



Representation in the Housing Process: Best Practices for Improving Racial Equity

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING EQUITY IN REPRESENTATION

BE ATTENTIVE TO ALL FORMS OF DIVERSITY ON BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS.

Local boards and commissions make critical decisions about what housing gets built and where it is located. Many are demographically unrepresentative of their communities across a variety of dimensions. Local governments should be conscious of bias by race, ethnicity, gender, age, and home-ownership status—and engage in targeted outreach and recruitment of board members if substantial bias is found.

BE AWARE OF REPRESENTATIONAL INEQUALITIES IN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC MEETINGS.

Traditional public meetings are sites of deep political inequality. They amplify the most privileged voices in their communities and those most disproportionately opposed to the construction of new housing. Equitably minded local governing bodies must acknowledge those political disparities when making decisions. The voices heard at traditional public meetings are not representative of their broader communities.

REMEMBER THE BENEFICIARIES OF HOUSING PROGRAMS, NOT JUST THE LOUDEST VOICES.

Public meetings disproportionately attract neighbors opposed to new housing and greater density. They are, in contrast, structurally unlikely to include the voices of individuals and families most likely to benefit from housing programs. Many of these individuals do not have the time or trust in government to participate; what's more, many do not live in communities currently proposing housing. A truly representative and equitable local government must remember and incorporate the interests of those beneficiaries into their decision-making.

USE INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES TO INCORPORATE THE WIDEST RANGE OF VOICES.

Governments should use inclusive community engagement practices that deliberately incorporate a wide range of voices. These approaches could include targeted focus groups, civic lotteries, and technological innovations. It is not enough to simply make it easier to participate in public meetings; governments must target and recruit underrepresented groups who may feel that their voices are unwelcome and unheard in larger, more traditional forums.

USE INCLUSIVE OUTREACH ON SURVEYS TO REACH A TRULY REPRESENTATIVE POPULATION.

Surveys are vulnerable to many of the same potential biases as public meetings. Indeed, surveys are not inherently representative of the broader population. The same individuals who do not attend public meetings are also less likely to complete surveys. Local governments that rely on surveys should use deliberate outreach strategies targeting underrepresented populations to ensure more representative samples.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, Greater Boston housing prices increased by a whopping 53%.¹ These escalating housing costs place the metropolitan area out of reach for many lower and middle-income households. They contribute to racial segregation by further increasing the barriers to entry in many communities. They make it more difficult for employers to find or retain workers. They hamper sustainability efforts by making metropolitan residents live far away from job centers; rather than living in walkable, transit-friendly communities, residents are forced to make long car commutes due to high housing costs. The roots of this crisis are manifold, but, perhaps most importantly, the region has failed to build enough housing to meet demand.²

These challenges are not just limited to Greater Boston: while Gateway Cities receive less attention in statewide conversations about housing, they face steep challenges. In Massachusetts Gateway Cities, housing production (1% growth) lagged population growth (3%) (both housing and population growth are behind the rest of the state.)³ What's more, these communities are, along with Boston's suburbs,

growing sites of racial diversity. The BIPOC population of many suburban and Gateway Cities grew rapidly, while the White population declined or stayed the same. At the same time, many rental properties were replaced or converted into owner-occupied housing, creating an acute shortage of rental properties and affordable housing of any type. Subsidized housing, in particular, continues to lag. In the Gateway Cities, the subsidized housing inventory (SHI) increased by less than 1% from 2010 to 2020. In contrast, it increased by nearly 12% statewide. The result is a severe affordable housing shortage increasingly borne by people of color in these communities.

The political process required to build housing in many communities obstructs the construction of all types of housing—affordable and market-rate. It also disproportionately amplifies the voices of older white homeowners.⁴ Addressing the housing crisis requires a reorienting of the housing production process to improve housing equity by focusing on representation, participation, inclusive engagement, and recognizing how unrepresentative and privileged voices currently dominate the process.

