

Housing Opportunities Master Plan Public Engagement Summary

INTRODUCTION

Few decisions by local government are as personal as addressing our housing needs. That's why public engagement is an especially critical component to ensure that key stakeholders are aware of new initiatives and have an opportunity to provide feedback through an open process. The public engagement strategy of the Howard County Housing Opportunities Master Plan aimed to engage with a broad audience, including people who have unaddressed housing needs or who may be affected by the proposed recommendations.

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting statewide response began in the early stages of the planning process, necessitating changes to the initial public engagement strategy. While the public engagement strategy of the Housing Opportunities Master Plan initially contemplated in-person public outreach and engagement activities, Howard County later determined that all public engagement would occur virtually to ensure adherence to public health and safety measures during the pandemic.

This primarily virtual engagement strategy used a combination of techniques, including:

- Ongoing coordination with the Housing Opportunities Master Plan Task Force - a team selected by County Executive Calvin Ball, who served in an advisory role throughout the planning process.
- Using the project webpage as the main information hub through routine updates that provided real-time project information for public review, located at howardcountymd.gov/HousingTaskForce.
- Two phases of public engagement:
 - Phase 1: collecting feedback on issues, perspectives, data, and goal-setting in the initial stages of the planning process.
 - Phase 2: collecting feedback on the draft recommendations.
- Each phase of public engagement included an online survey and series of online public meetings to discuss issues and ideas, and to collect feedback.
- In addition, the project team conducted outreach to environmental justice (EJ) communities, through both strategic in-person flier distribution, targeted emails and a series of small group meetings with EJ advocates and interested participants, to ensure broad and diverse perspectives were incorporated. Most of the selected flier locations were intended to meet people in the limited places they are most likely to go – interfaith centers, grocery stores, money cashing sites, camp and daycare locations, and convenience stores and were translated to Korean and Spanish as appropriate.
- Finally, as part of the effort to assess existing the County program and policies, the project team conducted virtual policy/program evaluation interviews with County staff and practitioners working for public, private, and nonprofit/philanthropic organizations in the local housing and social services sectors.

TASK FORCE COORDINATION

Howard County Executive Calvin Ball appointed the members of the Housing Opportunities Master Plan Task Force in October 2019 by Executive Order 2020-12. The Task Force was comprised of 23 individuals who represented diverse interests and constituencies from across the County. The Task Force also included an additional nine appointed advisors, each of whom represented a different department within the County government or affiliated organization. Together, the Task Force constituted 32 representatives who worked collaboratively through the planning process.

The role of the Task Force was to assist with an inventory and assessment of housing programs as well as with the development of recommendations to improve housing opportunities. The Task Force was divided into three workgroups with the intent of focusing

discussions and analyses on more specified topics within smaller group settings. Each workgroup focused on a unique theme: Housing Affordability, Housing Policy, and Housing Markets.

Throughout the development of the Housing Opportunities Master Plan, the Task Force was engaged to provide input as key elements of the process were completed. A number of meetings were held, including (i) formal, facilitated meetings with the entire Task Force and individual workgroups; (ii) informal coordination meetings with Task Force and workgroup chairs; and (iii) informal Task Force facilitated discussions. All formal meetings were open to the public, and the presentation and meeting summaries were thereafter posted online. The schedule and topics for each formal Task Force and workgroup meeting are shown in the table below:

Date	Participants	Meeting Topics Discussed
2/4/2020	Task Force	Introductions, planning process and objectives, and project schedule
3/17/2020	Affordability Workgroup	Preview of market understanding, inventory of housing programs, and goal setting
3/18/2020	Housing Policy Workgroup	
3/23/2020	Housing Markets Workgroup	
5/11/2020	Housing Policy Workgroup	Updates to engagement process, updated inventory and analysis, finalize goals, and analyze strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats
5/13/2020	Affordability Workgroup	
5/14/2020	Housing Markets Workgroup	
7/9/2020	Task Force	Preparations for public engagement, updated inventory and analysis, and gap analysis
9/29/2020	Task Force	Review of public input and initial policy recommendations
10/19/2020	Task Force	Detailed discussion to review and refine specific recommendations
10/20/2020	Task Force	
10/26/2020	Task Force	
12/10/2020	Task Force	
March 2021	Task Force	Review of Countywide General Plan process and integration of Housing Opportunities recommendations, and presentation of refined recommendations
		Review of Housing Opportunities recommendations included those within the Countywide General Plan

COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Promotion of public meetings and surveys was conducted through various means to ensure all communities were made aware of opportunities to participate in such events. To facilitate outreach, the County and library system promoted on their websites and through social media accounts, Task Force members shared information with their respective networks, and landlords and property managers distributed information to their residents. Encouragement to complete project surveys and become involved in the process was included on promotional fliers for the series of virtual community meetings and open houses that were held in August, September, and November 2020. These fliers were distributed throughout the County at its libraries and community centers, through shelters, food banks and local food distribution programs, and on the website.

Project Website

Throughout the duration of the planning process, Howard County maintained a project webpage at howardcountymd.gov/HousingTaskForce where project information was regularly updated. The following information was provided on the webpage:

- Background information
- A copy of the original Executive Order establishing the Task Force
- A list of Task Force members
- Answers to frequently asked questions
- Public Survey Links
- Survey Summaries results after they were completed
- Task Force meeting information including upcoming meeting dates with links to join via Zoom
- Copies of presentation materials and a downloadable detailed meeting summary
- The virtual presentation from the first series of community meetings
- Draft recommendations for public review

The website served as a central resource for the public to find the most recent and accurate project information. All project communications included a link directing people to the website for up-to-date project information. The website will continue to serve as a resource where the public can access the final recommendations, information about the Housing Opportunities Master Plan background and history, and continued updates as progress is made.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE OUTREACH

Engaging with stakeholder groups who are traditionally underrepresented in the planning process was an important goal and ensures all people had an opportunity to participate in the planning process. Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. An environmental justice community is an area whose annual median household income is equal to or less than 65 percent of the statewide median or whose population is made up of 25 percent more of minority, foreign born, or limited English language proficiency. During this study, special attention was paid to areas in Howard County where a significant number of environmental justice communities exist, which include North Laurel, Jessup, Guilford, Long Reach, Wilde Lake, Lisbon/Cooksville, Elkridge, and Ellicott City. Fliers were distributed at grocery stores, food banks, community associations, nonprofits, faith institutions, and community centers in English, Spanish, and Korean languages. Additional follow-up emails were provided to environmental justice advocacy groups and organizations within the County to further encourage participation.



Promotional survey flier, which was made available in English, Spanish, and Korean languages.

The project team invited representatives from more than 50 advocacy groups and organizations to attend two small group meetings, referenced below. Follow-up emails and calls were provided to all invitees. Ten groups and organizations participated, and others committed to review and share the draft recommendations.

- Meeting #1 - Tuesday, December 7, 2020 | 2 – 3 p.m.
- Meeting #2 – Wednesday, December 8, 2020 | 2 – 3 p.m.

As a result of the first two small group discussions, a suggestion from a member of the Chinese American Parent Association (CAPA-HC) resulted in a third meeting focused specifically for the Asian/Asian-American community. Invitations to the meeting were sent in Chinese and Korean. Seventeen community representatives attended the meeting and interpreters were present for Korean and Mandarin in-language services.

- Meeting #3 – Tuesday, January 26, 2021 | 12– 1 p.m.

Small group discussion comments and questions centered on:

- The need for racial diversity in housing plans
- Manage “flight” risks in western Howard County as plans to expand housing choice move forward
- Concerns of creating “pockets of poverty”
- Housing options that accommodate aging-in-place
- Consideration of the needs of middle-income residents and the impact of policy changes on taxes
- More transit-accessible neighborhoods
- Access to infrastructure including water and transportation
- Alignment of the Housing Opportunities Master Plan with the General Plan
- Alignment of housing recommendations with school capacity concerns

In addition to the targeted environmental justice outreach, the policy/program evaluation interview process included conversations with organizations with the core mission of serving environmental justice populations (see section below for details).

