the United States and that prompted fragile states expert Dr. Seth Kaplan at Johns Hopkins University to ask what's happening in our neighborhoods?

In his new book, *Fragile Neighborhoods*, Dr. Kaplan calls our attention to neighborhoods as the starting point for change by squarely focusing on revitalizing local institutions and community relationships. According to his research, our neighborhoods are currently in a state of fragility.

Dr. Kaplan defines *fragile neighborhoods* as social habitats (that consists of institutions and norms in which we are embedded and greatly influences how we live) that makes it hard to sustain a family and raise children. A fragile neighborhood is one in which residents exhibit stress, mistrust, frustration, and a sense of insecurity.

In an exclusive interview with the Davenport Institute's

assistant director Pooja Bachani Di Giovanna and Pepperdine School of Public Policy dean Pete Peterson, Dr. Seth Kaplan provides an overview of where he sees our neighborhoods today and how we can turn things around to help build stronger communities.

What kind of lens do you bring to understanding American neighborhoods and cities? How are you positioning your approach?

Most people [who study policy in countries around the world] look at a lot of technical information. If they visit, they stay in hotels or they meet with government people. I don't work that way. I tend to work from the bottom up.

I want to know what people are thinking. I want to know how different parts of society are acting on each other, or cooperating with each other, or competing with each other.

I want to spend time in people's homes. My first lens is much broader than others in this space.

"I do think a lot of our mistrust and polarization nationally would be healed if we redirected our energy more to local problems and local solutions."

—Dr. Seth Kaplan

When I work around the world, I see there are policies that matter, and there are politicians that matter, and having better policies and politicians matter a lot. But my basic framework for looking at a country is to try to understand what is going on in relationships. How are people experiencing life in that country day in and day out? And I think one of the problems we have in America is that we look for policy as the solution. We look to Washington for answers. We fight over what goes on politically.

We don't think enough about the local level. The people who dominate the (policy) debates on what is wrong and what to

do with [the United States], they're experiencing a very different version of America than people in the Heartland. Until we put ourselves in the homes and in the shoes (of those people) to understand what has changed so dramatically in their lives over two generations, we cannot begin to understand what's going on in this country.

Would this community-focused approach help deal with the issue of polarization in the nation?

My argument is that everything—from deaths of despair to depression, to problems we have with youth to the problems of mistrust and polarization—lies downstream from how our relationships have changed in neighborhoods and in specific places.

And so I certainly believe if we were to focus much more on the local it would suck energy out of some of the debilitating debates that don't seem to be very constructive. I'm all for voting. I'm all for protesting and supporting one policy versus another. But I do think a lot of our mistrust and polarization nationally would be healed if we redirected our energy more to local problems and local solutions.

I also think that one of the reasons why we put so much into politics is because we're alone. We're vulnerable. We don't have strong social connections. There's certainly data that says that people with strong social connections are going to think much more positively about politics, and they're going to be much more trustful of politicians and government.

"The more we see ourselves as facilitators and not just planners with long-term mandates around numbers, the more likely that we will actually make people's lives better."

—Dr. Seth Kaplan

Why should we reconsider the American Dream, as the title of your last chapter suggests?

I would say that the American dream today seems to be a dream of individuals. Individuals trying to gain some sort of individual material wealth, and that is all. And that is a very limited, very narrow understanding of the American dream. Originally, when this term first came into fashion, it was about uplifting people, uplifting all of society. Somehow we went from a more societal worldview to a worldview that's very individual and very material.

If you're a government leader that would strengthen society, encourage a strong society, encourage the development of strong structures in society, [and] encourage strong relationships place by place, it's only with strong community and strong social structures that we can lift up people.

In your opinion, what is the first step that local government leaders and staff can take to help build and foster strong neighborhoods and strong communities?

First, they should rethink the physical landscape around distinct neighborhoods with distinct identities, distinct centers, and distinct institutions. Most of our country has been physically designed to be placeless: a lot of houses, no center, no local institutions, no community schools. The second point would be rethinking government to make it more neighborhood oriented. A third point, which supports that, would be to have indicators to measure neighborhood health. The fourth thing governments can do is think of some sort of small grant programs that incentivize neighbors to cooperate, to improve their neighborhoods.

Is there a specific piece of advice you would give to those who are just starting to develop their understanding of community and place in their new jobs?

