

# ADVOCATE'S GUIDE TO HOUSING ELEMENTS MESSAGING



## Introduction

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The Housing Elements process is one of our most important opportunities to assess the needs of our communities, influence housing policy, and advance an ambitious, equitable, sustainable vision for housing. While the specific challenges and opportunities will vary from place to place, the goal is the same: to develop a plan that will house everyone in a jurisdiction and keep everyone housed.

Community engagement is a critical part of meeting this fundamental goal and developing a successful Housing Elements plan. This guide

provides tools that advocates can adapt to educate, engage, and mobilize community support.

The Housing Elements process does not exist in a vacuum. The messaging we use will be most effective when it aligns with broader housing narrative shift messaging. A full guide can be found at [shifthebay.org/resources/message-guide/](https://shifthebay.org/resources/message-guide/).



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# Housing Elements Basics

As with any process designed to address issues as complex as housing policy, Housing Elements can be complicated, wonky, and overwhelming for folks who are new to the process. The good news is that advocates and residents don't need to know all the details to make an impact.

No matter what the specific policies or proposals being considered, there are a few key facts about Housing Elements that can help community members understand why and how to get involved:

**Housing Elements is required by law.** That means that every city and county must participate, and the planning process **must include community input.**

**Housing Elements is for everyone.** The Housing Elements plan must determine how much housing is needed to **make sure every resident has a place to live**, and to plan for future growth. An important part of the federal law requires Housing Elements planning to **advance equity and prioritize the needs of communities of color** and other groups that have been the targets of discriminatory policy.

**Housing Elements is happening now.** This process happens once every eight years, and this is our moment. That means we can't wait to get involved — and that **we will be living with this Housing Elements plan until 2030.** That's a big deal!

**Housing Elements belongs to the community.** Nobody knows more about the challenges a community faces than the people who live there. That's why Housing Elements relies on community input to shape the plan. By getting involved, **you can help create a plan** that makes smart investments, supports your priorities, and helps build the future your community deserves.

There's a lot more to Housing Elements, and in some circumstances it may be helpful to add a bit more detail. But for most people, these points are enough to invite participation.

Remember that residents are already experts in their own lived experience. Our job is to make it as easy as possible for them to connect that perspective with the Housing Elements process.



# Connecting policy with people

Most housing advocates have embraced a policy approach that includes the 3 Ps:

**Production** of more housing, with an emphasis on more affordable housing.

**Preservation** of existing housing options.

**Protection** for renters and residents facing rising costs, eviction, and other hardships.

In addition, many advocates include an explicit emphasis on:

**Prevention** of homelessness by fulfilling housing needs.

The 3Ps and 4Ps frameworks are useful shorthand that can help break down and categorize specific policy proposals. We encourage you to keep using that framework. However, **this kind of language can feel abstract to folks who are not deeply engaged in housing advocacy.**

When discussing policy proposals, be sure to use accessible language that keeps the focus on how policy affects people's lives. For example, we might advocate for:

## ● More housing

- So that people have options that work for them
- So that communities and our economy can grow
- So that our children have a future here

## ● More equitable housing

- So that we can actively undo the harm done by past policies and invest in marginalized communities
- So that people from all walks of life can build a life here
- So that seniors, people with disabilities, and people with low incomes have stability and safety
- So that we promote the diversity that keeps our community vibrant and thriving

## ● Smarter housing

- So that we can protect and make most of our precious resources
- So that our communities are resilient and sustainable
- So that housing policy supports smart transit and economic planning

# Core Housing Elements message

A central, unifying message can help bring together stakeholders with a variety of perspectives and priorities. This core message provides essential

information, generates a sense of urgency, and conveys a vision of what a successful, community-driven Housing Elements plan can achieve.

Right now, we have a once-in-a-decade chance to address current housing problems, invest in our communities, and create better housing options for all. Speaking out now is the only way to make sure that your city/town/county will include your priorities in the [*Housing Elements/housing*]\* plan that will guide our community's future.

