



# Home for All Community Engagement Resource Manual



**HOME  
FOR ALL**

SAN MATEO COUNTY

**Home for All** is a San Mateo County-led collaborative of local governments, businesses, schools, advocates, community-based and non-profit organizations working to increase local housing production and preservation so persons of all ages, backgrounds and income levels can call the County home.

The County of San Mateo's Home for All Community Engagement Program is supporting cities in broadening community participation to develop shared approaches to increase the supply of housing at all levels in San Mateo County.

This resource manual is an overview of the strategies used in a collaborative community engagement effort to explore local housing challenges and solutions.



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# The Home for All Approach

As cities throughout San Mateo County work to address their housing needs, there is growing agreement about the importance of more inclusive and constructive community dialogue. To address an issue as complex as housing, **increased participation from the community is essential**. Making progress on housing requires new approaches – new participants and perspectives – so that the climate for housing decisions in San Mateo County is more positive.

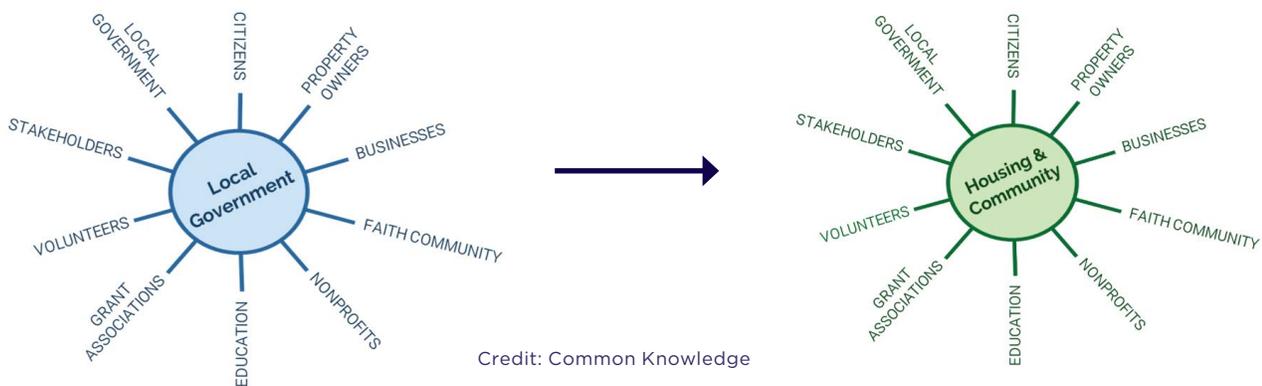
Home for All’s Community Engagement Program is **using inclusive and innovative strategies to help improve understanding, identify local solutions and increase the supply of housing in San Mateo County**. Home for All has partnered with Common Knowledge and cities in San Mateo County to broaden the conversation about local housing challenges and solutions. Participating cities have varied demographics, land use variables and experience in involving the community in housing decisions. However, they share the desire to intentionally engage new people and build a foundation of trust and shared values for future housing decisions.

## Proactive Inclusion | Mutual Phased Learning | Collaborative Action

The guiding principles above are essential to building community momentum for housing. The key elements of the Home for All approach to community engagement include:

- » Engage a broader range of perspectives and identify new leaders to participate in the design and development of priorities
- » Create opportunities for learning together; focus on building a shared understanding of the current situation before making decisions about specific projects or policies
- » Maintain two-way communication and offer multiple ways for the community to participate
- » Create opportunities for people to listen to each other and build trust within the community

**When dealing with complex challenges like housing, government cannot do it alone.** Despite this reality, many community members and civic leaders see local government as the primary entity responsible for “solving” the problem of housing. Reframing this thinking to put the community and the issue at the center and the city as one of many actors that can help address the issue, leads to more constructive engagement and more collaborative solutions across all sectors.



While there are various approaches to community engagement, this Resource Manual provides an overview of the successful strategies that have been used in various cities in San Mateo County for an inclusive and collaborative process to address housing issues.



The **highlighted items** in this manual refer to templates, worksheets and examples that can be accessed on our website at [www.homeforallsmc.org/engagement/](http://www.homeforallsmc.org/engagement/)

# Phase 1: Outreach and Listening in the Community

## Assessing City Readiness

When considering a community engagement process, cities benefit by starting from a place of inquiry. During the initial planning phase, it's important for city representatives to reflect openly and honestly on current community conditions, as well as the city's internal capacity. **Some helpful questions** for cities to ask themselves are:

- » What has been learned from past conversations about housing?
- » Where is there confusion?
- » What information do we need to gather?
- » What resources is the city willing to commit?
- » Who should be part of the team to ensure success?

"If people get together and listen, we can find good solutions."