The first thing that I would highly recommend is assuming that you are responsible for a place. Walk around, learn the place, learn the people, learn the institutions, create a map in your head of what is going on. Try to understand. There's something called appreciative inquiry: learn [and] try to appreciate by asking a series of questions. What are people thinking, what is it that they see would be helpful to improve in their neighborhood? You're going

to begin to see things from their view. Always ask, "what is it that can incrementally improve this place?" How do I open up channels of communication so I can get some sort of feedback loops, feedback loops of performance, feedback loops on how what we're doing is affecting this place, and so on and so forth. Again, think of your job as cooperating with people, collaborating with people to make a place better. The more we see ourselves as facilitators and not just planners with some sort of long-term mandates around numbers, the more likely that we will actually make people's lives better.

In Closing

Dr. Kaplan encourages us to focus our attention on the local level and begin revitalizing our nation one neighborhood, one zip code at a time. Learn more about Dr. Kaplan at sethkaplan.org and listen to the full interview via the QR code. **PM**



POOJA BACHANI DI GIOVANNA

is the assistant director at the Davenport Institute and works on curriculum development and program delivery, communications, and strategic relations.



PETE PETERSON is dean of the Pepperdine School of Public Policy. Prior to this he was the executive director of the Davenport Institute at the school, where he remains a senior fellow.





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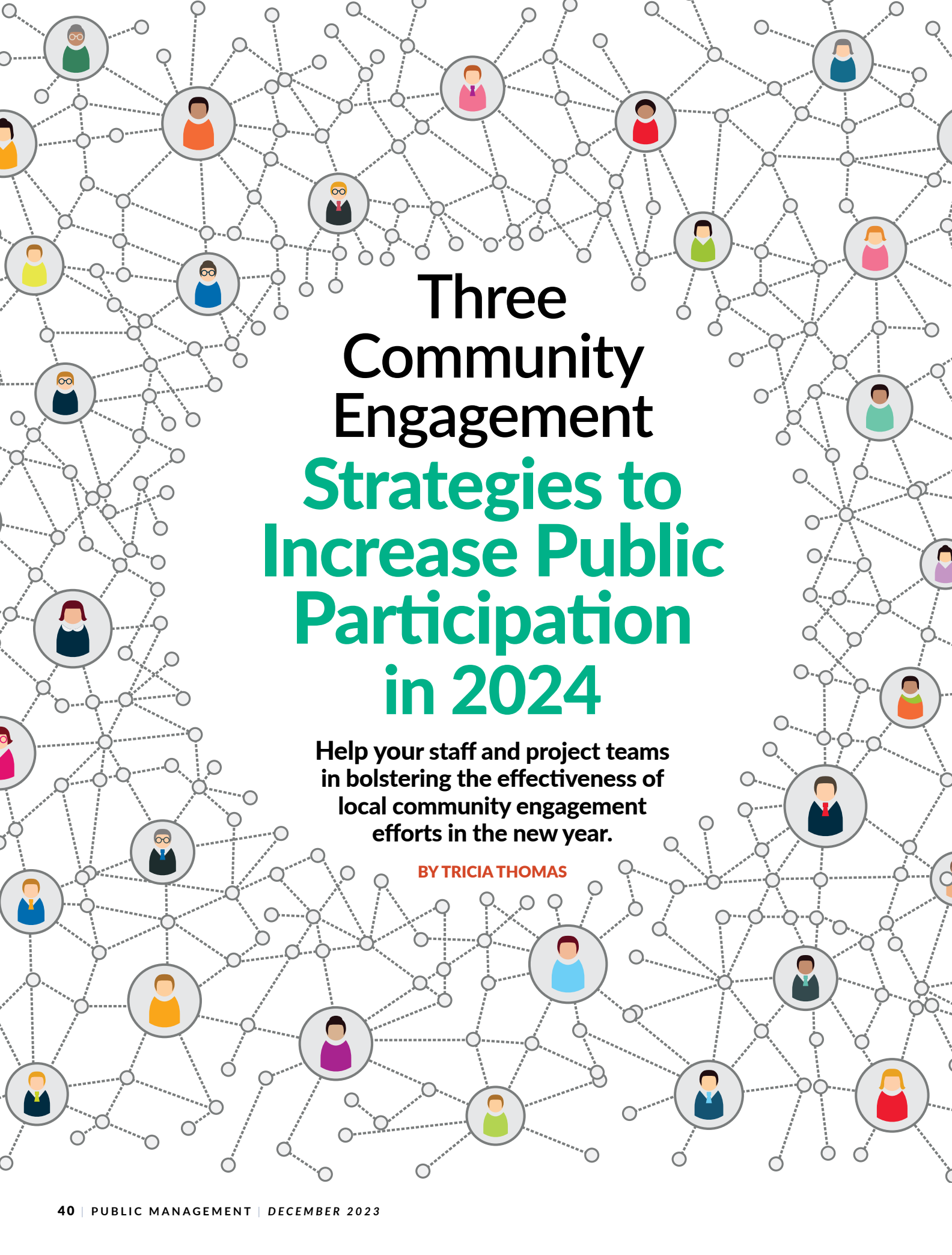