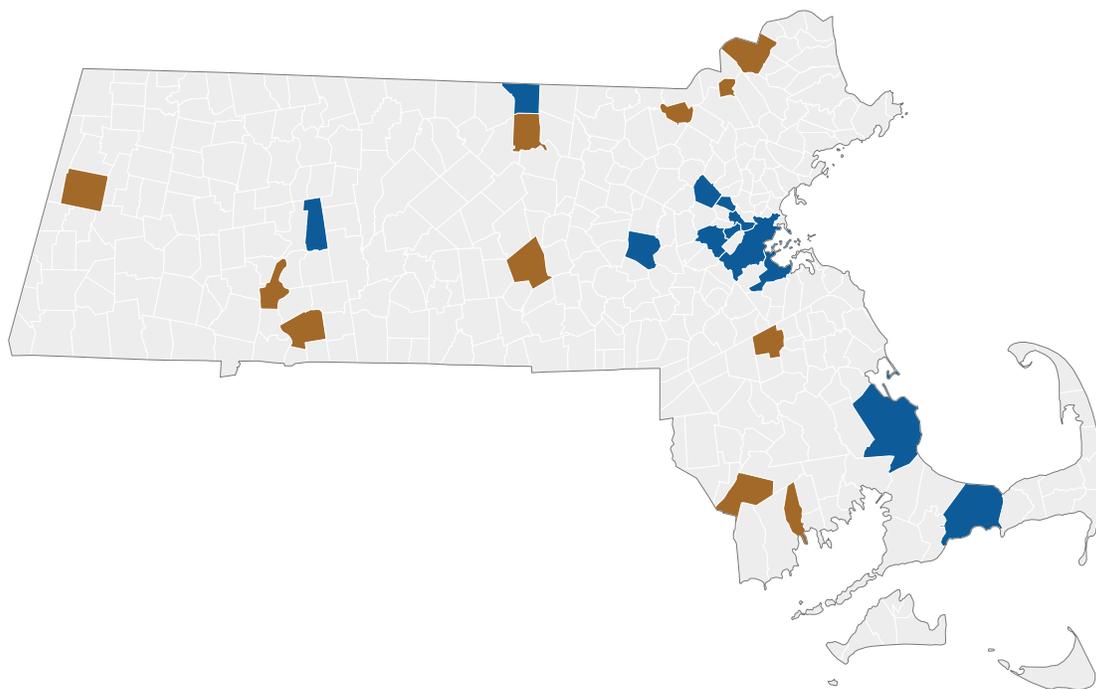


DIVERSITY ON LOCAL BOARDS/COMMISSIONS

Massachusetts cities and towns rely on various boards and commissions to make critical decisions on zoning, permitting, and long-term planning. These boards are generally made up of local residents, volunteering their time and abilities. These boards, which include Planning Boards, Zoning Boards of Appeals, and Redevelopment Boards, along with city councils or selectboards, have enormous influence and power over the kinds of housing that gets built in their municipalities.

Scholars and policymakers have paid relatively little attention to the composition of these boards, which have the power to shape the housing supplies of their communities. We collected data on the membership (as of September 2021) of the key boards involved with housing and permitting decisions across the eleven Gateway Cities, as well as an additional eleven cities across the state.⁵ We also collected data on elected officials--including mayors, city councillors, and select board members--who are similarly involved in housing politics. We matched these officials to a commercial voter file to identify their race, sex, age, and homeownership status.⁶ Overall, we collected data on 932 officials and matched 80% to the voter file.

Figure 1: **Map of Sample Cities**



Gateway Cities (brown): Brockton, Fall River, Fitchburg, Haverhill, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, New Bedford, Pittsfield, Springfield, and Worcester. Other Cities (blue): Amherst, Arlington, Ashby, Barnstable, Boston, Cambridge, Framingham, Lexington, Newton, Plymouth, and Quincy.

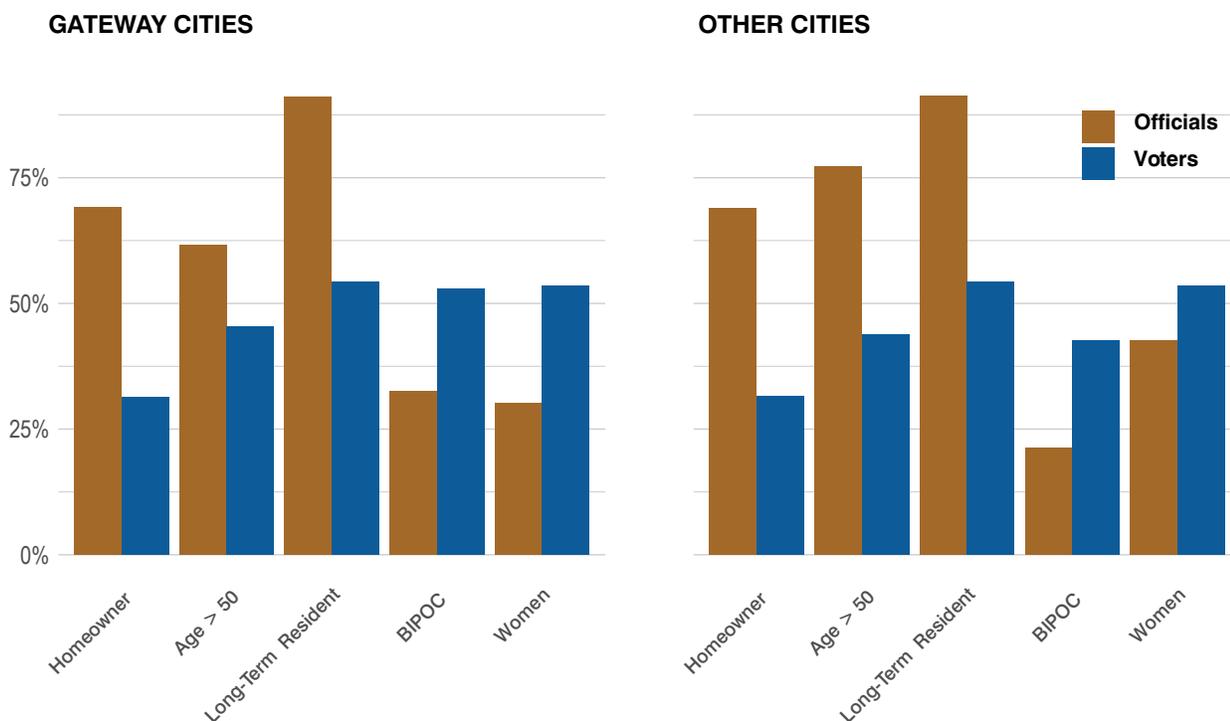
We find that homeowners, people over 50 years old, and long-term residents (people living in their homes more than ten years) are significantly overrepresented in city governments, boards, and commissions. Women and people of color are significantly underrepresented. Only 31% of voters in the Gateway Cities are homeowners (or live in owner-occupied homes), compared to 69% of public officials in these cities. 53% of the voters in Gateway Cities are people of color, but only 33% of public officials are. Similarly, women make up 54% of voters, but only 30% of public officials in the Gateway Cities. Figure 2 presents these results for both sets of cities in our analysis.

