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Each January at their annual retreat the MAP Board identifies a policy priority - an issue or challenge facing our industry - and over the course of the year seeks to learn more about that topic, ultimately developing a policy to guide the work of MAP, and of our members.

To that end, the board “links” with experts throughout the year, inviting leaders from planning or other industries to join the board for conversations about the topic, deepening our understanding, and informing our policy direction. What we learn is incorporated into our policies, and ultimately shared with our members through educational programming, Michigan Planner features, and advocacy. Sometimes it results in new partnerships or grants.

These board linkage conversations are so rich with content that we believe our members will find useful that we developed this series of Board Linkage Summaries to highlight the key findings of these exchanges with others - typically non-planners - who join us in the space of community building.

The objective of this series of to allow you to also better understand who the board is meeting with, the objectives of those meetings, and the takeaways that will help us all understand the interconnectedness we share with other disciplines and professions, and how we can apply this knowledge to our work as planners.

## Board Linkage Briefs

# How to Talk about Housing in Your Community

The increasing cost of housing has made it prohibitive for those with more modest incomes to afford the purchase or rent of a home in the community where they have stakes.

An acute housing shortage across much of the United States, and in Michigan, makes the problem worse. High housing costs and an inadequate supply contribute to, but are not the only sources, of the problem. Density resistant homeowners who own homes in predominantly single-family neighborhoods are often the most vociferous opponents to new housing units that are not single family, detached dwellings. They’ve been conditioned to oppose new development that they perceive will affect their property value, cause traffic congestion and parking problems, increase school classroom sizes, and negatively impact the “neighborhood character”. Arguments about your children being able to move back to your community after college to start a family, or allowing your parents to age in place, often fall on deaf ears.

Density resistant residents are one aspect of the challenge, but elected officials, conditioned to respond to constituent concerns, are also culpable. Elected officials, along with professional planners and planning commissioners, must become advocates and messengers of community building that includes allowing a range of appropriate housing along with livability and context sensitivity. Having state and federal legislation reinforce good, local decisions is also vital.

Getting beyond community resistance to establish a common understanding of the value of creating a range of housing types, with a variety of densities, and with many price points is not easy, but it is possible. Through education and engagement, the benefits to a community can be reinforced, and opposition lessened.

- **Show, Don’t Tell.** Provide photographs of local examples already in your community, or in a nearby town, along with an address if possible, showing the type of housing being proposed. Be ready with “bad examples” of the same housing and be prepared to explain why the “bad” wouldn’t be allowed and how the “good example” would. A visual of an Accessory Dwelling Unit, Duplex or Quad, when considered in the context of a traditional neighborhood, might sway concerned neighbors.
- **Use Language Carefully.** Avoid “density,” which describes the effect of these policies from a city’s perspective. Instead, talk about how this new housing would benefit an individual: “proximity to stores, parks, and schools”. Avoid “zoning”; “single-family zoning” sounds abstract. Instead, use concrete, colloquial language like “it is currently illegal to build a duplex almost anywhere in [insert your community’s name here].”
- **Talk about your Community’s Specific History.** It is helpful to track

down the date(s) when zoning changed in your community. Was there a time when duplexes became nonconforming? What else was going on in the state or the country at that time? Single-family zoning can then move from “almost-holy abstract concept” into “potentially reversible policy decision.” Understanding when the laws changed can perhaps capture some of the class and racial context of exclusionary zoning.

- **Meet People Where They Are.** Make a good slideshow. Get on organizations’ agendas (e.g., parent teacher associations, historic societies, places of worship). Go to meetings; answer any questions. Never prematurely assume that anyone will be your opponent.
- **Find Partners.** Housing affects everything. Find potential partners and allies at your school districts, chambers of commerce and visitors’ bureaus, and the AARP to craft nuanced policies and show officials the benefits a variety of housing bring.
- **Collaborate with Housing Developers.** Developers have the technical expertise, and a financial incentive, to promote better zoning. With skyrocketing materials costs and a dearth of construction laborers, there are economies for their bottom line usually, to construct more units per acre, attached units, and new housing proximate to existing public utilities. Ultimately, any new housing will be built by a developer. Meet with them to hear what type of housing they think would work in your community and what hurdles they may have encountered.
- **Review your Master Plan.** Does the master plan include a housing, transportation, or equity component? A Housing Needs Assessment is a frequently absent, but critically important plan element that takes a hard look at the number and type of housing units your community needs. Equipped with proper data, keen analysis, and a compelling story, most residents can begin to understand the long-term value of a more diverse range of housing. At their best, hard numbers like median household income, average commute, and the number of housing starts, transform ideological debates into problems that can be solved and tradeoffs that can be balanced.
- **Find Common Ground and Be Willing to Compromise.** YIMBYs (Yes In MY Back Yard) may often be at odds with NIMBYs, but remember to not throw away the good because it isn’t perfect. For example, should fourplexes be permitted in single family detached housing districts? YIMBYs may say yes, NIMBYs may say no. The answer may be to compromise: YIMBYs and NIMBYs say no to fourplexes, but yes to duplexes with triplexes as a special land use.
- **Start Now.** The best day to start building new housing was 10 years ago; the second best day is today. When reaching out to partners and other community members, remember the values you share. This will take patience and persistence, but it must start now.

Officials and professionals must understand the housing needs of the community, as well as listen to the concerns raised in opposition. Potential problems like traffic, noise, and parking can be solved not only through zoning provisions (e.g., screening requirements, minimum parking spaces), but probably more effectively through other local police power regulations like noise, traffic, and nuisances.