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Three Community Engagement Strategies to Increase Public Participation in 2024

Help your staff and project teams
in bolstering the effectiveness of
local community engagement
efforts in the new year.

BY TRICIA THOMAS

Community engagement plays a pivotal role in fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment within the community. However, for local government leaders striving for success in this area, a mere commitment to involving residents might not be enough. Success demands a deep understanding of resident needs and preferences.

In 2022, PublicInput conducted a survey of U.S. residents to understand their preferences for engaging with their local government following the pandemic. The results from the 2022 survey revealed a mix of perceptions about how residents viewed their experiences with community engagement.

Fast forward one year, and PublicInput has conducted a new survey to continue to learn more about resident expectations and preferences. The results confirm the following key findings:

- Local proximity motivates residents to engage—the closer to home, the more likely they are to engage.

- Engaging residents through groups with which they affiliate increases public trust and willingness to participate in community engagement opportunities.
- Residents are motivated to engage on a variety of issues, but report not being made aware of opportunities to engage.

Engagement best practices reveal that decision-making quality often declines when leaders only hear from a narrow set of resident perspectives. It's widely recognized that the “more is better” approach falls short unless it incorporates representation from those most affected by decision-making.

PublicInput is responding to this need by providing government leaders with three practical strategies. These strategies are specifically crafted to assist staff and project teams in bolstering the effectiveness of local community engagement efforts.

Proximity matters. Survey results show that the closer to home an issue or opportunity is, the more likely residents will participate.

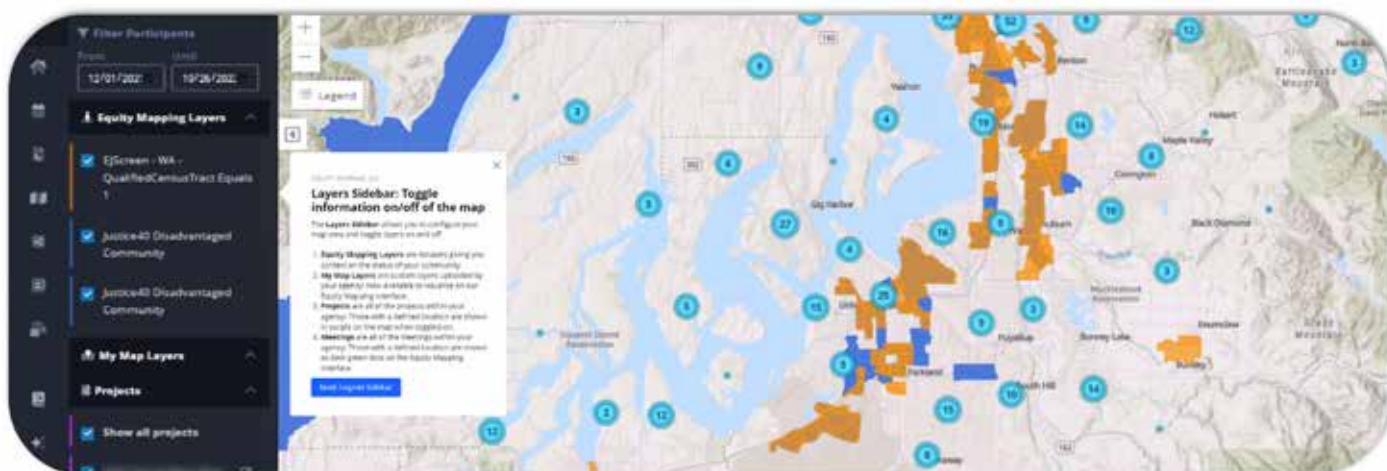
1. Use Proximity to Guide Outreach and Engagement.

Proximity matters. Survey results show that the closer to home an issue or opportunity is, the more likely residents will participate.

