

LOCAL HOUSING ADVOCACY: TIPS & RESOURCES



All housing solutions need public support in order to be successful. Local governments and legislators won't take action unless they hear from citizens about why housing is needed, what solutions they support, and how to take action. Citizens can be a voice for housing solutions that will drive their representatives to act - by attending local government planning commission and elected board meetings, contacting their legislators, and sharing their own stories about housing with campaign partners. Housing North and its Homes for Our Future campaign can provide important resources to help you get started in your community in Northwest Michigan.

WHEN DO I GET INVOLVED?

Sometimes, there's a clear point at which point to get involved in public conversations about housing: when the community is creating or updating its master plan, as the community is considering changes to zoning ordinances, when development projects are proposed, or when tax incentives are requested (see page 2). It's critical to provide public comment and directly contact local staff and officials to share your input during these processes. **But, it's also important to be proactive, reaching out to local elected and appointed officials and staff to proactively share your concerns about housing.**

WHO DO I CONTACT?

Depending on the specific issue, you may need to talk with local planning commissions, elected boards, or land bank authorities (see the next two pages for more details on how these groups are involved). It's important for these officials to hear from their constituents about housing needs and solutions, either through presentations or one-on-one discussions. Local government staff and websites can help you find the right decision-makers to contact.

WHAT DO I SAY?

Advocacy messages will always vary, depending on the community, leadership, project or process, and other engaged community members. Generally, though, it's important to share information about how you and others in the community are impacted by housing shortages. A few tips on how to "frame" that message are below; and housing data, talking points, and more resources are available in the [Homes for Our Future Communications Toolkit](#), available on homesforourfuture.org.

- Connect messages to shared values, and explain "why" and "how" housing has become an issue.
- Use words with positive associations, like "homes" and "working people."
- Focus on solutions, and make sure your audience knows how they can be a part of the solution. Information on how local governments can change policies and practices to support housing is available in the [Northwest Michigan Housing Ready Checklist](#).
- Use data, but highlight a few key points to make it meaningful. Information on the number and type of housing units needed in each community is available on homesforourfuture.org.
- Consider the messenger: people listen to people they trust. Reach out to trusted individuals in your community to get their perspective on housing, and see if they're willing to participate.





LOCAL HOUSING ADVOCACY: WHO'S WHO

Housing solutions require buy-in and leadership from both the public and local officials, meaning that housing advocacy is a community-wide effort. Connecting with these diverse audiences takes time and commitment, but there are many community partners and local staff people that can provide introductions and information to start the conversation.

For those new to working with local government, a short guide to working with local governments on master plans and zoning ordinances, and providing public comment, is available in [Making Connections: Understanding Community Health, Safety, and Welfare in Northwest Michigan](#).

DECISION-MAKERS

- PLANNING COMMISSIONS** Planning commissions are appointed by elected boards to develop master plans and zoning, and to review development proposals. Often, they make recommendations to the elected board, but do not have final authority on some decisions.
- ELECTED BOARDS** Elected boards—like city councils or commissions, county boards, township boards, and village councils—are elected by local citizens. They are often the final authority and decision-makers about zoning, development approvals, and tax incentives.
- LAND BANK AUTHORITIES** Land bank authorities are appointed by county boards in some communities to address tax-foreclosed property and other public land. They can provide important tools and incentives for development and redevelopment on many properties.

ADVOCATES

- ALLIES** Community organizations, service groups, and members of the public that have experience with housing needs are often supportive of housing advocacy efforts, and can add their voices to the message.
- CHAMPIONS** Trusted community members, like business leaders, clergy, philanthropy leaders, and police, can be influential and persuasive advocates.
- COMMUNITY GROUPS & SERVICE GROUPS** Service organizations and other community groups bring together diverse members of the public that are often interested in learning more about community issues—and can help spread the word to their own networks.

LOCAL HOUSING NETWORKS

Local housing networks are informal groups that bring together local government officials like planning commissioners and elected officials, allies, and champions to identify and advocate for housing solutions. Local housing networks exist in many communities in Northwest Lower Michigan; visit homesforourfuture.org to get connected to a network in your community.



WHAT, WHEN, & HOW TO GET INVOLVED: THE BASICS

MASTER PLANS

WHAT: A master plan is a guide that's intended to shape decisions made by cities, villages, townships, and counties. It helps the community understand current issues and work towards a vision for the future. Master plans make recommendations about development, and act as the legal framework for zoning ordinances. They're an important way to begin conversations about housing, and can provide guidance about how housing needs should be addressed in local policies and zoning.

WHEN: Master plans are reviewed by planning commissions every 5 years, with changes and new plans based on input from citizens like you!

HOW: Contact your local government's planning department or zoning administrator to find out more about when your master plan was adopted, when it might be updated, and whether it addresses housing needs.

TAX INCENTIVES

WHAT: Local governments are able to grant tax incentives to certain types of development. Payments in lieu of taxes (PILOTs), Neighborhood Enterprise Zones, and tax increment financing tools can all help to make housing more affordable. These incentives often require public hearings and a vote by the elected board.

WHEN: Discussions and public hearings on tax incentives are usually held only when projects are proposed.

HOW: Contact your local housing network to stay informed on tax incentive discussions in your community.

ZONING ORDINANCES

WHAT: Development begins with zoning, which is a locally-adopted law that regulates where, how, and what type of development is allowed in a community. The right zoning can create a opportunities for the type of housing that a community wants and needs. But it can also be a barrier, preventing the construction of many types of homes, raising development costs, or complicating approval processes. It's important for communities to make sure that their zoning ordinances are up-to-date, fair, predictable, and reflective of the community's housing needs.

WHEN: Zoning ordinances are regularly reviewed and updated by planning commissions.

HOW: The [Housing Ready Checklist](#) identifies a number of ways that zoning ordinances can provide for more housing choices. Look online to find your community's zoning ordinance, and contact your local zoning administrator or planner to talk about plans to talk with them about the Checklist, and/or update the ordinance or rezone properties.

DEVELOPMENT REVIEWS

WHAT: Often, zoning requires special review procedures for housing projects that include multiple units. These procedures can include heated public discussion that may threaten a project's approval and eventual completion.

WHEN: Discussions and public hearings on tax incentives are usually held only when projects are proposed.

HOW: Contact your local housing network to stay informed on projects in your community.