How Do We Talk About Housing?

A GUIDE TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY
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A Guide to Community Engagement & Grassroots Advocacy

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Across the state, groups of various sizes and levels of formality are working together to ease the impact of the housing crisis in their communities by considering local land use regulations and embracing creative solutions. While these grassroots groups are often led by individuals with some expertise, true community engagement does not begin with solutions. Rather, leaders begin by listening to the housing stories and concerns of community members, bringing residents together with decision-makers, and putting the faces of their neighbors to the issue of housing.

Grassroots movements are meant to convene, connect, and facilitate. They guide concerned citizens, members of the business community, and decision-makers through an iterative process that often include challenging and revealing conversations.

This guide outlines a community-led, bottom-up approach to engagement and advocacy for housing advocates across New Hampshire and beyond. It is intended for housing coalitions, commissions or committees; groups of interested citizens; and anyone who wishes to bring their community together to talk about local housing in the present and future, as well as its influence on community and economic development.

This guide outlines a nine-step process to help organize community efforts to make positive change.
A key first step is finding your entry point into the greater community. You’re probably reading this guide because you are concerned about housing and eager to make change in your community, but do others share your concerns? Are community members, elected officials, business leaders, or other key stakeholders already talking about housing? Answering these questions will help to determine a starting point.

While zoning ordinance amendments must be adopted at the local level, these conversations and grassroots movements can – and often do – take place regionally. Regional efforts are particularly useful if your community is small. Collaborating with nearby communities can help raise awareness collectively and efficiently provide opportunities to share resources, support, and information.

The best way to find the answers to questions is to ask! Collect your community’s “people infrastructure” by talking with people you already know and initiate conversations with other potential allies or stakeholders from a diverse cross section of the community.

- **Reach out to leadership from the faith-based community.**
- **Connect with the business community and talk with local employers.** If your community is served by a chamber of commerce or has a local business association, this is a great place to start making connections.
- **What other organized groups exist within your community?** Does your community have a senior or community center or a young professionals network? Sometimes the most active and engaged local groups are less formal, like a knitting or gardening club.
- **Look for allies in local government.** Talk with municipal staff, members of the planning board, elected officials, or leaders in the school, police, and fire departments.
- **Consider taking advantage of other opportunities to reach out to the entire community.** For example, post to a Facebook group or on a community bulletin board.
- **When you talk with someone, ask them who else you might talk with. It is likely conversations about housing are already taking place.**
- **Invite housing experts into the conversation, such as those from the regional planning commission and New Hampshire Housing.** They may already be aware of housing-related conversations occurring in your community.
How receptive a community is to change will vary significantly from one community to the next. In some communities, you will find that people are eager to explore possible solutions, while in other communities you may find there is little public or political support for expanding housing options. If your community is closer to the latter end of the spectrum, proceed more slowly, but don’t give up!

Leading with solutions can often thwart good community engagement, but it is useful to think about possible solutions and talk with a local decision-maker or elected official you trust (e.g., a trusted member of the town or city council, a supportive planning board member, or a municipal staffer like the planner, town administrator or city manager, or economic development staff). Get a sense of the community’s history by asking:

- What solutions have been discussed in the past?
- What types of projects or policies have garnered public support in the past?
- What types of projects or policies have led to resistance?

**What do I ask members of the community?**

One-on-one and small group conversations are a great way to build relationships, get to know the community, and grow a grassroots group of people eager to engage.

Here is some advice to guide these stakeholder conversations:

**Be curious and ask questions.**

Your goal is to learn as much as you can about the community and what conversations have already taken place. This is an important opportunity to build trust and a network you can rely on for information, advice, and support.

**Leverage the impact of personal housing stories.**

When you meet with people, ask them about their own housing story. How has the housing crisis affected them or their family or friends? Has the crisis affected their business?

**Don’t lead with solutions.**

The community may not be ready to jump into a conversation about solutions. It’s important that the grassroots effort be community-led.

These stakeholder conversations, often called key informant interviews, are a key first step. For more information on successful key informant interviews, see resources from UNH Cooperative Extension on page 19.
Once you've had a handful of conversations with community members, it likely won't take long to identify some of the top concerns. Consider how the housing problem is being articulated and by whom.