For example, a comprehensive plan update affects a very broad set of places, but framing the community call to action around “how might we make [neighborhood name] more connected, healthier, and livable” could put a comprehensive plan into a more relevant context for residents that are unfamiliar with the process.

Key Takeaways

- If you want to drive engagement, make people aware of how an issue or project will impact their geographic area and/or their daily life.
- Target your communications to the specific geographic area that may be affected most.
- Translate an initiative into tangible impacts at the community level.



Mapping and screening tools like Qualified Census Tracts, CEJST, or EJScreen can help hone your engagement strategy. Overlaying demographic indicators with project maps can guide outreach efforts to ensure agencies reach target groups.

Opportunities

- Identify affected communities using project area maps overlaid with key demographic indicators (like income, race, and English language proficiency) to create a strategic approach to outreach in the areas most affected.
- Plan for outreach by incorporating both traditional approaches (like direct mail and in-person events) with digital approaches that target email, text, and social communications.

2. Partner with Community Groups to Increase Stakeholder Engagement.

Residents are more likely to engage when the community call to action comes from a group with which they affiliate.

Whether it be faith-based organizations, nonprofits, neighborhood associations, or civic groups like the Rotary Club, affiliated networks and community groups play an influential role in the fabric of a community. These groups seamlessly help bridge the trust gap between governments and residents.

Key Takeaways

- The preexisting rapport established between community groups and residents provides a trusted environment that has the potential to enhance the

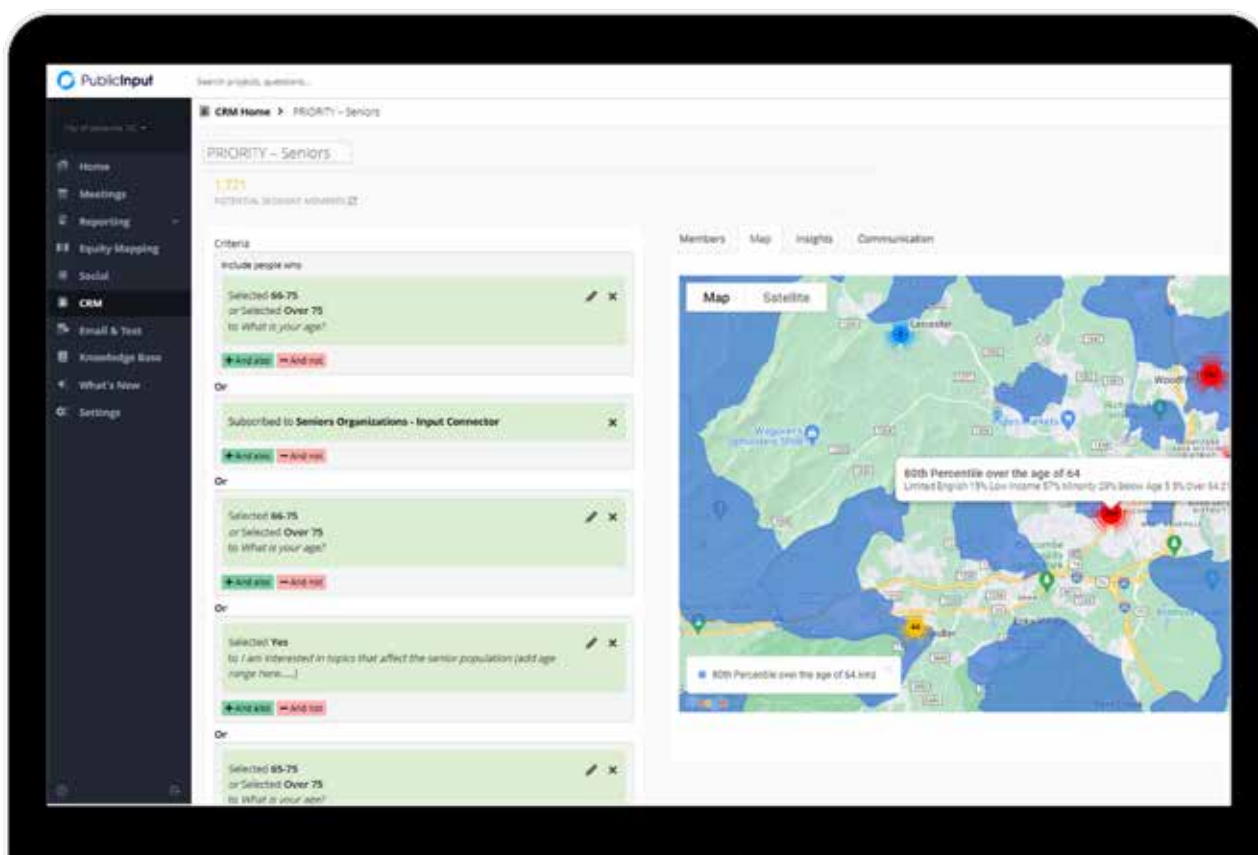
A common sentiment we hear is that people don't feel that they're informed enough to engage.