Burlingame Participant



## Role of Council and Commissions

Councilmembers and Commissioners play an important role as listeners during community conversations and assist with outreach and engagement efforts before, during and after the community conversations. Through this process, they are better informed about how housing issues are affecting the community and the solutions with greatest community interest. City officials can play a variety of roles in community engagement, including:

- » **Super-Connector:** Identifying groups and individuals that should participate
- » **Co-Planner:** Determining the best timing for efforts, helping to navigate the community landscape
- » **Co-Promoter:** Sharing information and activating their own networks
- » **Co-Host:** Providing a warm welcome and closing "thank you" during community conversations
- » **Listener:** Listening to expand understanding of values, hopes, concerns and policy preferences

## Community Partners and Outreach

Community partners are an essential resource in helping the city connect with vital and underrepresented constituencies – those who care deeply about the community but have not participated in traditional civic processes or previous conversations. Partners can be informal or formal allies to help you listen to a broader range of people who live and/or work in your city and find out how they are experiencing the housing challenge.

A city should be thoughtful and strategic about engaging community partners. A good place to start is **mapping the city's partner landscape**, including a candid assessment of which relationships are strong and which might need special attention. Ideal community partners:

- » Can help the city reach "new" audiences or segments of the community that have been underrepresented in civic discussions
- » Share goals or values related to inclusive participation and community education
- » Have not taken an overly partisan or fixed position in relation to housing
- » May be willing to commit staff time, resources or volunteers (and the city can consider supporting grassroots groups in recognition of the value of their community connections)



< Intercept interviews with community members at the Burlingame Public Library

San Mateo pop-up outreach at Chavez Market >



Partners can be a mix of entities along a spectrum of those closer in to city operations as well as more grassroots groups. The common theme is to find people who care about your community that have been less involved in city decisions:

- » Neighborhood and homeowner associations
- » Local businesses
- » Non-profits
- » Faith organizations
- » Service organizations
- » Schools
- » Cultural associations
- » Sports leagues
- » Libraries
- » City commissions
- » Other city departments

The Home for All engagement cities have reported the value of using a mix of **outreach methods**:

- » Newsletters/social media
- » Short online surveys
- » Intercept interviews and pop-ups
- » Community events
- » Word of mouth through trusted “super-connectors” – people who have a large network in the community
- » Existing meetings of community groups
- » Other locations and events suggested by community partners

### Pop-up Outreach Supplements More Traditional Methods

Pop-ups are staffed by friendly “field ambassadors” who serve as listeners and provide relevant information about city projects (in this case, housing). Pop-ups typically begin 3-4 weeks prior to a community conversation and are used until one week prior to the event to gather input and invite participation. Successful pop-ups generally include:

- » A location with high foot traffic
- » A table and poster boards with questions that get people thinking about the issue (bi-lingual if appropriate) (i.e. “How does housing affect you and those you care about?”)
- » Greeting people and having a **guided conversation** about how they are impacted by housing
- » Post-it notes for people to write down answers to questions and share their thoughts
- » Additional information such as a **meeting invitation**, or a **housing resource guide**

## Preparing for Community Conversations

### 12-8 Weeks Before the Event

- » Engage the City Council and gain approval
- » Hold a kick-off meeting with Council and staff
- » Map out the community partner landscape

### 8-4 Weeks Before

- » Identify and reach out to super-connectors
- » Conduct pop-up outreach and presentations to community groups
- » Book event venue and identify facilitators

### 4-0 Weeks Before

- » Send out event invitations
- » Draft event agenda, PowerPoint, and other meeting materials
- » Arrange food, childcare, and language translation
- » Train table facilitators

Materials for the underlined actions are available on our website.

## Phase 2: Community Conversations

For many cities, public meetings often follow a limited number of formats. In many City Council or Planning Commission meetings, staff often present information on a topic and community members individually offer input to decision makers during a public comment or feedback window. While valuable in some cases, this method can be daunting for community members, prevent nuanced feedback and can lead to an “us vs. them” dynamic between the city and community. Home for All’s model of community conversations aims to promote dialogue among community members with varying perspectives to increase understanding and bridge differences while giving decision makers the opportunity to gain insights into the thoughts and feelings of their constituents.

Offering community members, elected officials and city staff the opportunity to take part in a more participatory, learning-oriented conversation is central to successful housing engagement. The approach most cities settled on was the **CLEAR (Collaborative Learning Experience and Reflection) Conversation**, a format focused on building mutual understanding and shared language. This format emphasizes learning before decision-making and includes extended time for dialogue between participants of diverse backgrounds. Community members also have a chance to learn more about the issue, how others are experiencing the issue and what they can do to take action. This focus on collaborative learning – making sense of the issue together – applies not only to the community but also city staff. City staff and elected officials are learning, just as community members are learning.

When planning a CLEAR community conversation, specific goals are set for both what participants should learn and experience.