The racial gap in representation in city government spans all racial and ethnic groups. White residents are significantly overrepresented, while Hispanic, Black, Asian and other residents have little representation on the local government

bodies that make decisions around housing. The underrepresentation of Hispanic residents in the Gateway Cities is particularly notable; Hispanics make up 31% of voters, but only 14% of public officials. In Haverhill, for example, White residents make up 70% of the voters but hold every seat on the city council and school board.⁷ Figure 3 illustrates these disparities.⁸

These representational disparities mirror similar differences (by race, age, homeownership, and sex) in who participates in public meetings on housing development. Recent studies of participation in public meetings in Massachusetts (both in-person and remote meetings held during the COVID-19 pandemic) find that the people who participate are older, whiter, and much more likely to be homeowners than the general population of their cities and towns.⁹

Figure 2: **Comparison of Public Officials and Voters**



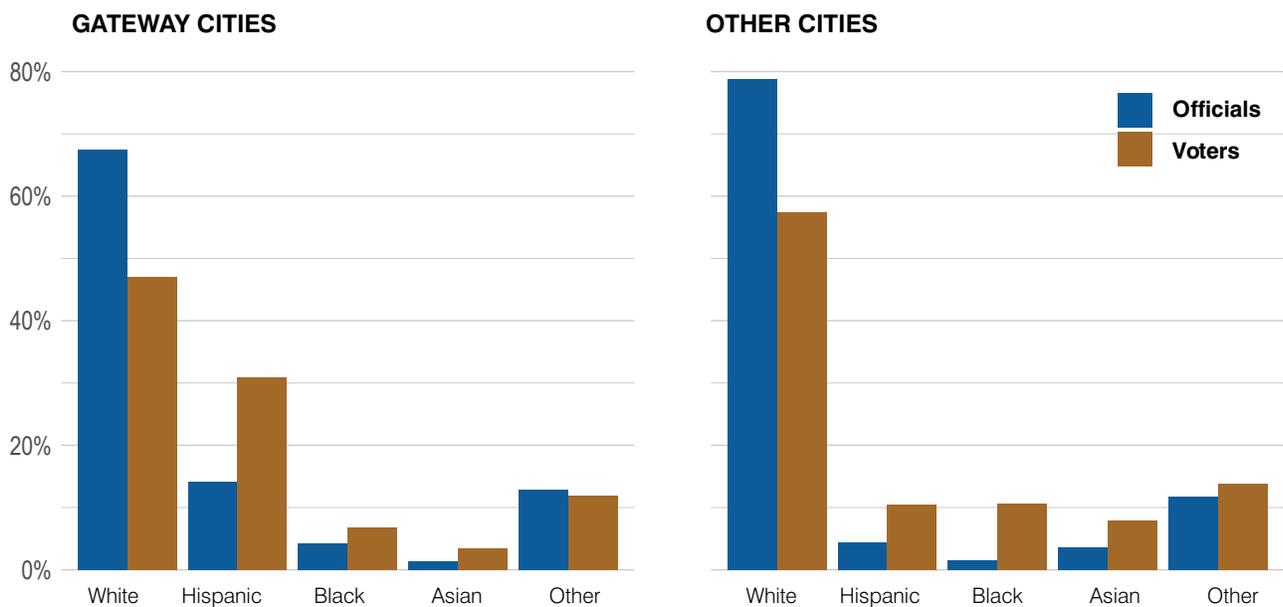
BENEFICIARIES OF HOUSING PROGRAMS

Public meetings disproportionately attract neighbors opposed to new housing and greater density. They are, however, unlikely to include the voices of the individuals and families most likely to benefit from new housing, whether market-rate or subsidized. Many of these individuals do not have the time to participate. Or, they may not trust government to be responsiveness to their concerns. What’s more, many do not live in communities that are currently proposing new housing. A truly representative and equitable local government must remember and incorporate the interests of those beneficiaries into their decision-making.

Without the participation of the people who will eventually live in the new housing and become a part of the

community, the most common supporters of new housing are the developers proposing the project. Property developers, especially for-profit developers, are a frequent target for opponents of new housing and are much easier to vilify than the people who will benefit from the new homes. Indeed, in a 2017 survey of residents of large metropolitan areas, only 36% of respondents reported having “some” or “a lot” of trust in real estate developers, comparable to the level of support for then-President Trump (34%) and corporate executives (33%), and far below levels of trust for homeowners (91%).¹⁰ Keeping the focus of the planning and zoning process on the families who will live in new housing and become part of the larger communities, rather than the developers constructing the housing, may help improve housing equity and improve local decision-making.