willingness to participate in engagement opportunities.

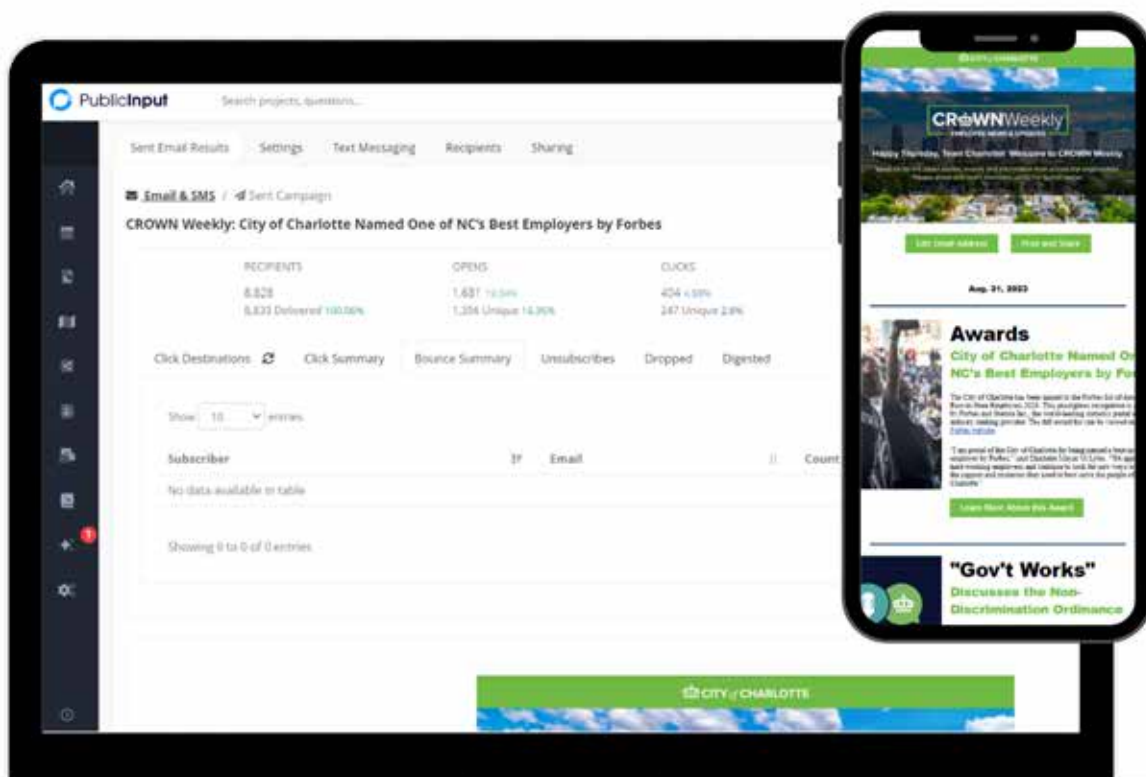
- The data tells us that group affiliation may drive more engagement among residents than proximity does.
- Partnerships with community groups is a must for state and local governments that want to increase engagement, especially among under-represented communities.

Opportunities

- Community groups already have strong connections within the community and can build on that relationship to help spread the word about engagement initiatives.
- Manage the process of collaboration and



Centralized engagement data is a powerful tool. With an integrated engagement database, agencies can combine demographic indicators, location, community affiliations, and interests to create unique segments for project-specific outreach.



Expand your reach by using a mix of communication channels to spread the word. Support emails with flyers or advertise an upcoming engagement initiative on a local news broadcast, or make use of established community ties by partnering with local organizations.

engagement using a database module to warehouse information, including:

- Community groups and their members.
- Mapping of topical areas of interest or influence that support outreach and engagement efforts.
- Coded and tagged survey results and comments associated with each community group.