PUBLIC OUTREACH – PHASE 1

Public outreach and engagement activities took place throughout Summer 2020 to collect information of the issues, challenges, opportunities, and needs for housing reform in Howard County. While the meetings were all held virtually because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the outreach was successful in reaching broad audiences and resulted in well attended meetings. Participants provided valuable feedback that helped lead to comprehensive goals and recommendations.

Public Survey #1

The purpose of the Howard County Housing Opportunities Master Plan Public Survey #1 was to gain a better understanding of Howard County residents’ experiences with housing. All answers to the survey were anonymous. The results were used to identify housing needs and craft recommendations for the Housing Opportunities Master Plan.

Public Survey #1 was available from June 16, 2020 to September 28, 2020, and it received 2,312 responses. Advertisement of the survey was published in a variety of public, private, and nonprofit resources and proved crucial to the successful response rate of the survey.



Promotional flier in Korean for small group discussion with the Asian community

Of the 2,312 respondents, 97 percent live in Howard County and 36 percent also work in the county. Homeowners represented 71 percent of respondents, while 5.5 percent receive housing assistance of some type. When asked about the most important considerations when shopping for a home, the majority of respondents selected home cost and affordability as the most important, followed by low crime rate, home quality, and proximity to quality schools. Elements of these themes were interwoven throughout survey responses.

Analysis of the survey results demonstrated a need for increased affordable housing opportunities, as well as support for a greater amount and diversity of housing. Just 27 percent of respondents believe Howard County has enough reasonably priced housing options, and 61% of respondents agree that many current residents cannot find housing that suitably aligns with their earnings. Moreover, 69 percent of respondents believe there is a need for more variety of housing types to meet different lifestyles and household configurations, and 54 percent believe there is a need for more integration of different housing types within the same communities. This numerical trend was supported by many of the comments that were left throughout the survey, in which respondents noted that affordable options are not spread out equally throughout the County, creating contrasting pockets of poverty and wealth.

Public Discussion Meetings

A series of online public meetings were held to share information and updates about the work to-date, and to gain qualitative feedback regarding individual housing experiences and future housing wants/needs. Approximately 68 people participated in one or several of these meetings. The meetings were held on the below dates/times, and the presentation and meeting summary are posted online:

- Meeting #1 - Tuesday, August 25, 2020 | 11:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.
- Meeting #2 – Wednesday, August 26, 2020 | 6 – 8 p.m.
- Meeting #3 – Thursday, September 10, 2020 | 4 – 6 p.m.

COMMENTS AND THEMES FROM PUBLIC OUTREACH – PHASE 1

Input collected from the first public survey and set of public meetings in the Summer 2020 were used to refine project goals and inform the development of recommendations. Common themes from comments received throughout the survey and online public engagement process include:

Affordable Housing

- What some may consider to be “affordable housing” in the County is still not affordable for many people in need. The parameters for affordable housing in the County need to be reexamined.
- More affordable housing needs to be built across the County and be built to the same standards as market-rate housing.
- Those who need help finding affordable housing are uncertain how to receive assistance.

Housing Diversity

- Howard County could benefit from housing and resources that are specifically designed for seniors, people with disabilities, non-traditional and multi-generational families, and individuals living with chronic mental illness.
- The County could support greater socioeconomic and racial diversity across the County. Affordable housing units are generally concentrated in a handful of areas, and the lack of integrated affordable housing units across the County inhibits diversity.

Development and Zoning

- Restrictive zoning ordinances can limit the development of new housing, particularly in the case of multifamily housing. Likewise, there are opportunities for providing more housing through increased density, which zoning changes can help facilitate.
- As the County continues to grow, it should encourage the redevelopment of unused or underused properties.
- The County should consider allowing more mixed-use development with a diversity of housing options.
- New growth should involve the creation of supporting infrastructure, such as transportation and utility improvements and increased school capacity, and it should include strategies for natural space preservation. Developers should be accountable for the impacts that developments have on existing communities.

