



Extension

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
DANE COUNTY

Engaging Community to Inform Housing Strategies

Situation:

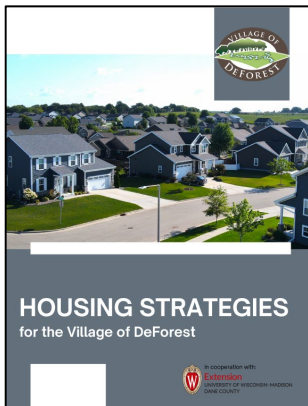
Dane County has experienced rapid growth in jobs and residents, but housing construction has not kept pace. Demand for all kinds of housing - from affordable rentals to high-end family homes - is surging. Limited availability of workforce and senior housing is leading many households to pay more in rent or mortgage than is feasible given their income (called housing cost burden). The Dane County Regional Housing Strategy, created in 2023, calls for all communities to work together to address the affordable housing shortage. The Village of DeForest is a growing community both in terms of population and business development. In 2023, the Village updated their comprehensive plan, setting forth housing goals that preserved community character while promoting higher density housing and prioritizing housing for seniors and the workforce. In February 2024, the Community Development Director for the Village of DeForest contacted Dane County Extension for support with a public engagement process to explore how the housing goals of the comprehensive plan could be realized. The Village Board supported a process that allowed residents to contribute, by sharing their experiences, concerns, and ideas.

Response:

Sharon Lezberg, Dane County Community Development Educator, engaged Kristin Runge, of UW-Madison Extension's Community Development Division, to assist the Village in development and implementation of a community-wide survey. And Sharon worked with the Village staff to develop a community engagement strategy that included focus groups of key sectors, presentations to the Village Board, and a community workshop to discuss actions the Village could take to increase the availability of housing.



Community workshop held to discuss housing needs



The focus groups gathered input from various audiences (developers, seniors, nonprofit providers, public sector employees, large-scale industries, local businesses) to learn about the specific needs, concerns, and barriers each audience faces. The focus groups provided a lens into constraints experienced by developers, which helps inform policy development. Focus group comments were analyzed and presented to the Village Board for discussion. The community-wide workshop provided an opportunity for residents to learn and discuss housing strategy. 30 people attended the workshop and heard from speakers from the Dane County Regional Housing Strategy and the UW-Madison School of Business. Participants then discussed strategies focused on funding, regulations, and partnerships. Comments were recorded and summarized in a [final report](#).

Results:

The project had several positive outcomes:

1. The Village Community Development staff were able to assess community opinion to test their ideas for eliminating barriers to the construction of new housing. The engagement provided in-depth understanding of how the community views and experiences housing shortages so Village staff were able to propose zoning and procedure changes that both met the expectations of residents and eliminated barriers for developers.
2. Village staff gained skills in survey development, focus group administration, and community workshop planning.
3. Village Board members improved their understanding of housing gaps in a deeper, more nuanced way, and are able to craft policy based on up-to-date information and understanding of constraints and challenges experienced by a wide range of residents, workers, and businesses.
4. Community residents were brought into a process that is often opaque, leading to higher levels of community engagement and greater understanding of civic action and governance.
5. People seeking affordable housing will be the ultimate beneficiaries, as the Village has committed to increasing the stock of affordable, high-quality rental and home ownership options.

Evidence:

Evaluation of the focus groups and community workshops indicated a high level of appreciation for the opportunity to learn and engage around this important issue. Several participants stated they cared deeply about the issue (in particular, businesses of all sizes that were struggling to find suitable housing for employees) and suggested they would be available to help implement solutions.

As evidenced by the final report to the Village Board, Community Development staff feel they can proceed with a high level of confidence on several funding, strategy & policy initiatives to reduce barriers, including:

1. Expand DeForest's affordable housing fund,
2. Use the statutory one-year extension of Tax Incremental Districts (TID) to fund affordable and workforce housing,
3. Adopt policies prioritizing Tax Increment Finance (TIF) incentives for affordable housing development,
4. Make strategic purchases of vacant or underutilized land for housing development,
5. Create loan funds for home renovations focused on aging-in-place and ADA modifications for seniors,
6. Enact zoning changes that allow for increased density, a mix of housing types, reduced setbacks and smaller lot sizes, and fewer mandates regarding mixed-use multi-family buildings. These zoning changes will allow building affordable units with fewer cost barriers for developers.

The community engagement process highlighted the importance of working in partnership. Participants identified both traditional and innovative partnerships to nurture to move forward on shared housing goals.

For more information about this project, contact Sharon Lezberg at lezberg.sharon@danecounty.gov.