*\* While "Housing Elements" is a clear term for many in this space, some processes may use more general language (for example, "housing planning meetings"). You should use whichever term will be most familiar and accessible to your audience.*

*If your city announces public comments on its Housing Elements draft, by all means use that language. But residents can be motivated to take part in "housing planning" without adopting insider language.*





# Housing Elements supporting messages

Within that core message, we have identified four supporting messaging frames that can be used to engage particular audiences, or that may be more effective for some messengers. These are mutually reinforcing, interconnected concepts, and in many cases you will want to refer to more than one while developing messaging content.

The most important question to ask is: which of these supporting messages will be most meaningful and motivating for the community members I am likely to reach?

## Thriving communities

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**Basic message:** Many people in our community are struggling right now to find housing that works for them — housing that is safe and stable, housing that they can afford. And that reality makes life harder for all of us. A thoughtful, inclusive plan will increase options and make our community livable now and for years to come. We need to act now to ensure that the next generation has a chance to thrive here in the place we love.

**Advanced message:** Investing in affordable housing options can help cut commute times, strengthen schools, and move our whole community forward.

## Justice and equity

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**Basic message:** A history of policies designed to segregate and exclude people of color has created inequity and put safe, stable housing out of reach for far too many people. New housing policies can help undo that harm and move all our communities forward. Let's invest in housing that supports a diverse, vibrant, equitable future for the Bay Area.

**Advanced message:** Federal law requires the housing plan to include details on how it is “Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH).” That means that we need to understand how communities of color are affected by current housing options, and develop a plan that directly addresses inequities in our community. A good plan will make new choices about the priorities and investments that matter to our community.

## Better economy

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**Basic message:** Housing costs don't just affect where you're able to live — they impact the economy for our whole region. The places that succeed over the next decade will be those that invest in housing so that essential workers can make ends meet, people can live near where they work, and local businesses can connect with the loyal customer base they need.

Creating a range of affordable housing options will help residents *and* businesses thrive.

**Advanced message:** We've all seen how a growing economy can affect housing costs and make it harder for many people to stay in the communities they love. If we don't act now to create more options and a better balance, it's going to be harder and harder for businesses to attract and hire workers for all sorts of jobs.

## Sustainability and resilience

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**Basic message:** Climate change is already hitting the Bay Area hard — bringing drought, wildfires, dangerous storms, extreme temperatures, and rising sea levels. This crisis affects all of us, and smart, sustainable housing policy has to be part of the solution. Modern housing options — including multifamily homes and concentrating near public transit — reduce our region's carbon footprint and help drive sustainable growth that will be climate resilient.

**Advanced message:** The Bay Area has been a leader in so many of the most important movements of the last fifty years. Now, it's time to step up and show the way forward on two of the biggest challenges we face: housing affordability and climate change. Innovation in housing policy will strengthen our community and keep the Bay Area at the leading edge of sustainable development.



# Recruiting community members

Every resident will have their own priorities for housing policy — the message guidance above is meant to provide a range of options that can be adapted to suit those goals. Some folks are already feeling the strain of high housing costs, while others are inspired by a vision of a more equitable and sustainable future, or any combination of factors.

But no matter what motivates a desire for change, there are two essential truths that someone must believe before they will get involved. Participation needs to feel *accessible* and *meaningful*.

To make community participation feel **accessible**:

- **Communicate essential information about the process, especially timeline and location.** If your city collects online feedback on its draft plan, promote the URL and deadline to submit throughout your messaging. If there is a public forum, display the time and location prominently.
- **Provide clear guidance on what to say.** The rest of this guide provides sample language and key messages. Be sure that community members are comfortable communicating their personal message.
- **Address barriers to participation.** Some residents may have concerns that they will not be able to participate in the process. Messaging should actively engage with these concerns. For example:
  - Develop multilingual messaging (including promotional materials as well as guidance on process and community input). If your jurisdiction will accept comments in languages other than English, say so.

- Public meetings can present a challenge for residents with different work schedules or childcare needs. If written testimony is an option for those who can't attend in person, promote that option.
- Make it clear if public meetings will take place in person or virtually. If in person, mention COVID policies and precautions.