- » **Content goals** focus on the information that we want people to know. This includes relevant background information (How did we get here?) and information about current conditions (Where are we now?), helping community members orient themselves in the broader context.
- » **Experiential goals** are the feelings, attitudes and mindsets that we want participants to experience.

“Focus on solutions that integrate the look and feel of our Coastside community.”

Half Moon Bay  
Community Member





Portola Valley Community Conversation >

< San Mateo Community Conversation



## Designing and Planning Your First Community Conversation

Attention must also be placed on helping the entire community to build understanding of housing trends, needs, priorities and shared values. The primary focus of the first meeting is to elicit key community values and principles that will inform the entire community engagement process. By interacting with peers, community members can identify shared values and explore what really matters to them in more detail than they could in, for example, a public comment period. Create the conditions that encourage dialogue, not debate.



Redwood City Event Flyer

Essential elements of a successful meeting include:

- » **Strong outreach to super-connectors, community groups, and other organizations** to leverage trusted sources and messengers to encourage less civically engaged residents to attend.
- » **Carefully designed meetings** are welcoming, accessible and provide comfortable settings for constructive conversation. A meeting facilitator, working closely with small group facilitators, ensures that the **meeting design** is carefully implemented.
- » **Neutral facilitators** help participants have confidence in the proceedings and speak openly. In San Mateo County, **neutral facilitators** were recruited by the Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center who worked with Common Knowledge and the Home for All team to assume this role.
- » **Food.** Meeting around breakfast, lunch or dinner is a great draw. Breaking bread together can make people feel at ease and set a positive tone.
- » **Childcare.** Making the event a family-friendly affair can help you reach audiences that do not typically attend city events. Providing childcare removes barriers for families to participate in the conversations and engages parents who cannot readily make alternate arrangements for childcare.
- » **Provide translation and interpretation.** If more than 5% of your community are monolingual in a language other than English, that language should be supported. When possible, it is preferable to mix English and non-English speakers with a bilingual table facilitator to create an opportunity for participants to learn from diverse perspectives. Work with community partners to provide **translated print materials**, as well.
- » **A balance between staff presentations and table conversation.** Presentations should be broken up by periods of discussion instead of overloading people with one big lecture at the beginning. Although providing well-framed facts about housing solutions (see next section) is essential to educating the community, the opportunity to have conversations with their peers is often cited as participants' favorite part of the events.



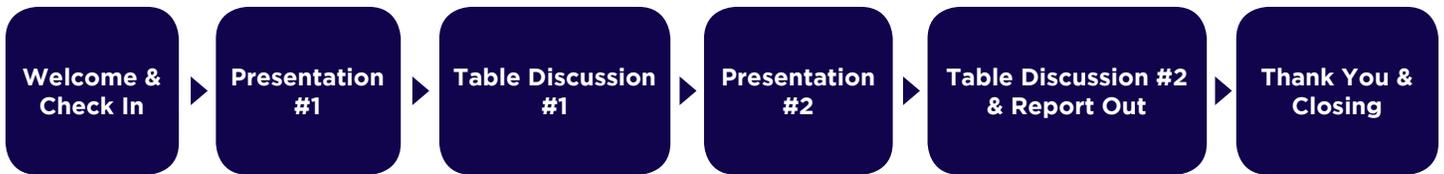
Half Moon Bay Community Conversation >

< Pacifica Community Conversation



- » **Place community members at the center of the conversation.** Elected officials and city staff are encouraged to welcome people, circulate during table discussion and listen, while taking notes on a **listening guide**. City officials should not sit at tables because it can distract from peer conversation.
- » **Provide multiple opportunities for feedback.** Table facilitators should take notes that summarize the high-level themes discussed at the table, without trying to chronicle every comment or opinion. Each participant should receive a **Table Participant Feedback Form** to provide additional comments, as desired. Facilitators should also fill out a **Facilitator Feedback Form** in addition to debriefing with city staff immediately after the meeting.
- » **Mix people at tables.** Although walk-in attendees should be accommodated whenever possible, community members ought to be encouraged to **sign up for the event online** ahead of time. Attendees are **assigned to specific tables** to ensure a mix of diverse perspectives. To the maximum extent possible, organizers should try to mix these different groups through assigned seating to ensure every table has a diversity of views. Couples often have similar views on housing issues and should be seated at different tables when possible.