Figure 3: **Comparison of Public Officials and Voters by Race**



INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

Participatory inequalities have many roots. People may lack the resources—either financial or time—to participate. Or, they may not be interested in the political proceedings in question. Finally, they may have a well-earned distrust of government and feel that government officials will not listen to them.¹¹ Simply making it easier to participate—by, say, holding public meetings online or at a more convenient time—may encourage those who ordinarily lack time to join. But, it will do little to ameliorate a lack of interest or trust in the proceedings.

Rectifying those gaps requires targeted outreach.¹² Government officials must adopt technologies and meeting strategies that signal to underrepresented groups that their voices are welcome. They must also devote time to community education and solicit feedback on broader land use topics to ensure that they are asking for participation on issues of genuine interest to a broader population.

GATEWAY CITIES

In multiple interviews with officials who have worked in Gateway Cities, *all* stressed the importance of, as one put it, “meeting people where they are.” Indeed, many Gateway Cities face unique challenges that make traditional community engagement strategies unlikely to be effective. According to several public officials, trust in government is low—especially among underrepresented immigrant communities. This problem is compounded by large undocumented immigrant populations. One state official describes the importance of this obstacle: “A lot of people, even if their own immigration status is OK, are reluctant to get involved in any

sort of official process. The only way to break through that is to have allies or partners, whether they’re churches, or businesses who cater heavily to those communities, who are helping you gather feedback. Someone has to trust that you’re not working with ICE.” Finally, these cities are disproportionately comprised of lower-wage workers employed at multiple jobs who simply do not have the time to learn about or engage in local political proceedings.

All of these factors militate in favor of intensive community outreach. Multiple local and state government representatives described attending local church masses or community barbecues to become “embedded in the community and build long-term relationships,” as one official put it. These frequent and more low-key interactions are critical. One official described the importance of relationship-building in Gateway Cities: “There’s a limited amount that you can do without buy-in and trust...Move at the speed of trust. It takes a lot of trust, high contact with people, especially in communities that are highly immigrant and highly refugee.”

Several public officials highlighted WhatsApp as an effective outreach strategy for reaching out to Latino constituents. One official described the service as “the best form of communication with the Latino community (more so than social media).” Data from Pew Research confirms WhatsApp’s distinctive popularity among Hispanics: 49 percent of Hispanics reported that they used WhatsApp, compared with 14 percent of whites and 21 percent of Blacks.¹³

HAVERHILL

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine in Haverhill illuminates the importance of community trust and inclusive technology. In spring 2021, Massachusetts relied heavily on large state vaccination sites to disseminate the COVID-19 vaccine. State Representative Andy Vargas, who represents the district, noted that these sites were “45 minutes away from my constituents.” What’s more, appointments were challenging, requiring high levels of technological skill, time, and luck to obtain. As a consequence, Vargas observed that “none of my Latino constituents and seniors were getting those appointments.”

In response, Vargas worked with Greater Lawrence Family Health Center to open a clinic in Haverhill.¹⁴ The team circulated an appointment platform directly to the community and neighborhood leaders through WhatsApp. Vargas said:

“A lot of people would get their appointments there. It’s what happens when you’re intentional about outreach.”

These types of “intentional” strategies can be quite effective in making planning processes more inclusive as well. Vargas and Noah Koretz, the head of Mass Development’s Transformative Development Initiative, collaborated on outreach to Haverhill’s Spanish-speaking community about a project to revitalize the city’s downtown and urban core. Koretz found that, when he held Spanish language community input sessions, “no one was showing up.” He and Vargas realized that it would be far more effective to conduct outreach in a place where people were already gathering. So, Koretz drove up to Haverhill on a Sunday with “a lot of food” to a Spanish language mass that Vargas also attended. As mass let out, Vargas told attendees that there was a primarily Spanish-language community input session taking place downstairs with free food. Koretz and Vargas both said the session was a resounding success. Koretz noted: “We went to a place where people were gathering anyway, and worked with [Vargas] who has a lot of trust in the community.” He emphasized that effective community input must “capitalize on being where people are.”

Such a strategy is in stark contrast to traditional community engagement around housing and planning. Most forums take place in a government building—often at an inconvenient time—and are led by city planning officials, whom community residents may not know. As a consequence, true outreach is very difficult to do at public meetings—or even online. Our Gateway Cities interviewees consistently underscored the value of gaining trust, often by going door-to-door and being present at community events. Such a strategy is more staff- and time-intensive. As one official noted, “If you want to do it right, it’s incredibly time-consuming.” Such investments are necessary, however, to truly encapsulate views other than those held by the vocal minority most likely to engage in formal public meetings.

NEWTON

Local officials can also create planning institutions that incorporate a wider array of voices. Community planning in Newton illuminates the promises and political pitfalls of inclusive land use planning. Newton is presently in the midst of a decade-long effort to revamp its zoning code. The process has been contentious at times, with frequent community meetings dating back to 2011.