- **Overcome anxiety about the process.** For many people, giving public testimony can be stressful, and even submitting written testimony can be unfamiliar or intimidating. Messaging should consistently emphasize that getting involved is easy, quick, and open to all. While housing policy may be complex, residents are experts in their own lives. Calls to action should emphasize these elements, with language like, “Telling your point of view is a simple way to make sure our city gets it right.”

To make community participation feel **meaningful**:

- **Be direct.** Tell residents, “This is the most effective way you can affect housing policy.” Talk about time. Be clear that there are deadlines, and residents who do not speak out in time will miss their chance to influence housing policy. And, repeat facts about the Housing Elements cycle: this only happens once in a decade, so what we do right now will have an impact for years to come.

- **Place the resident within a community and a movement.** Nobody will believe that their voice and their voice alone will determine policy — but they are part of a community that is coming together to demand better housing options. We have a chance to get this right, if we come together to shape the future of our community.

- **Include legal requirements.** Make it clear that this is not an optional process for jurisdictions. The law requires that this process be completed on a given timeline, and also includes requirements such as AFFH. These requirements work with personal messaging: Community voices provide accountability, and the law requires that jurisdictions consider this input.

- **Share success stories.** Talk about families that have benefitted from stable, affordable housing. Show how existing density around transit hubs helps communities thrive. Show how momentum is on the side of people who eagerly support better housing options.