3. Develop Outreach Strategies that Increase Awareness of Opportunities.

Residents are motivated to engage and willing to self-educate on a variety of issues, but report that they're simply not aware of issues that affect them.

A common sentiment we hear in some communities is that people don't feel that they're informed enough to

engage. But according to the survey data, that's not the blocker. In fact, residents cited not being aware of an issue at nearly twice the rate of those concerned about not having enough information to engage.

Key Takeaways

- It is increasingly challenging to get the right information to the right people in an age when communication channels and content have increased exponentially.
- Typical methods of outreach, like posting on a website or a social media page, are not very effective at driving resident awareness, especially at the hyperlocal level.
- Direct mail, geo-targeted text and email campaigns, and even targeted social media advertising are all proven ways of reaching and engaging specific residents.

Opportunities

- Support and supplement online communication methods with offline methods (like print advertising, signage, flyers, and partnerships with local organizations) to increase awareness.
- Provide regular communication via newsletters, subscriptions, or project emails that are integrated within a central database.
- Track resident interests via their participation to help your teams cater future communications based on resident interest.

Having an equitable community engagement approach is a critical aspect of any local government initiative aimed at fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment within their community. It is

evident that simply committing to involving residents is insufficient; a profound understanding of their needs and preferences is essential for success.

By embracing some of these strategic opportunities local government leaders can enhance the effectiveness of their community engagement efforts and ultimately create stronger, more connected, and inclusive communities. **PM**

To access the full survey report, use the QR code or visit learn.publicinput.com/2023-resident-engagement-survey.



TRICIA THOMAS is content marketing manager at PublicInput.



The Search for the First Number Two in Local Government

The **assistant city manager** is an indispensable position today, but when did the role come about?

BY MATT
WOJNOWSKI,
ICMA-CM



As a member of ICMA's Assistant Chief Administrative Officer (ACAO) Committee, I knew about my assignment to write an article for *PM* magazine about 10 months ago. I knew throughout the year my topic would come to me, but it didn't come too easily. I pondered on what could supplement the articles already written for the column or bring a unique perspective for ACAOs. I enjoy researching family history so that gave me an idea. Looking at the history of the council-manager form of government and the city manager position, we know that the first city manager was Charles E. Ashburner, who worked in Staunton, Virginia (1908–1911); Springfield, Ohio (1914–1918); Norfolk Virginia (1918–1923); and Stockton, California (1923–1928). But who, when, and where was the first official assistant city manager (ACM) in local government?

I found a list of cities that were among the first of those who adopted the

**Who, when,
and where
was the
first official
assistant city
manager?**

council-manager form of government or incorporated the city manager position within their organization, including the cities where Mr. Ashburner was city manager. I emailed the city secretary/clerk and the library staff asking about their first ACM. Now I'd like to pause and thank all of those who responded to my emails and provided information and copies of newspaper articles or meeting minutes. Their assistance and research are the essence of my article. I'll share the top five results from the following cities: Dallas, Texas; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Staunton, Virginia; Amarillo, Texas; and Wichita, Kansas.

The city of Dallas adopted the council-manager form of government in 1931. The Dallas Public Library shared a *Dallas Morning News* article from June 17, 1933, with David L. Robinson listed as the ACM. The article is titled "City Seeks Data on Federal Loans" and states, "...David



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City managers have always needed assistance, whether from other city staff, unofficial ACMs, or designated assistant city managers.

L. Robinson Jr., [a]ssistant [c]ity [m]anager, discussed various ways of financing a loan from the [federal] [g]overnment Friday and the projects to be included on a possible eligible list.” Prior to being the ACM, he was the assistant city engineer in Dallas.

The city of Grand Rapids adopted the council-manager form of government in 1916. The Grand Rapids Public Library shared a *Grand Rapids Press* article from May 10, 1929, with George H. Waring listed as ACM. The article is titled “Waring’s Salary Fixed at \$12,000” and states, “George H. Waring’s salary as director of public service and ex-officio assistant city manager, was fixed Thursday afternoon at \$12,000 a year.” Before you use the inflation calculator, I will tell you that \$12,000 in 1929 equates to about \$216,500 in 2023. In later articles, we read that his salary in this position was divided between the general fund and utility fund as he continued to serve as director of public service—similar to utilities or public works.