In its most recent outreach efforts, Newton’s Department of Planning and Development and community engagement officials have used a multi-pronged approach to reach a broader array of Newton residents. They have held traditional meetings, but they have also used more innovative approaches. Echoing the advice of Gateway Cities officials to “meet people where they are,” Newton sent interns to engage people in popular areas, such as the public library. Officials held a meeting at a local high school to better incorporate youth views. The city also used Vision Kits, in which individuals and groups had the opportunity to download self-guided walking tours through village centers and send pictures and other insights to planning officials.

The city’s most novel approach—and perhaps, unsurprisingly, its most controversial—has been its equitable focus groups. Concerned about the unrepresentative demographics of traditional meeting attendees, Newton Community Engagement Planner Nevena Pilipović-Wengler, Chief of Long Range Planning Zachery Lemel, and Associate Planner Cat Kemmett spearheaded a series of equitable groups for the following categories: BIPOC people; people with disabilities; young people (ages 15-24 and 25-35); creatives; renters; LGTBQ+, and elderly people (ages 65+). All members of these groups were invited to participate in spring and summer 2021, and facilitators were provided a modest honorarium. Equitable focus groups were moderated by members of the community or relevant commissions in Newton; planning officials served as notetakers. Staff offered to do phone interviews with any interested participant who could not attend the scheduled virtual focus group.

139 Newton residents participated in these equitable focus groups. Moderators asked focus group participants to answer a broad set of questions. For example, renters considered the following four questions: (1) As a renter, do you feel connected to Newton’s village centers? If so, how? What do

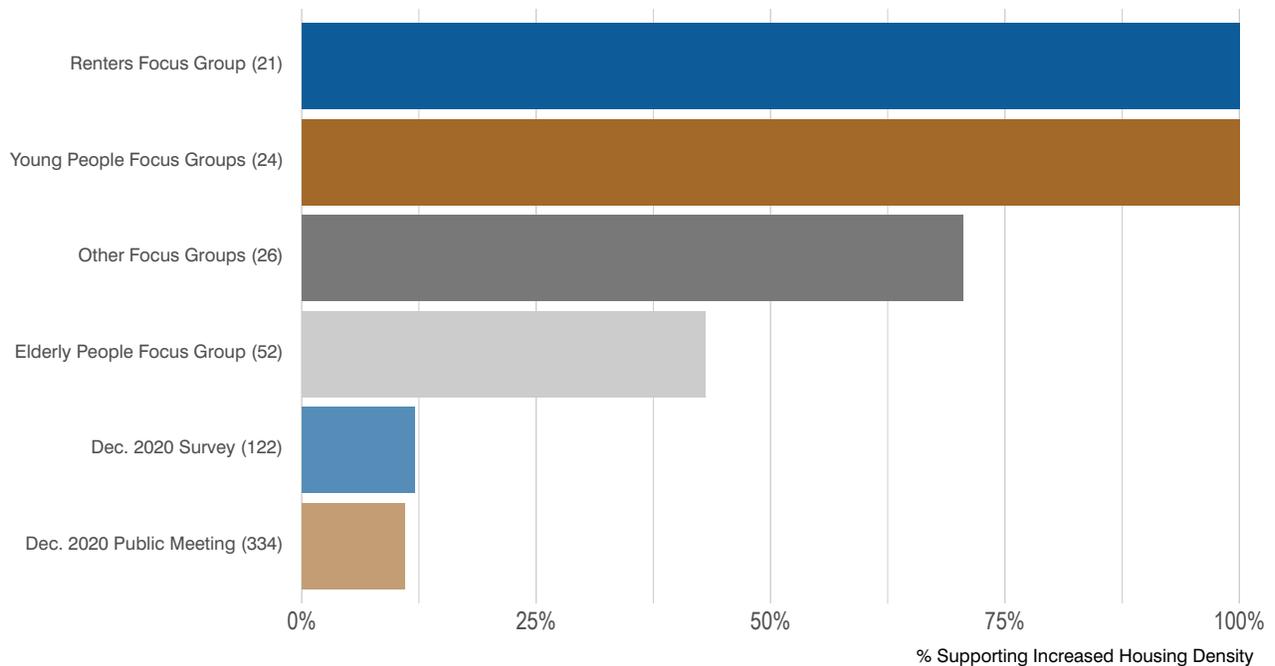
you go to them for? (2) If there were no limitations or barriers to think about: what would make your most ideal village center? What would exist there, what would it look like? (3) In our past engagement, we have seen a large disparity between participation from homeowners and from renters. As we consider zoning changes for village centers, how can we make sure renters are heard in the process? (4) Is there anything else about village centers that you want the city to consider? (For example, the environment, accessibility, housing, inclusivity, transportation, and more.)

The planning department transcribed comments from these forums, allowing us to compare attitudes on housing between focus groups and more traditional community meetings. In all focus groups and a December 2020 traditional community meeting, we searched for comments

about housing density in Newton. For each comment on this topic, we coded whether a commenter supported or opposed increased density. These meetings encompassed a wide range of issues, so many of the comments were not directly about housing density. For example, the disabilities focus group participants largely emphasized accessible housing and safe pedestrian/cycling infrastructure in their comments. None of their comments directly pertained to housing density, however; so, the figure below does not feature this focus group in the analysis.