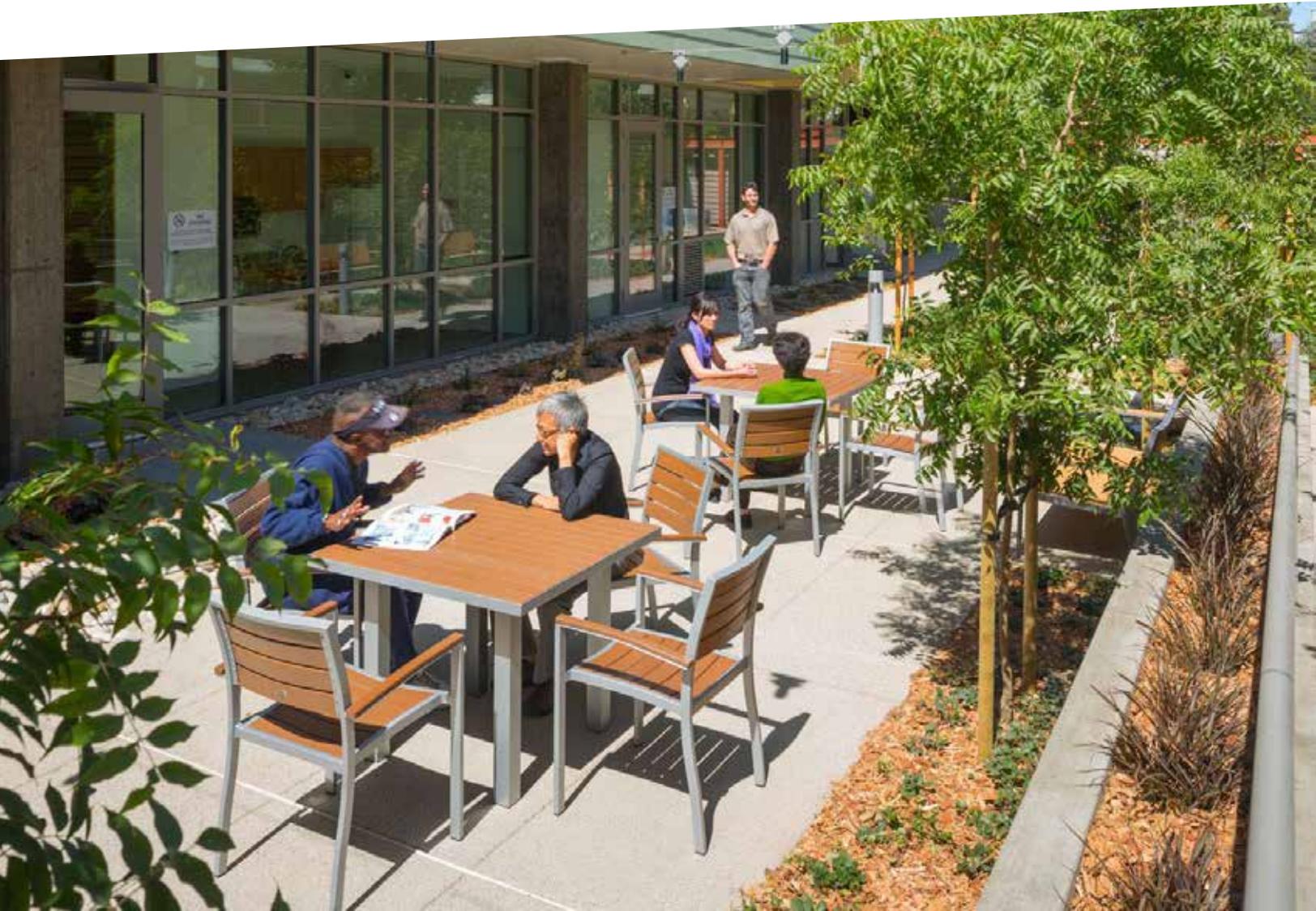


# Sample policy language

Every advocate will have one or more policy priorities that they most want to emphasize in the planning process. A simple, repeatable format is a highly effective way to elevate those priorities and demonstrate widespread community support.

This template is meant to provide sample language that adheres to a few key principles:

- 1-3 sentences explaining the goal or problem, emphasizing the human impact.
- 1-3 sentences making a direct, actionable call for a specific policy proposal.
- 3Ps language can be included, but should not be the focus.
- Use values-driven, person-centered language.
- Whenever possible, use personal stories and experiences to ground policy language. “This has happened to me” or “This is what my family needs” are powerful starting points.



## Just Cause/Rent Control

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People who live in our community right now need **stability** — and that means **protections** like rent control and just cause policies for eviction. With the costs of housing rising so fast, families who are forced out of the homes they live in face an impossible situation.

Our community needs a housing plan that **protects** residents from harassment, eviction, and out-of-control rent hikes. That's the only way we can care for our families, plan for our futures, and build the kind of **stability** that will enable us to **thrive** over the next decade.

## TOPA/COPA

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When a landlord decides to sell a multi-family building, that creates a **sudden emergency** for every person who calls that place home. Their lives are upended, and even if they're **lucky** enough to find a new home they can afford, they are forced to pay all the costs of moving and starting over.

Tenant/Community opportunity to purchase policies would prevent this kind of disruption when a building is sold. These are **simple, effective** policies that **protect** renters and create the kind of **stability that improves our whole community**. When our community is able to invest in itself, we all benefit.

## Community Land Trust

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The people in our community — **working people, seniors, students, families with kids** — should be the ones who decide what our future looks like. But for a long time, that hasn't been true. Investors and corporations have bought up just about every bit of land, and **banks have discriminated** against people of color when it comes to loans and financing.

This housing policy is a chance to level the playing field and **allow our community to invest in itself**. We need to fund community land trusts to purchase land and build new homes that **people can afford for the long term**. Community land trusts mean that the public investments in housing will stay in our community, will benefit our community, and will **lift up our community** for years to come.

## Inclusionary Zoning

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Building new housing will **strengthen** our community — but only if it isn't used to **push out the people** who already live here. It will give families the **options** we need — but not if every new home built is out of reach for most people. We need to make sure that any new housing includes a **range of options**, so we can **include and support the kind of diverse community** that makes this such a **special place**.

The housing plan must include **strong requirements for inclusionary zoning**. That means that new housing will include options that are affordable for people with lower incomes, for young families just starting out, and for seniors who want to stay in **the community they love**. Inclusionary zoning is how we can **move forward together without leaving our neighbors behind**.

This guide was developed in consultation with dozens of stakeholders, working groups, coalitions, and organizers, and by leveraging and building from the research learnings from Shift the Bay, the coalition-driven initiative to advance housing and racial justice in the Bay Area.

Shift the Bay offers research-driven and field-practiced strategies, tactics, and messages to seize this powerful moment to drive new narratives for our movement.

Learn more at [www.ShifttheBay.org](http://www.ShifttheBay.org)

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