



HOUSING STRATEGIC PLAN

FALL 2020 ENGAGEMENT REPORT

Prepared by Cactus Consulting, LLC in partnership with the Home2Health team

Executive Summary

The City is updating the Housing Strategic Plan. This plan sets housing goals and guides City decisions on policy and funding for the housing system. While previous plans have focused on income-qualified Affordable Housing, this update to the Housing Strategic Plan will address the entire spectrum of housing needs in our community. The draft vision – Everyone has stable, healthy housing they can afford – reflects this shift.

In October and November of 2020, nearly 450 community members took the time to share their experiences, provide feedback, and brainstorm solutions to the housing challenges in Fort Collins. This report sums up this early community feedback.

Participants highlighted five priorities—**Stability, Equity, Choice, Collaboration, and Creativity**. Within each priority are suggested strategies for the City, nonprofits, developers, and community members. The report ends with next steps, including important community conversations around density and home ownership and recommendations from the community on how to evaluate strategies and center equity in decision-making.

The Process

In preparation for updating the Housing Strategic Plan, the City of Fort Collins reviewed local housing data and community feedback gathered through the Home2Health project. As a result, the City identified six key challenges related to housing:

1. Price escalation impacts everyone, and disproportionately impacts BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and People of Color] and low-income households.
2. There aren't enough affordable places available for people to rent or purchase, or what is available and affordable isn't the kind of housing people need.
3. The City does have some tools to encourage affordable housing, but the current amount of funding and incentives for affordable housing are not enough to meet our goals.
4. Housing is expensive to build, and the cost of building new housing will likely continue to increase over time.
5. It is difficult to predict the lasting effects of COVID-19 and the impacts of the pandemic.
6. Housing policies have not consistently addressed housing stability and healthy housing, especially for people who rent.

These challenges were later updated and expanded to include a specific mention of the imbalance between job growth and housing growth. The updated list of challenges is available in the Housing Strategic Plan.

The Housing Strategic Plan team designed safe and accessible engagement opportunities to gather feedback on the challenges and ideas for overcoming them. This included Community Guide discussions, in-person (distanced and masked) focus groups, virtual workshops, and an “At-Your-Own Pace” online survey.

The goals for engagement were:

- 1) To provide safe, flexible opportunities for all community members to participate.
- 2) To close persistent engagement gaps, including under-engagement of Spanish-speaking residents, renters, and residents who make less than \$50,000/year.

To this end, workshops and surveys, which traditionally result in more responses from women, older adults, and higher income households, were combined with outreach to specific stakeholders and community groups. The City partnered with the Mi Voz community group to discuss housing with 38 Spanish-speaking residents, many of whom reside in mobile home parks. The Partnership for Age-Friendly Communities hosted conversations with older adults and mobile home park residents. The Center for Public Deliberation hosted conversations that targeted residents under 30, and those making less than the median income. Additional engagement with neighborhood groups, including homeowners’ associations, was identified as an opportunity for growth in future engagement opportunities in this plan.



Overall, staff and community partners facilitated 37 different engagement opportunities. This included four events facilitated by the Partnership for Age-Friendly Communities (PAFC) and eight by the Center for Public Deliberation (CPD). Through these approaches, the City was able to gather feedback from around 450 participants in October and November of 2020. Demographic data was not analyzed because it was optional and may not provide a full picture of participation.



Participants were asked six questions related to current housing challenges in Fort Collins, the housing vision, and their ideas for achieving it. The six questions were:

1. Based on your experience, do these challenges reflect what you know about housing in Fort Collins?
2. How do these challenges affect you and our community more broadly?
3. What needs to change to address these challenges?
4. Who has the ability to make the change needed?
5. What do you wish decision makers understood about your experience with housing?

6. How would you like to engage in this project in the future?

Though the responses to these questions provided rich information on community experiences and ideas related to housing, it is important to note that this report is also built on the shoulders of many engagement efforts conducted over the past two years, including City Plan, Our Climate Future, and the [Home2Health project](#). Community members have consistently talked about the importance of affordable housing to a healthy environment, an [equitable community](#), and to the [physical and mental health of individuals](#). Prior to analyzing responses from this year's engagement efforts, we revisited the findings, and data from recent surveys and analysis (including the Social Sustainability Gaps Analysis and the Larimer County Community Health Survey) to ground our work. The following community priorities reflect the collective engagement of hundreds of community members who shared their time, energy, and experiences.