Figure 4 compares support for greater housing density among the focus group participants, participants in a traditional public meeting in December 2020, and survey participants from a December 2020 survey. (We will discuss the survey respondents in greater depth in a subsequent

Figure 4: Support for Increasing Housing Density in Newton, by Outreach Effort



Other Focus Groups include focus groups of BIPOC and LGBTQ people, and people working in the arts.

section.) We pooled respondents in some of the smaller focus groups to have a large enough number of observations; the results, however, look quite similar even when we estimated housing support for each focus group individually. The gap between focus group participants and traditional meeting attendees is enormous: while 100% of comments related to housing in the renters and youth focus groups supported greater density, only 11% expressed similar views at traditional public meetings. Even in the elderly focus group—a population well represented at traditional meetings and typically opposed to new housing—opposition was more muted than at the December 2020 meeting: 43% of housing-related comments at the elderly focus group endorsed greater density. As an important caveat, the zoning redesign context was somewhat different in December 2020, as residents at that forum considered a proposal to allow two-family housing throughout Newton—a possibility that the city council subsequently tabled.

Nonetheless, the differences in housing support between the focus group participants and traditional meeting attendees are massive. The proportion of participants supporting housing at the traditional housing meeting is remarkably similar to the support that we, along with our Boston University colleague David Glick, found in our analysis of in-person public meetings from 2015-2017. In contrast, the equitable focus groups featured support for new housing that was over 85 percentage points higher in some cases.

Traditional meetings featured familiar concerns, including changes to the neighborhood character and rushed process. One community member worried, “How will Newton maintain its suburban feel and decongest its roads if zoning changes allow the population to grow quickly? Is the goal to turn Newton into Brookline?” Indeed, multiple community residents made this (unfavorable) comparison between Newton and its slightly more urban neighbor: “What is the reasoning behind trying to make [o]ur fair city of Newton more densely crowded and therefore simply an extension of the city of Boston (as Brookline has become)?” Residents wanted to avoid a potential urbanization of Newton: “I moved to Newton for a suburban atmosphere, and the huge complex in Newtonville is disturbing the landscape.”

Participants at the December 2020 meeting also felt that the process was rushed and undemocratic. Multiple residents cited the pandemic as a reason to delay: “Why is the City conducting this process during a pandemic? Wouldn’t it be preferable to have a fully interactive, in-person process?” Other community members acknowledged that Newton’s zoning process had been, in fact, quite lengthy. They used this length to militate in favor of a slower, incremental approach to changing the city’s zoning code: “This process has been going on for years, beyond many members of the planning department, city council, and a mayor. I have watched many public meetings raise serious mistrust and doubt within the populace. So I ask, rather than trying to overhaul the entire zoning code, why not make incremental changes to the most problematic issues such as FAR and street continuity?” Multiple community members challenged the idea that such land use matters should be in the purview of the city council. Instead, they pushed for a vote from residents: “When did we decide as a city that we want to rezone? What were the residents of the city asked about this? Do most of the people in Newton support the urbanization process.” Another asked for a vote (of taxpayers and homeowners): “I’m concerned there is no vote from tax papers and homeowners. You the Newton city council board are unilaterally making the decision for our community. Democracy please? An issue about huge zoning changes that affects all of us needs to be put to a ballot and not by the [C]ity Council. Thank you.”

These stand in stark contrast to the comments from the equitable focus groups, which largely supported greater density and lamented the inequities of the traditional planning process. At the youth focus groups, multiple participants endorsed mixed-use housing: “Housing above retail - seems like something every village center should just have. There’s just so much untapped potential. We’ll grow our commercial tax base, and it would be cool to live in housing above retail. Something a lot of younger people fantasize about to go to do when they leave Newton.” Another group member responded: “Yes, it feels like this [housing above retail] could add to vibrancy. That kind of housing is not as appealing if you’re outside a parking lot or above a store that isn’t engaged

much.” Another youth focus group participant supported the convenience of “2-family homes and duplexes.” Another group member “would love to see more rentals coming into Newton that are obviously in the affordable range.” Support for mixed-use developments extended to other focus groups. As one BIPOC focus group participant noted, “Housing must be part of any future village center. Historically, there were residential units above commercial spaces in our village centers. Putting housing here would not be as contentious as pushing more housing in the surrounding neighborhoods.” A participant in the BIPOC focus group supported diversifying housing to reduce costs: “By diversify, I don’t mean culture—there’s some truth to it, but I mean diversify housing. Give more housing options, supply and demand. When you have more supply, less demand.” An elderly focus group participant similarly linked housing supply and density with costs: “It’s unfortunate that 20% of the houses are selling for over 2 million dollars. If we want any younger families moving here, we need more options. Like a variety of 2-3 unit buildings. I see that as vital to village centers.”

These views were not uniform. While opposition to greater housing density was less potent in the focus groups, it certainly manifested at times. For example, one BIPOC focus group participant lamented, “Seeing Newton become the hub of development of huge apartment complexes - sold to the community as opportunities for diversity are disingenuous because the price points of all of these apartments are way beyond what most folks can afford. It’s offensive to me as a minority-represented individual, that’s what I came here for.” An elderly focus group participant worried about growing urbanization, “I do not want to see the villages turn into areas of great congestion, which I think will happen if we put a lot of multi-family houses there. I think the character of the city is changing sadly enough with current developments. For example, the new library mirrored city hall and fit the architecture and the fit of the city. But some of the condos, particularly down in Newtonville, it’s like downtown Boston. And I don’t want to head in that direction.”

