



DOWNTOWN HOUSING PLAN

Memo

Community Advisory Group Meeting 1 Summary
January 14, 2025

PALO ALTO DOWNTOWN HOUSING PLAN COMMUNITY ADVISORY GROUP MEETING 1 MEMO

EVENT FORMAT: Meeting

VENUE: Community Meeting Room - City Hall, Palo Alto

DATE: January 14, 2025. 5 pm – 7 pm

Meeting Overview

The inaugural meeting of the Palo Alto Downtown Housing Plan (DHP) Community Advisory Group (CAG) was held on January 14th from 5-7 pm at City Hall with two CAG members participating virtually. The principal purposes of the meeting were for: 1) CAG members to introduce themselves; 2) clarify the CAG purpose and role as an advisory group to the project team over the course of the planning effort; 3) receive a project overview and discuss takeaways from the Community Assessments completed by the consulting team; and 3) preliminary discussion related to establishing measures of success for the DHP and next steps related to community outreach and engagement.

A list of meeting participants can be found on page 5.

Project Overview

The City of Palo Alto staff presented an overview of the DHP, a targeted initiative to increase residential development in the downtown area. The Plan implements key housing policies and programs outlined in both the City's Comprehensive Plan and Housing Element.

The DHP will establish development standards that facilitate housing construction, and plan for the necessary public infrastructure to support increased residential density while promoting fair housing.

Staff noted that they expanded the DHP's area boundary to include more potential development sites. They emphasized that the Plan must demonstrate the city's enhanced capacity to meet Housing Element construction targets while garnering community support. Additionally, the city is exploring opportunities to exceed Housing Element unit goals by encouraging mixed-income development, with a particular focus on creating low-income housing options.



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The project was launched in the late spring of 2024 and is scheduled to be completed in Spring 2027.

CAG Roles & Responsibilities

The facilitator gave an overview of the CAG's roles and responsibilities, explaining that the CAG serves as an advisory body to the DHP project team, bringing diverse stakeholder perspectives to the planning process. Throughout the project, the CAG will convene for up to six meetings, each scheduled on weekday evenings and lasting between 90 minutes to three hours.

CAG members will help shape the Plan's vision and objectives while providing strategic input on community engagement efforts. The group will also offer guidance on goals and policies, particularly regarding housing, land use, and transportation alternatives, while carefully weighing key issues and trade-offs. As the project progresses, the CAG will provide critical feedback on the draft Plan before its finalization.

This collaborative approach ensures that multiple community voices and perspectives are integrated into DHP's development, helping to create a more comprehensive and inclusive final product.

Community Assessment Takeaways

The consulting team presented key findings from their initial analyses, examining housing equity, employment patterns, mobility, infrastructure, and utility systems. The assessment incorporated extensive stakeholder feedback gathered through community engagement. A comprehensive report detailing these findings will be provided to the CAG for review within the next couple of months.

The analysis revealed several opportunities for the Plan:

- The potential to create a vibrant "15-minute city" through strategic mixed-use development
- Strong existing transit connections and proximity to employment centers
- Identification of 32 development sites with capacity for approximately 300 housing units
- Housing cost reduction possibilities through reduced parking requirements near transit
- Opportunities to streamline development through property owner partnerships and updated regulations
- Valuable lessons from successful regional housing initiatives

However, significant challenges need to be addressed:



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- High real estate costs are intensified by competition from office development
- Development constraints posed by predominantly small lot sizes under half an acre
- Regulatory barriers including restrictive development standards and impact fees
- Complex parking considerations including preservation of surface parking and neighborhood impacts
- Need for community engagement regarding increased density

Discussion Topics

The consulting team invited CAG members to give feedback on what types of housing should be prioritized for possible future residents and what parameters or metrics should be established to measure the success of the DHP.

The conversation about future downtown housing in Palo Alto centered on creating diverse housing opportunities with a particular emphasis on affordability and senior living. Participants highlighted the need to understand local income demographics and define affordable housing parameters within the context of both city and county contexts. They noted that Alta Housing is currently managing waitlists for available units, particularly focusing on ownership opportunities.

Senior housing emerged as a key priority. This focus stems from the advantageous location of downtown near transit, healthcare facilities, and amenities like Avenidas (Parking Lot C is adjacent). The group noted that senior housing projects automatically qualify for density bonuses. They emphasized how downtown living can promote social interaction and better health outcomes for seniors. Another participant offered that while senior housing is important, it should be balanced with the housing needs of others, such as families and the local workforce. All agreed that priority groups to consider in planning are seniors, essential workers, service workers, and different age groups.

The discussion touched on broader strategic goals, including how the DHP aligns with the City's sustainability, climate action, and economic development objectives. A recurring theme was intergenerational housing accessibility, with participants expressing concern about future generations' ability to afford living in Palo Alto.

Participants supported diverse housing solutions, recommending zoning reforms to permit various housing types, such as duplex, triplex, four-plex as well as medium scale infill and large scale with 5-6 stories over podium; and exploring options for residential development above commercial spaces. They emphasized that all types of new housing would benefit the community, suggesting that even simple zoning changes could have a significant impact.



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CAG members offered some specific examples of measures of success, including:

- Set a target of at least 150 senior units downtown.
- Consistence of DHP with the sustainability climate action goals, economic development, city's strategic plan goals.
- Increase the percentage of below AMI brackets.
- Completion of a certain number of units in 5-year cycles.
- The number of people who work in Palo Alto live in Palo Alto

Targeted Outreach and Engagement

The consulting team reported that essential and service workers were underrepresented in the initial project phase and sought advice from the CAG on how to better engage these groups. For essential workers, Lee Pfab suggested virtual engagement through surveys and polls during evening Zoom meetings (7:30-8pm) and collaboration with labor unions, particularly for childcare and healthcare workers. Nancy Coupal proposed in-person engagement for service workers, including restaurant staff, with Spanish translation. Additionally, Avenidas could assist in connecting with partners related to senior housing needs. Participants emphasized the need to diversify engagement by reaching workers on different shifts and through staff meetings, as well as collaborating with local unions and the faith community.

Next Steps

The next CAG meeting is expected to take place in the summer. The team will aim to schedule the meeting with at least one month's notice and will ensure that materials are distributed well in advance, giving CAG members ample time to prepare.



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Meeting Participants

CAG Members

Allen Akin
Yadira Aldana
Don Barr
Jennifer Buenrostro
Nancy Coupal
Sudha Fatima
Ken Hayes
Aubrey Merriman
Lee Pfab
Kendra Rosenberg
Stephanie Wansek
Charlie Weidanz

Absent CAG Members

Brad Ehikian
John Shenk

City of Palo Alto Staff

Jennifer Armer
Coleman Frick
Vishnu Krishnan

Consulting Team Members

Kelly Beggs, Good City Company
Tania Carlone, Consensus Building Institute
Poonam Narkar, WRT
Deeksha Rawat, WRT