Community Priorities

Community members generally felt that the housing challenges reflected the experience of housing in Fort Collins. Some shared personal stories of their struggle to afford healthy, stable housing. As one person shared,

"We live in a mobile home park, and they've been increasing our rent... We're fortunate because we were able to buy a trailer so we're not paying the trailer off, just lot rent. A lot of people have been asking us, "Why don't you buy a house?" We're looking, but everything is so expensive. We're between a rock and a hard place."

While organizations like the City may express goals in number of affordable housing units available or number of dollars allocated to emergency rent relief, community members described their goals for housing in very different ways—in the ability to feel secure in their homes, in the ability to choose a home with the amenities that they want and need, and in the ability to rely on their community to work towards a better future for all. Participants suggested a variety of strategies to overcome housing challenges and help everyone in Fort Collins have healthy, stable housing they can afford. These strategies are grouped into five priority areas:

1. **Stability.** The cost of housing is a major source of stress and instability for many households. People want options for stable rentals and home ownership.
2. **Equity.** Folks want a diverse community where equity guides how we fund, build, and manage housing.
3. **Choice.** People recognized that different households have different housing needs. They prioritized having options for the types of housing they rent or buy. This calls for increasing the total supply of housing, revamping the housing we have, and improving access to amenities like public transportation and parks.
4. **Collaboration.** Housing is a complex problem, and no one organization can do it alone. Community members want the City to take the lead, but also want the community and local organizations to step up and be part of the solution.
5. **Creativity.** People want new and innovative solutions. They want the City and the community to be willing to do things differently.

It is important to note that the community priorities are not listed in order of importance to the community, and many of the strategies and recommendations overlap.

Stability

The cost of housing is a major source of stress and instability for many households. People want options for stable rentals and home ownership.

Community Recommendations: Advocate for limits on rent prices and/or annual rent increases ♦ Explore rental licensing to promote safe and healthy housing ♦ Preserve manufactured housing communities ♦ Explore opportunities for resident-owned manufactured housing communities ♦ Explore opportunities to limit fees associated with housing ♦ Bolster nonprofits providing “housing first” models of support ♦ Provide emergency gap funding to prevent eviction

What we heard: The cost of housing was described as a major source of stress and instability for households in Fort Collins. People recognized that easing the cost burden of housing could have a transformational impact on an individual’s mental and physical health, among other things, and praised nonprofit organizations pursuing a “housing first” model in the community. They stressed the importance of gap funding for emergency rent relief to prevent eviction and displacement.

Participants expressed frustration that landlords could set and increase prices without any oversight, and suggested regulations at the state or local level that would limit maximum rent prices, reduce extra fees, and/or limit maximum annual increases. Many also recognized that low wages were a barrier to affordability and called on employers to increase wages.

People also shared negative experiences with landlords who did not maintain their homes. Some were afraid that asking landlords to maintain homes would invite retaliation or lead to rent increases, putting their housing at risk. A rental registration or licensing program was suggested to put housing protections in place and ensure housing is safe and healthy.

"My apartment is rising in rent every year, and the living conditions don't match the price. I have many maintenance issues [and] the condition of the apartment is old and under taken care of...not to mention they like to add miscellaneous fees."

Residents of manufactured housing communities discussed the need for park preservation, and the desire to work towards more resident control and ownership of communities. Many owners of manufactured housing discussed struggling with costs despite owning their home because of perpetual increases in lot rent, costly utility bills, and frequent fees. Similarly, some participants expressed concern about the monthly fees from HOAs, condominium associations, and metro districts inflating the cost of home ownership.

Guidance for the Housing Strategic Plan: These comments align with community feedback from the Larimer County Community Health Survey and the Home2Health project regarding the central role of housing stability for individual and community well-being. Though many responses suggested home ownership as the preferred source of stability, some community members defined stability in a different way. The Housing Strategic Plan

"There are many people who do not desire the traditional house with a 20-30 year mortgage... There are so many people (both young and old) who want to live smaller, and we are ready for these options to be available in our city."

should discuss how each strategy could create pathways to stability for residents, whether that be long-term, stable rentals, cooperative housing, or home ownership.