- Is the business community concerned that their workforce can't afford to live nearby? Often communities – even those without a strong business presence – are part of a regional economy.
- Are older residents who are looking to downsize and stay in the community being priced out or stuck in too-large homes?
- Are younger people struggling to enter the community or thinking about returning to their hometown due to a lack of available rental housing?
- Are young families struggling to purchase their first home?

Identifying the problem will go a long way in ensuring that you're headed in the right direction when it is time to talk about solutions.

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**RESOURCES**

**Master Plan**

This is a good time to review the community’s Master Plan and other relevant documents. When was the Master Plan last updated? Does the Master Plan have a housing chapter? According to the Master Plan, what is the community’s vision for the future of housing?

**Regional Planning Commission**

Connect with the regional planning commission to inquire about a regional housing plan or housing needs assessment. Note: Regional Planning Commissions will have completed a housing needs assessment and fair share analysis by December 2022.

**Housing Data and Research**

New Hampshire Housing is a good source for housing data. We have many studies on various housing topics that are excellent references.
Once you’ve had several one-on-one conversations and begun to build relationships, it’s time to pull people together and formalize the team. This group, dedicated to increasing conversation and taking action to support housing choice and availability, is an informal housing coalition, steering committee, or housing team.

The goal of the team is to reach out to the community and plan discussions about housing, provide education, and increase the base of supporters. It may take several meetings before the team finds its footing.

It is important to bring municipal staff and local decision-makers, such as elected officials or a representative from the planning board, to the table, as well as other interested stakeholders. Bring in experts from New Hampshire Housing, the regional planning commission, and representatives from other relevant housing organizations. These groups can help support formation, provide educational tools and data, and help to guide planning and facilitation of meetings.

FORMULATE AN INITIAL OUTLINE TO GUIDE THE PROCESS:

What are the measurable goals? What would you like to accomplish?
How will you measure your progress? For example:

- Community is more aware of the effects of a housing shortage on individuals, families, and the economy. Consider implementing a pre- and post-survey to measure attitudes about housing.
- Community has an increased understanding of the need for housing.
- Community is aware of the barriers to housing choice and is committed to removing barriers.
- Community has taken action to remove barriers (e.g., created a housing commission or land trust, adopted changes to land use regulations).

How will the group communicate with each other? How will the group communicate with the greater community?

- Consider creating a communications plan that will make it easy to access information, notes from meetings, and other resources.
- Create a Facebook group, website, or utilize another tool (e.g., Basecamp, Discord, Slack).
If there are representatives from larger groups (such as a chamber of commerce, local business associations, or regional planning commissions), consider inquiring if any of their existing online tools are appropriate.

Consider other means of outreach to connect with more people, being mindful that not all members of the community are tech-savvy.

**How will the team gather input from the community?**

**How will community input be used?**

- Community engagement is key to a successful grassroots movement.
- It is important that the initial team not get too far ahead of the greater community and move toward solutions too quickly (as tempting as they may be).
- Ensure the team is engaging the entire community and collecting feedback from those beyond the group.

**What will the group do?**

- Build in feedback loops by using input gathered at each meeting to inform next steps.
  - What picture is emerging about the types of housing needed and the people impacted?
  - What myths or misperceptions have revealed themselves? What specific topics seem to interest the group?
- The answers to those questions will guide next steps and provide valuable information about what topics future speakers or events should cover.

**How often will the group meet?**

**Where will the group meet and in what format?**

- Consider establishing a regular meeting schedule and decide if the group will meet in person or virtually. Identify a meeting location, if in person.
- Be mindful that meeting days and times will greatly impact who can participate in the meetings.

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**TIP**

If funding is needed, contact New Hampshire Housing about applying for a mini-grant.
It’s time to invite the greater community to the conversation! A good way to do this is with a launch event. Here is a framework for what planning and hosting a launch meeting:

**INVITE**

Once you’ve chosen a date, time, and location, the most important thing to do is ensure community members attend! Be sure cross sections of the community are well-represented. Send targeted invitations to members of the business community, the faith-based community, civic groups, decision-makers and elected officials, the arts community, seniors, young people, and anyone else who may share a personal connection with the issue or could be impacted or wants to make a difference.