### Community Conversation Meeting Structure



### Framing Your Communication Around Housing

The ways we talk about housing and invite participation are key aspects to consider when launching any engagement effort. Certain housing-related phrases and messages can trigger cognitive biases and can impede people’s ability to take in new information. Be mindful of potential communication pitfalls and proactively frame communications to emphasize the theme of interconnectedness. Two goals of these conversations are for community members to develop a shared set of values and identify how their own experiences fit in with those of the broader community. During the conversation, it is important to build on connections developed from outreach efforts and other individual or small group engagement activities. **Advice on framing messaging, designing materials and of meeting handouts can be found on our [Community Engagement webpage](#).**



Check out the Frameworks Institute’s resources on framing messages about housing:  
[Frameworksinstitute.org/housing.html](https://frameworksinstitute.org/housing.html)

## Designing Subsequent Conversations

After holding the first conversation, the project team show assesses the results – carefully reviewing feedback from participants, observers (like City Councilmembers and planning commissioners) and community partners who helped promote the event. Immediately following the event, all facilitators should debrief to collect initial reactions. This feedback helps the city fine-tune their meeting design, identify if there are ways to improve the presentation of information and settle on the best format for future meetings. After the first meeting, organizers will want to prepare a brief **meeting report** to share what was discussed with the community. The primary audience for this report is the community and should include images, participant quotes and be written in a way that is accessible to a broad community audience.

During a second meeting, it is important to confirm the community values identified through earlier engagement. Often, a significant share of participants will not have attended the first meeting or participated in earlier outreach efforts. While attendees may generally agree with the values or themes expressed in the first meeting, inviting input from new participants is essential. The **format of the second meeting** can be more flexible (more table discussion, a gallery walk, etc.) and can be an opportunity to obtain specific feedback on the policy options highlighted in the first meeting.

“The conversation for solutions needs to continue. There is a decent amount of community consensus on the issue.”

Burlingame Community Member



## Phase 3: Sustaining Two-Way Engagement

Following the primary engagement phase, how do you make sure that the time and energy invested in developing a larger audience of more informed and engaged community continues to pay dividends? **A City’s housing solutions will be supported by a series of conversations over the next several years.** Keeping in contact with participants is essential to sustaining momentum.

### 1-3 Weeks After Your Community Conversation

- » Debrief the community’s themes, questions and feedback with your city team and partners.
- » Develop an accessible **meeting report** to share with all attendees and community partners. Post it to the **city’s webpage**, newsletter and social media channels.
- » Share highlights of the community conversation with your Council and planning commission.
- » Follow up on opportunities and new ideas. One example is how residents volunteered to do tours of their housing options in Portola Valley (ADUs) and Half Moon Bay (mobile homes). When people offer to help, they can be champions for your ongoing housing conversation.



Pacifica Let's Talk Housing Web Page

## 3-6 Weeks After Your Community Conversation

Review the community information needs. What do residents want to know more about? How can the city provide it?

- » Redwood City prepared a [Housing Resources Guide](#) in English and Spanish to help those looking for immediate support or ways to volunteer.
- » At your Planning Commission meetings, share [handouts of the “basic information” from your community conversation](#) for residents to pick up.
- » Update the city’s housing webpage with [community-facing information](#) and simplified language that addresses varying levels of information needs. Make communications responsive. Respond to participant questions or provide information requested during the community conversation.

## Looking Ahead

Conventional engagement efforts are typically episodic – they take place in a time-limited fashion that focuses on a single project or policy. Staying in contact helps you keep the positive momentum when you have other planning or housing decisions coming before your commission or Council.

## Follow Up Actions After Community Conversations

### 0-1 Week After the Event

- » Debrief with facilitators and project team
- » Send thank you notes to attendees
- » Compile table notes and feedback forms to write the meeting report

### 1-3 Weeks After

- » Debrief with key city staff and Councilmembers
- » Share the meeting report
- » Follow up with community partners
- » Begin planning future conversations

### 3-5 Weeks After

- » Make a formal presentation to the City Council
- » Continue to share the outcomes of the meeting with the community
- » Act on key priorities the community expressed

## Evolving Partnerships

City staff have many responsibilities. If staff members do not have the bandwidth or resources to continue the same level of engagement, they should consider sharing responsibility more broadly. In Redwood City, engagement efforts are being sustained with support from the City’s Housing and Human Concerns Committee, as well as Redwood City 2020, a local collaborative dedicated to addressing challenging issues facing the community. Members of the city team can continue to support and champion ongoing engagement efforts, but they are not solely responsible for seeing every aspect through. If engagement is to be sustained, it is best for the responsibility to be shared.

## Ongoing Communications

Community members want to know more about the city’s role in housing and be informed ahead of major decisions. Use existing city channels and partner networks to provide regular housing updates. Consider highlighting housing efforts through [newsletters](#), [blog posts on the city’s website](#) and [posts on social media](#). Hold pop-ups during farmers markets, community festivals or holiday celebrations. Whether in person or online, it works well to offer regular occasions for the community to share their feelings and experiences so that you can keep a pulse on community perspectives and information needs.

“Always remember that quality of life in our city needs to be a starting place when considering development.”

San Mateo Community Member







The photos in this manual can be credited to Common Knowledge.

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