Equity

Folks want a diverse community where equity guides how we fund, build, and manage housing.

Community Recommendations: Focus financial support on lowest income residents ♦ Increase equity in existing programs and services ♦ Bolster nonprofits providing supportive housing services ♦ Combat stigmas associated with affordable housing ♦ Consult with BIPOC and low-income households on housing policy and programs

What we heard: Though community members discussed and defined equity in different ways, most emphasized the importance of focusing efforts on those who are most affected by the current housing challenges, including BIPOC households, low-income households, people with disabilities, and seniors. While some participants were concerned that specifically discussing challenges for BIPOC households was outside the scope of this plan, most comments expressed a need for more inclusive programs and practices to combat ongoing discrimination and historic inequalities.

In general, folks recognized that current funding levels were not adequate to meet the housing needs in our community, and discussed the importance of balancing the very immediate need to keep people’s housing stable with the longer-term need to fund the housing options people want and need in our community. In general, community members prioritized “gap funds” to help households make ends meet and subsidized housing for low-income households over financial assistance to middle-income earners.



"I think it is important that workers are able to afford living in or near the city they work in, especially teachers and frontline workers."

People discussed the importance of creating specialized support systems so folks can find and keep homes. Participants praised the hard work of nonprofits in this arena and expressed support for bolstering funding and expanding services to meet the needs of seniors, seniors raising grandchildren, immigrant and refugee families, and people who were previously incarcerated.

Participants discussed the importance of continuing to consult with BIPOC and low-income households as decisions about housing are being made. As one person stated,

"People of color should be put at the forefront of making this change. City leaders/city officials should be handling this with the insight of people of color."

Finally, a few community members shared personal experiences of feeling unwelcome in the community because of race, ethnicity, and/or income status. As one participant shared,

"Living in an affordable housing community in Fort Collins is challenging, especially when you are aware that the property where you live wasn't wanted in the neighborhood where you live, the community you are trying to become a part of has rejected you before you have even had a chance to integrate."

Community conversations may be needed to break stigmas around affordable housing and promote equity and inclusion in Fort Collins’ neighborhoods.

Guidance for the Housing Strategic Plan: These comments align with previous feedback from the Home2Health project and the Social Sustainability Gaps Analysis on the disproportionate impact of housing challenges on BIPOC and low-income households. The Housing Strategic Plan should consider how their decisions can support equitable *outcomes* (going beyond the traditional focus on equitable opportunities). In addition, the Housing Strategic Plan should include clear opportunities for consultation with BIPOC and low-income households and community conversations around equity in housing.

Choice

People recognized that different households have different housing needs. They prioritized having options for the types of housing they rent or buy. This calls both for increasing the total supply of housing, and changing the types of housing we are creating.

Community Recommendations: Remove or relax occupancy restrictions ♦ Explore new housing types, including tiny homes and cooperative housing ♦ Build more duplexes and small multifamily units ♦ Ensure all neighborhoods have access to amenities ♦ Remove or relax regulations that limit creative reuse of existing homes.

What we heard: Many community members expressed frustration with the lack of housing choices currently available, especially for low- and middle-income earners. As one participant shared,

“I want to find something close – I like my job, my community. But we are looking outside Fort Collins. You can’t be as close if you want something affordable.”

People called for building more housing and revamping the housing Fort Collins has to offer. Community members emphasized the need to build new housing options that people can afford on a typical salary, rather than “luxury” homes or apartments. Some also expressed a desire for options that go beyond the “traditional” large single-family home, including more duplexes, small multi-family developments, and tiny houses.

Community members highlighted that the goal should be to increase options—not to expect that every low-income household should live in an apartment building. People stressed the importance of being able to access the amenities that were important to them. Some mentioned the value of having access to a personal yard or garden. Many advocated for improved community amenities in all neighborhoods, including parks, open space, and public transportation.