- Consider the role hospitality plays in these events. What are appropriate food and beverage options for those gathered? Consider childcare or other possible needs.

**WELCOME**

Which member of the housing team should offer a welcome at the launch meeting? It should be someone well-known by the community – perhaps a business owner, elected official, or someone who is recognized as a leader. Ask this individual to provide the welcome and introduction, and to offer context for the meeting.

**INTRODUCE**

Ask attendees to introduce themselves. If the group is too large, have attendees break into small groups to break the ice and meet one another. In addition to sharing their name, consider asking attendees to share what role they play in the community, what groups or interests they represent, and why they are there. Encourage attendees to share their housing stories with one another.
LISTEN

There will be plenty of time for education at future gatherings – the launch meeting is an opportunity to hear from the community. Either as one large group or in smaller groups, have attendees share their personal housing stories, concerns, barriers, and potential areas for opportunity. Create a discussion guide to lead these conversations. Small group conversations can be self-facilitated or facilitated by individuals from the housing team. Consider collaborating with Cooperative Extension at the University of New Hampshire or NH Listens for assistance planning and executing this key step.

COMMIT

Ask attendees how they imagine moving forward. Ask who is missing from the conversation. Are you willing to commit to any specific tasks or action items? Would you like to meet again?

DEBRIEF

As a group, summarize the results of the launch meeting and allow what you heard to inform next steps.

For more tips on hosting a local conversation, read this article from Strong Towns: 6 Tips for Hosting Your First Local Conversation
www.strongtowns.org/journal/2022/9/7/6-tips-for-hosting-your-first-local-conversation
What you heard at the launch meeting will inform next steps for engagement and education. Continue to invite experts to the table to be part of these conversations.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES INCLUDE:

- Invite experts in to speak to various housing-related topics and share data.
- Host a screening of the documentary Communities & Consequences II, followed by a panel discussion or community listening session.
- Combine housing-related discussions with social time and food.

CONTINUE TO PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE TO SHARE THEIR HOUSING EXPERIENCE.

- Assemble focus groups of experts to identify key barriers and discuss potential areas of opportunity. For example, one focus group discussion could be housing industry professionals such as planners, housing developers with experience in the area, architects, engineers, and others.
- Continue to invite the community to share their reactions and perspectives in every conversation.

What you learn from the community at each of these gatherings will inform next steps. For example, if concerns about how housing will impact school enrollment and property taxes is part of the current narrative, bring in an expert who can speak to this topic specifically.

Advice for these conversations:

- It’s important to let the community lead the conversation, identify the problem, and inform the goals. Your role as a leader is to be curious and continue to ask questions. It may be helpful to work with a neutral facilitator, like someone from UNH Cooperative Extension or NH Listens.
- Don’t let the data overshadow the people part of the conversations about housing challenges. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure every community member understands what current and future members of the community need.
- Continue to invite new voices into the group.
- Be patient – done well, this work can be slow and iterative.
- Consider technology needs for all types of meetings.
Repeat Steps 1-5, as needed, until the group is ready to move toward solutions. This process often progresses slowly with small wins and challenges along the way. It is important to consider how you will continue to bring new people and new ideas to the table while nurturing the initial group of stakeholders.

- Ensure you have built in feedback loops so that participants have the opportunity to provide feedback throughout the process. It is important to maintain a level of engagement to ensure changes made are still resonating with the community. In some cases, successes of the past become challenges when the community’s attitude changes without an opportunity for individuals to provide feedback. Even once you’ve reached the end of this guide, this process never truly finishes.

- At this stage another key component is communicating the work being done with the greater community. Whether this is a website, community Facebook page or group, or another vehicle, it is critical that a public “hub” exists that is accessible to members of the community. This is key to ensuring the process is transparent, which builds trust while also providing a central location to store meeting minutes, agendas, meeting schedules, reference materials, presentations from guest speakers, and more.
At some point, the community will be ready to move toward solutions. Solutions will be fueled by stories, perspectives, and ideas shared throughout Steps 1-6. What are community members saying about their needs? Are themes emerging from these conversations? What are you hearing from stakeholders?

- Maybe you're hearing that there is a need for more rental housing, or perhaps opportunities for current renters to become homeowners?
- Maybe you're hearing older residents would like to downsize and stay in the community or that there is a need for multi-generational living?
- Maybe there are concerns coming from the business community about where their workers will live?