Next up is the city of Staunton, Virginia. Staunton is well known as the first municipality to use the council-manager form of government in 1908. Naturally, I thought they would also be in the mix as one of the first cities to have an ACM. The Staunton Public Library shared an article from *The Staunton News-Leader* from February 10, 1926, that mentioned Marie Gordon Haines as ACM. The article, titled, “Miami Gets Big Earful of News from Staunton,” states, “...and now comes a first woman city clerk and assistant city manager. Marie Gordon Haines occupies this unique position in the thriving city of Stanton, Virginia.” Before becoming ACM, she was clerk of water works, then city clerk and assistant city manager. Unfortunately, the library shared that she exaggerated her title to the reporter in Miami and resigned within a week of the news reaching Staunton.

We return to the great state of Texas for a two-step shuffle closer to first ACM with the city of Amarillo. The city adopted the council-

manager form of government in November 1913. The Amarillo Public Library shared an article from *The Amarillo Globe Times* from October 25, 1925, mentioning Harve Avery. The article, titled, “City of Amarillo has Special Agent,” started with, “‘Is the [c]ity of Amarillo employing an [a]ssistant [c]ity [m]anager to assist Jeff Bartlett?’ is a question asked by a taxpayer of *The Globe* this morning.” The immediate response in the article: “Amarillo hasn’t an assistant to Mr. Bartlett [the city manager] but it is employing Harve Avery at a salary of \$200/month as a special agent or special representative of the city commission.” Not quite an ACM, although it seems at least one taxpayer thought Amarillo had one. (Incidentally, \$200/month in 1925 equates to a \$41,734 annual salary in 2023.)

This brings us to our final stop on the search for the first official, documented assistant city manager. The city of Wichita, Kansas, adopted the council-manager form of government in 1918. This is 10 years after Staunton, five years after Amarillo, and two years after Grand Rapids. The Wichita Public library shared articles from *The Wichita Beacon* from December 8, 1919, with Fred W. Sefton named as the ACM. The article, “Have Wood to Give But No Way To Distribute,” stated, “F. W. Sefton, assistant city manager, said today that offers had been made by persons who said they would haul fuel free of charge, but he had been unable to get anyone to do the work without pay.” Wichita had a few more articles from 1919 and 1920 that continue to document Sefton as the ACM before he left in May 1921, to become the city manager of Salina, Kansas.

What can we learn from the search for the first number two? First, newspapers are valuable for documenting the work and actions of local government staff, and library staff willing to research historical records are a gift and benefit to the community. Second, from the beginning of the city manager position, they have always needed assistance, whether from other city staff, unofficial ACMs, or designated assistant city managers, at least for the last 104 years, and undoubtedly for the foreseeable future. Thank you to Fred W. Sefton for his inaugural service and thank you to all the ACMs out there! **PM**

What Municipal CAOs Need to Know, *Part 2: Ensuring Management Fitness*

Technological fitness starts from the top down. | BY MARC PFEIFFER

In the October issue, part one of this series introduced the idea of technology fitness through cyber hygiene and tech management. This month we discuss the critical elements that affect municipal government technology leadership for municipalities. How they are implemented depends on the organization's level of management capacity and the engagement of elected officials. Too often, the important attention paid to cybersecurity over the last few years takes away from the attention municipalities pay to their tech management practices.

Technological fitness requires management's attention to the leadership elements described in this article. Failing to address any of them can diminish the effectiveness of the others.

Tech at the Table

Today's technologies touch most municipal activities. Depending on the tech profile of the organization, the

person who oversees the town's technologies could be an employee, a volunteer, or a consultant. That individual needs to be involved in every decision made about the deployment of or changes in technology use.

Literally or figuratively, your expert should be sitting at the senior management table when technology-related decisions are made. Too often, decisions that directly or indirectly affect technology are made without checking with the tech staff. This can result in wasted effort or additional expenses to ensure a successful outcome. The expert doesn't need to be a senior-level manager, but they must be part of the decision-making process to ensure that decisions fit into the organization's tech capacity, profile, and plans.

Think of your tech expert as a chef that serves technology; the chef needs to be part of deciding what will be on the menu, its ingredients, the costs, and how the dishes are prepared and presented.



MARC PFEIFFER, an ICMA Life Member, is a marginally retired New Jersey town administrator and state agency manager. He is currently a senior policy fellow and assistant director at Bloustein Local, a unit of the Center for Urban Policy Research at Rutgers University. (marc.pfeiffer@rutgers.edu)



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