Many participants also saw zoning and occupancy restrictions as a significant barrier to having enough housing, and to having housing that is affordable for all residents. Many supported repealing or modifying “U+2”, which limits the number of unrelated people who can live in a house. This was seen as a potential benefit

“Eventually [U+2] will HAVE to go away because of the cost of housing and shortage of housing... [This is] not just a student housing issue anymore. [There are] way more renters than there used to be.”

for people of all ages living on single incomes, and an opportunity to “free up” additional homes for rental or purchase. Some participants acknowledged concerns around noise or parking that can come with higher occupancy levels, but many felt that the rule was unfairly limiting the housing choices of the larger community to prevent problems caused by a small group.

Community members also suggested relaxing some restrictions in the Land Use Code to make it easier for homeowners and developers to renovate homes and set up living arrangements that work for modern households. Ideas included making it easier to add Accessory Dwelling Units (carriage houses, in-law apartments, etc.), convert single-family houses into duplexes, and set up cooperative housing. In addition to increasing available housing units, duplexes and Accessory Dwelling Units in particular were seen as a benefit for extended families who could pool resources to purchase a home, and adults for caring for aging parents.

Finally, there was a perception among participants that “investment buyers” were unfairly driving up prices and reducing opportunities for home ownership by buying homes to rent out. As one participant shared,

“Investors and real estate gurus have made competition on the housing market wholly unfair... Allowing this type of free market activity has strangled fair housing market competition and destroyed purchasing by lower income households...thus forcing them into un-affordable rentals or outside the community where travel expenses make up the difference in cost and adds to pollution.”

Community members expressed frustration that first-time homebuyers were “competing” with purchasers looking for a source of income rather than a place to call home. Some community members suggested limiting the ability of investors to purchase homes, though there was recognition that this would pose a serious challenge. Additional conversations will be necessary to understand the impact of investment buying on the community and discuss opportunities to support first-time homebuyers.

Guidance for the Housing Strategic Plan: These comments align with previous feedback from City Plan engagement on relaxing occupancy ordinances and Land Use Code restrictions to allow for more housing choices. The Housing Strategic Plan should discuss how each strategy can increase the housing choices available in our community. In addition, continued conversations are needed on the right balance between encouraging homeownership and providing enough rental options.

Collaboration

Folks recognized that a challenge like housing requires community-wide action. Many of the ideas for addressing housing challenges would require changes to local or statewide policies. However, responses also highlighted the importance of bringing in nonprofits, developers, and local employers.

Community Recommendations: Incentivize developers to build affordable housing ♦ Relax restrictions in the Land Use Code to make it easier for developers to build new homes ♦ Collaborate with large employers on housing ♦ Partner with nonprofits to provide specialized support ♦ Build community-wide support for doing things differently

What we heard: Though many of the recommendations were City policies or programs, community feedback highlighted the importance of collaboration to reaching Fort Collins' vision for housing.

People shared strategies that would encourage developers to build more affordable, diverse types of housing, including waiving fees or providing other financial incentives, and relaxing requirements in the Land Use Code on density (or the number of houses in an area), building height, and parking. Some also suggested placing requirements on builders and developers to provide some affordable housing in all new developments.

There was some support for City-led development of subsidized housing or "tiny home" sites, but largely folks did not see the City as a major supplier or manager of affordable housing. People recognized the work of nonprofits to provide housing and supportive services to vulnerable populations, and called for increased collaboration and support for these existing programs.

Some also called on local employers to take a larger role in housing policy and provision. In addition to calling for higher wages, folks suggested that large employers should take a greater responsibility for helping their employees find healthy, stable housing. One suggestion was for the City to incentivize employers who provide housing or housing stipends to their employees.

Finally, people recognized the need for public awareness and education to build community-wide support for doing things differently. Community members want increased public awareness around the true size, scope, and impact of housing challenges on our community. Some expressed concern that current homeowners may resist changes that they see as a threat to their wealth and livelihood (for example, allowing more homes and occupants in their neighborhood).

Guidance for the Housing Strategic Plan: These comments align with past feedback from City Plan, Our Climate Future, Home2Health, and the Larimer County Community Health Survey on the importance of recognizing and leveraging the connections between housing and other important community priorities. Continued collaboration and dialogue will be essential to understanding the needs and the true community costs and benefits of any potential actions. The Housing Strategic Plan should discuss opportunities to leverage the skills and resources of our entire community, including community members, nonprofits, developers, and local employers.