AS YOU MOVE TOWARD SOLUTIONS, HERE ARE SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- **Who are the decision-makers you will need to target?** How do decisions about land use regulations get made in your community?

- **Assess the current political will.** Who among the decision-makers is movable? Who is likely not?

- **Invite developers to share their perspectives with the group.** Zoning ordinances are sometimes crafted without understanding the financial feasibility of actual development.

- **Ensure any news coverage is balanced and fair.** If possible, develop a relationship with the press.

- **Continue to invite experts to offer their assistance, including an individual from New Hampshire Housing, the regional housing coalition, or the regional planning commission.** You don’t need to be an expert to guide this process!

WHAT ARE SOME POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS AND NEXT STEPS?

As the key problem(s) becomes clear, it will be easier to envision key solutions. If you haven’t already, this is an important time to connect with New Hampshire Housing – we’re here to help identify solutions and resources. We’ll also loop in your regional planning commission and housing coalition. See Appendix on page 18 for more information on how to identify decision-makers in your town or city.
Consider opportunities to examine local land use regulations.
- Apply for a Housing Opportunity Planning (HOP) Grant.
- Review the Meeting the Workforce Housing Challenge Guidebook.

Host a charrette with a regional housing coalition or Plan NH.
- This project may be eligible for funding through New Hampshire Housing.

Review your community’s accessory dwelling unit (ADU) ordinance.

Don’t reinvent the wheel: consider what other communities have done.

Create a housing commission or committee.
Even the most well-crafted zoning ordinance won’t help to ease the housing crisis if it isn’t adopted! Continued engagement and outreach efforts are critical to ensuring a warrant article or ordinance amendment are adopted by decision-makers and/or passed by voters. Consider what happens in between the creation of an ordinance amendment or warrant article and Election Day. Do voters understand the warrant article? Will the town or city council or board of alderman adopt the proposed changes?

It is critical at this stage to gather feedback from decision-makers and concerned citizens, ensure answers to “frequently asked questions” are communicated effectively, and advocates are prepared. Often it is those who oppose change that turn up at public hearings or campaign prior to a town meeting or election. Advocacy from supportive stakeholders is needed; activating supportive voices is key to ensuring decision-makers hear from pro-housing community members.

PREPARING COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO BE EFFECTIVE ADVOCATES WILL HELP – HERE’S HOW:

Host an advocacy training. Consider partnering with an organization that does this training or a housing-related organization, like a regional housing coalition.

Ensure potential advocates understand what advocacy is. Advocates can:

- Email a letter of support to the planning board, town or city council, or board of aldermen.
- Testify in person at the public hearing at the planning board.
- Voice their support and share their own housing story (a powerful advocacy tool) in a local paper/letter to the editor, blog post, or social media post.

Prepare advocates to testify at a public hearing with these tips:

- Introduce yourself and include your street address (you can say the street or neighborhood if you aren’t comfortable stating your address).
- Be brief and stick to your key points.
- Submit written comments in advance of the meeting, if possible.
- Be respectful.
• Be personal and passionate and include your personal experience.
• Avoid reading from a piece of paper.
• Bring someone you know with you (there is strength in numbers, and you’ll be more comfortable).
• Adjust the microphone, if needed, before you begin speaking.
• Practice will make it easier and more comfortable, as will watching others deliver their testimony.
• Say “thank you.”

MORE RESOURCES FOR ADVOCATES:

• Strong Towns: Getting a Response from Local Leaders

• New Futures: Power of a Personal Story
  www.new-futures.org/advocacy/power-personal-story

• Strong Towns: 9 Ways to Change an Elected Official’s Mind

One way local, grassroots housing groups can affect change is by recruiting and campaigning for pro-housing people to run for local office.

It is helpful to have allies on town or city councils and on planning boards. Becoming a part of local government and becoming a decision-maker has value.
If you're in a community with a traditional town meeting or town election, don't forget to go vote! If you're in a community with a town or city council or board of alderman, be sure to attend public hearings and ensure decision-makers hear from supportive voices.

What now?