Perhaps most intriguingly, multiple focus group participants expressed strong support for this novel process—and considerable qualms with more traditional community

meetings. Several BIPOC focus group participants highlighted the intimidating and unwelcoming atmosphere at traditional public meetings. One said, “As a person of color, and having only lived here for a year, I have struggled to feel confident to engage in the process when people who are lifelong residents begin to get loud.” Another similarly praised the inclusive atmosphere of the focus groups, “I would applaud what you’re doing here tonight. I’ve lived here 23 years, and this is the first such invitation for communication, so showing that Newton is welcome to another voices, a very small population of other voices in Newton, but just showing that you’re interested in other voices sends a message, so that’s great.” A renters focus group participant was thankful for the city’s explicit outreach: “I have rented in Newton for more than 20 years and have never participated before. Typically, people in Newton get involved through their children’s school. I do not have kids and I always felt disconnected. I heard about this focus group through my landlord and just the fact that the City reached out directly to renters, like me, is why I am participating now.” Some renters felt stigmatized by their home-owning neighbors: “You need to remove the stigma. When I moved to the rental I live in, the neighbors came by and said, ‘oh you are the new renters.’ Since then, we have become very friendly, but it didn’t start off that way.” One Mandarin-speaking renter simply appreciated the direct outreach: “I like that our opinions are getting directly asked by the Planning Department.”

One BIPOC participant explicitly connected these issues with broader problems of political representation: “There is a real deficit in the City of representation. Look at who is using the Senior Center because the programming doesn’t speak to the diverse people in Newton and/or just feeling not welcome.” The representational inequalities we have described throughout this report shape who feels welcome in public forums.

As with many policy programs explicitly centered on equity, the Newton equitable focus groups faced steep public opposition from members of the community. Perhaps most publicly, the Newtonville Area Council sent out an email lambasting the equitable focus groups in May 2021:

“Early last December over 500 residents made their views known about proposals and near-proposals put forward by Newton’s planning institutions. The administration was responsive and pivoted away from some of the most important of those, at least until the end of this City Council term.

As the process moves to discussing the Village Centers, you can make your voice heard, by learning about this next stage of Zoning Redesign on Thursday and then participating in the aspects of its noted below.

If you don’t fit into one of the designated focus group categories, say, if you are a homeowner or a white, middle-aged person, be creative and sign on as part of the creative community. The idea, I’ve been told, is to maximize participation.”

More generally, the backlash to the Newton focus groups illuminates the challenges associated with having multiple forms of community input. In particular, local officials must struggle with the politics of how to weigh these different forms of input in making decisions. In its critique of the equitable focus groups, the Newtonville Area Council put a large emphasis on the number of participants: more people in total participated in the traditional December 2020 meeting. Newton planning officials may, in contrast, want to place greater weight on representative feedback from a broader

array of voices—even if the total number of voices heard from is smaller. (The number of voices heard from in the planning process was, in fact, quite large. Including vision kit submissions, an online interactive forum, and equitable focus groups, roughly 1,700 people engaged in the process.)

CHALLENGES TO EQUITABLE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Across Gateway Cities and Newton, the creation of inclusive community engagement processes creates political and implementation challenges for public officials. How do you weigh the feedback from different processes? Which type of feedback is more “valid?” The Newtonville Area Council illustrates how these different frameworks can become highly politicized. Local governments that hope to engage in these more inclusive planning processes will likely have to accompany them with substantial community education to explain why a small number of participants can, in fact, be more representative of the broader community. Indeed, while a larger number of observations intuitively seems like it would be more representative, it does not, in fact, automatically mean greater demographic representation on its own.

Moreover, these programs can be more costly than traditional public engagement. They require substantial outlays of staff time—often with a staff member whose full-time job is to manage these processes. They also require resources to compensate participants from underrepresented groups for their time; indeed, this compensation is critical for boosting participation from groups that have been marginalized from more traditional processes. Local governments have to make a significant investment to support equitable community engagement.

Finally, public officials must accept the potential political costs of equitable community engagement. Newton illuminates this quite clearly and is not alone in facing a political backlash for innovative community engagement. More broadly, rapid changes to political structures—especially ones designed to empower underrepresented groups—are prone to white backlash across a wide array of policy areas.

SURVEY OUTREACH

Surveys present a tempting, and relatively low cost, way of obtaining a representative set of community views. As a consequence, local governments use them frequently in a variety of policy areas, including planning, housing, transportation, schools, and the environment. Typically, government officials will post a link online, and circulate it through social media/email, perhaps augmented with fliers.