Creativity

People want new and innovative solutions. They want the City and the community to be willing to do things differently.

Recommendations: Explore opportunities for creative reuse of buildings ♦ Seek out innovative ideas from the community and peer cities

What we heard: Fort Collins is a city known for innovation. Community members highlighted that they valued the spirit of innovation and creativity in the City's approach to housing.

Though many recognized that the largest and most impactful solutions were likely to be more traditional strategies—things like changing the Land Use Code and offering incentives to developers—people also wanted to see new and creative ways to provide housing. Some

suggestions included turning hotels into group homes and instituting “housing swaps” between older individuals looking to downsize and live in more accessible homes and younger people looking for more space. The City should continue to seek out innovative ideas from within the community, and from peer cities moving forward.

Guidance for the Housing Strategic Plan: Though it can be difficult to commit resources and times to ideas that may end up being less impactful, the Housing Strategic Plan should discuss ways to pilot creative strategies for ensuring healthy, stable, affordable housing.

Next Steps

Community feedback identified five priorities for housing as the City adopts its new Housing Strategic Plan—**Stability, Equity, Choice, Collaboration, and Creativity**—along with a number of exciting and creative strategies that the City could use along the way. These community priorities and ideas have provided a starting point for the Housing Strategic Plan’s efforts. The following section outlines two important next steps.

Evaluate housing strategies with community priorities in mind

The community has highlighted priorities for housing that build on prior feedback from the Home2Health project, City Plan, Our Climate Future, and more. As the City evaluates strategies, the following questions could help ensure that these community priorities are centered in decision-making:

1. Does this strategy increase the housing choices available for the community, particularly for vulnerable or traditionally under-resourced groups?
2. Does this strategy increase opportunities for housing stability for renters and homeowners?
3. Does this strategy leverage the resources and skills of our whole community?

Incorporating these questions and centering community recommendations in any Housing Strategic Plan documents and decisions will be vital to achieving our housing vision.

Facilitate community conversations on “sticky” issues

People recognized that changes in housing policy and programs have community-wide impact and require community-wide action. As one participant shared,

“I think the biggest change that needs to occur is a change in cultural perspective. It’s all well and good to say U+2 is not helping us anymore, that we value affordable housing... [BIIT](#), will that translate into voting residents and City Council supporting those solutions? Right now, I think the answer is no... I think any collection of new tools or adjustments will need to be coupled with a public education campaign...”

Honest conversations about what is needed to achieve the vision—Everyone has healthy, stable housing they can afford—will be vital to identifying the best path forward. Below, a few important topics are highlighted.

Understanding and de-stigmatizing affordable housing

Participants recognized that there are many misconceptions and fears around affordable housing. More conversations are needed to understand what affordable housing looks like in our community, and to promote acceptance and understanding between all people—no matter their income level or whether they rent or own their home.

Balancing Density and Occupancy

Many recognized that removing U+2 and/or increasing density in neighborhoods may be a challenging transition and could be unpopular with some homeowners. Some participants acknowledged concerns around noise or parking that can come with higher occupancy levels, but many felt that the rule was unfairly limiting the housing choices of the larger community to prevent problems caused by a small group. More conversations are needed to identify the root causes of occupancy concerns, and discuss potential alternatives.

Balancing Options for Renting and Home Ownership

There was a perception among participants that “investment buyers” were unfairly driving up prices and reducing opportunities for home ownership by buying homes to rent out. More data is still needed on the impact of investment buying in Fort Collins, and the right balance between promoting home ownership and supporting quality rental supply. Understanding the housing goals of the community, including what percentage prefer renting over home ownership, and the types of rentals and for-sale units that people would select, could help the City to better understand challenges and opportunities related to investment buying. Ultimately, additional conversations could reduce the perception of competition between renters and homeowners for housing.

Conclusion

The Fort Collins vision for housing – everyone has healthy, stable housing they can afford -- is not currently a reality for everyone. Realizing this vision and overcoming the complex challenges of our housing system will require big, community-wide solutions. Overall, these responses suggest that the community is ready to do things differently. Centering both the five community priorities—**Stability, Equity, Choice, Collaboration, and Creativity**—and the ideas and feedback of low-income and BIPOC households will be essential to the continued efforts of the Housing Strategic Plan.