As mentioned in Step 6, this process never truly finishes. Even once a policy change is enacted, it is important to maintain some level of engagement to ensure the changes continue to resonate with community members.

One of the benefits of establishing a housing committee or commission is that this group is tasked with continuing to monitor the pulse of the community and creates opportunities for community members to express their concerns and provide feedback.
How, and by Whom, are Local Zoning Ordinance Amendments Made?

Select Board + Traditional Town Meeting

Typically, zoning ordinance amendments are placed on the ballot for vote by the planning board. Before election day, zoning ordinance amendments must be discussed at a public hearing held by the planning board. Ballot items (also called warrant articles) are voted on at the town meeting and only residents in attendance can vote. The Town Meeting is usually a day-long affair, held on a Saturday in the late winter or early spring. Zoning ordinances specifically cannot be amended after the public hearing(s).

Amendments are only voted on once per year at the town meeting. Ultimately, voters are the decision-makers under this type of government. Alternatively, citizens can initiate amendments and collect signatures via citizen’s petition. These must also go through a planning board public hearing, but the planning board has no power to change them.

Example: Stratham, Newington

“SB2”: Select Board + Deliberative Session + Town Election (Official Ballot)

Typically, zoning ordinance amendments are placed on the ballot for vote by the planning board. Before election day, zoning ordinance amendments must be discussed at public hearing held by the planning board. Ballot items (also called warrant articles) are discussed at a deliberative session prior to election day. Zoning ordinances specifically cannot be amended at deliberative session, so all amendments must be made during the planning board’s public hearing(s).

The deliberative session is typically an all-day affair, held on a Saturday in late winter. All residents can vote on election day, typically a Tuesday in the spring.

Amendments are only voted on once per year at the town meeting. Ultimately, voters are the decision-makers under this type of government. Alternatively, citizens can initiate amendments and collect signatures via citizen’s petition. These must also go through a planning board public hearing, but the planning board has no power to change them.

Example: Exeter, Hampton, Rye, Barrington

Council

In communities with a town or city council, it is ultimately the council that votes to adopt zoning ordinance amendments. Amendments can be initiated by anyone, but are often written by a councilor, planning board member, or a relevant committee or commission.

Regardless of who initiates the amendment, all amendments are passed through the planning board for their feedback and public hearing(s) before being voted on by the council.

Residents and planning board members can influence amendments during the public hearings held by the planning board.

Example: Durham, Newmarket, Portsmouth, Dover, Rochester, Somersworth

Despite having a City Council, zoning amendments in Lebanon are sent to the voters in a March election – one of many exceptions!

Aldermen

Similar to council, but with a stronger mayor. In NH, these are only the cities of Manchester and Nashua. Both cities have the staff and resources to help citizens navigate the process.

Zoning ordinance amendments are passed through the planning board for feedback from the public at public hearing before ultimately being voted on by the Board of Aldermen.

Residents and planning board members can influence amendments during the public hearings held by the planning board.
RESOURCES

www.chapa.org/about/chapa-programs/municipal-engagement-initiative

www.desegregatect.org/be-the-change

The Strong Field Framework: A Guide and Toolkit for Funders and Nonprofits Committed to Large-Scale Impact. The Bridgespan Group 

Piecing It Together: A Framing Playbook for Affordable Housing Advocates. Frameworks Institute, Enterprise Community Partners. 
www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/piecing-it-together-a-communications-playbook-for-affordable-housing-advocates/

“You Don’t Have to Live Here”: Why Housing Messages Are Backfiring and 10 Things We Can Do About It. Frameworks Institute, Enterprise Community Partners. 
www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/you-dont-have-to-live-here-why-housing-messages-are-backfiring-and-10-things-we-can-do-about-it/

Housing-Ready Toolbox. Vermont Housing Data website, HousingData.org – Vermont Housing Finance Agency. 
www.housingdata.org/toolbox/steps-for-municipalities

https://extension.unh.edu/resource/tools-community-engagement

NH Listens. Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire 
https://carsey.unh.edu/new-hampshire-listens

Want to Invigorate Community Engagement? Break Out the Building Blocks. 

New Hampshire Housing Publications 
www.nhhousing.org/publications-data/publications-reports/
As a self-supporting public corporation created by the state legislature, New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority promotes, finances, and supports affordable housing.