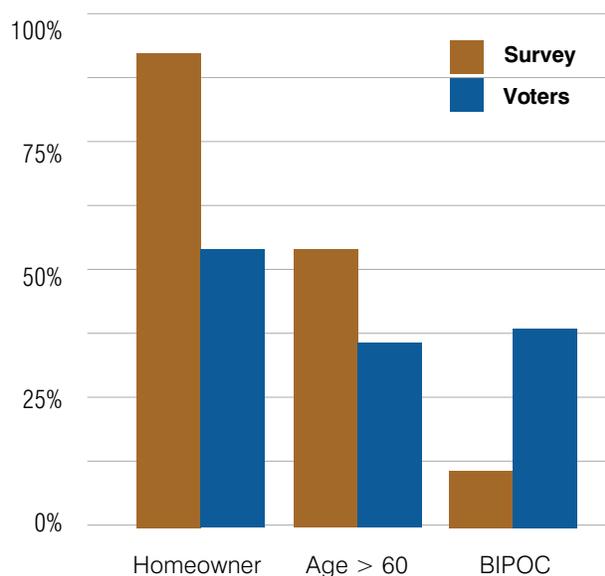
Unfortunately, this approach results in a convenience sample that is frequently unrepresentative of the broader community. Newton's Zoning Redesign process illustrates the potential pitfall of surveys. Simply circulating a survey does not guarantee a representative sample. Many of the

same dynamics that plague traditional in-person meetings can also affect surveys. Strong opponents (or supporters) of housing can organize fellow group members to take a survey.

Figure 5 illustrates representational disparities in the survey of Newton residents discussed above. Homeowners are massively overrepresented (93% of survey respondents; 54% of voters), as are older people (54% of survey respondents are over 60; 35% of voters), while people of color are substantially underrepresented (11% of survey respondents; 38% of voters). As discussed above, survey respondents were also significantly more opposed to increasing housing density and zoning changes than participants in focus groups for younger people, renters, and people of color.

At a minimum, officials need to check respondent demographics against their community's demographics and identify any biases. Ideally, good survey practices require going beyond simply posting and circulating a link. As with other forms of community engagement, getting more representative survey responses necessitates "meeting people where they are." More effective strategies for outreach might include going door-to-door or surveying people where they are already gathering, such as a church, market, or mass transit commute. Local officials should evaluate surveys not on the number of responses they obtain but on the breadth of community members surveyed.

Figure 5: **Comparison of Newton Voters and Zoning Survey Respondents (December 2020 Survey)**



CONCLUSION

Equitable political processes are critical to redressing the housing crisis in Massachusetts. The current system amplifies unrepresentative voices and regularly stops or delays the construction of new housing—ensuring that the supply of affordable and market-rate housing cannot rise fast enough to meet demand. Moreover, witnessing these inequitable processes likely further builds mistrust in government, especially among marginalized communities.¹⁵

Making changes to existing institutions will not be easy. To

obtain more diverse political representation and participation, public officials and community organizations must engage in extensive outreach. They must build trust in groups that have often been ignored by the government. They must make substantial investments in more robust outreach. They must center the voices of those who will actually benefit from new housing—voices almost entirely absent from current processes. They must make challenging choices about how to weigh different forms of community feedback. And, in what is perhaps the greatest challenge of all for an elected official, they must be willing to withstand potentially substantial political backlash from groups that currently dominate the housing process.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Crump, Sarah, Trevor Mattos, Jenny Schuetz, and Luc Schuster. 2020. "Zoned Out: Why Massachusetts Needs to Legalize Apartments Near Transit." Boston Indicators and Brookings Institution. <https://www.bostonindicators.org/reports/report-website-pages/zoned-out>.
- 2 Crump, Sarah, Trevor Mattos, Jenny Schuetz, and Luc Schuster. 2020. "Zoned Out: Why Massachusetts Needs to Legalize Apartments Near Transit." Boston Indicators and Brookings Institution. <https://www.bostonindicators.org/reports/report-website-pages/zoned-out>. Phillips, Shane, Michael Manville, and Michael Lens. "The Effect of Market-Rate Development on Neighborhood Rents." UCLA Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5d00z61m>?
- 3 Source: 2009 and 2019 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.
- 4 Einstein, Katherine Levine, David Glick, and Maxwell Palmer. 2019. *Neighborhood Defenders: Participatory Politics and America's Housing Crisis* New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 5 We collected information on city councils, planning and zoning boards, historic and conservation commissions, and other entities with power over housing permitting.
- 6 Race is estimated using a Bayesian Improved Surname Geocoding (BISG) method that uses an individual's name, home address, and census data to estimate their probability of belonging to a particular racial group. Homeownership is estimated by matching home addresses to property records. Sex and age are included in the voter registration data. We also use the date of a voter's registration at their current address as a proxy for how long they have lived in their current home.
- 7 Garcia, Marcela. 2021. "Haverhill, you're on notice: Open the door to Latino representation in local government."
- 8 A recent report by [MassINC](#) finds similar differences in representation by race in the elected officials in the Gateway Cities and the Massachusetts legislature statewide.
- 9 See Einstein, Katherine Levine, David M. Glick, and Maxwell Palmer. 2019. *Neighborhood Defenders: Participatory Politics and America's Housing Crisis*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press; and Einstein, Katherine Levine, David Glick, Luisa Godinez Puig, and Maxwell Palmer. 2020. "Still Muted: The Limited Participatory Democracy of Zoom Public Meetings." Working Paper.
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- 14 The mayor of Haverhill highlighted the central role that Vargas played in distributing vaccines in Haverhill. https://www.hgazette.com/news/local_news/haverhills-recent-800-doses-of-covid-19-vaccine-bring-immediate-appointments-for-residents/article_f6e339e6-d021-5d74-a064-22762dee29c7.html
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