Housing Programs and Assistance

- The value of vouchers is decreasing while rent is increasing, making it difficult for lower-income households to make ends meet or to find housing at all.
- Low- and moderate-income residents require increased assistance.
- The County needs more revenue to provide additional financing, subsidize rent, and to provide aid for people facing eviction.
- The housing program process is cumbersome and needs reassessment of the parameters that allow people to receive assistance, such as considerations of gross income rather than net income, debt burdens, and continued care of children who may no longer qualify as part of the family once they turn 18.
- Stronger incentives can increase the supply of affordable housing and for owners to accept the voucher program.
- The County should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of its existing housing programs.
- Consider building professional group coalitions to develop alternate funding strategies.

Miscellaneous

- The County should consider policies that encourage maintenance and upkeep of older units, particularly in the case of individually owned homes, townhomes, and condominiums that are rented to tenants as part of the “shadow rental market.”
- Older communities throughout the County need continual investment. There is a need for programs to incentivize upgrading older housing, not just programs for people who need housing.
- It is important for Howard County to address crime rates. Elevated levels of crime in certain areas can lead to negative perception that detracts from home values.
- The Howard County School Board has an outsized influence over housing policy. Building moratoriums have made housing supply much lower than demand, inflating housing prices.
- The Housing Opportunities Master Plan should address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in lower available income and increased eviction threats for many tenants.
- The County should continue to invest in high-quality transportation services such as bike routes and pedestrian infrastructure. Residents rely on these amenities, which are crucial for ensuring mobility, at all stages of life.

PUBLIC OUTREACH – PHASE 2

A second phase of public outreach occurred in November 2020 to collect feedback on the draft recommendations proposed for the Housing Opportunities Master Plan.

Public Survey #2

The purpose of the Housing Opportunities Master Plan Public Survey #2 was to gather feedback on each of the 74 draft recommendations. Public Survey #2 was available between November 6-30, 2020, and it was promoted using the same methods as Public Survey #1. However, Public Survey #2 received a much lower response rate, with just 220 complete responses. Moreover, these responses were not entirely reflective of the community as a whole; for example, 90 percent of respondents to Public Survey #2 were homeowners, compared with 72 percent of respondents to Public Survey #1 and 74 percent of all County residents who responded. One reason for these differences may be that the second public survey was more detailed and more technical than the first public survey and that, given the number of recommendations, it required more time to complete. Another reason may be that people who participated in the original survey felt the recommendations adequately addressed their issues and goals and were therefore less concerned with completing a lengthy second survey.

Feedback received from the online survey included:

- Nearly 30 percent of respondents did not express support for any of the 74 recommendations. This feedback suggests that some community members believe the County should not address housing opportunities, or that it should prioritize other issues before housing.
- Of those respondents who indicated support for at least one recommendation, the most popular recommendations were those that would have direct positive impacts to people already living in Howard County, such as the creation of tools for existing homeowners in the County.
- On the other hand, the least popular recommendations included those that involved changes to zoning regulations, the creation of more diverse housing options, and the establishment of Adequate Public Facilities Ordinances (APFO) exemptions.
- This input suggests many of the survey respondents were skeptical as to whether more housing, and specifically more affordable housing, is necessary in the County. However, the analysis in the Housing Opportunities Master Plan points to significant unmet needs in the community, a finding with which the Task Force agreed throughout the planning process. Similar sentiments were observed from many of the responses to Public Survey #1, which had participation from a larger and more diverse sample of the population.

Public Open House Meetings

Two online public meetings were held to provide follow-up information and updates about the Housing Opportunities Master Plan Task Force's work to date, and to gain qualitative feedback regarding the proposed recommendations. More than 100 people participated in one or both of these meetings. The meetings were held on the following dates/times, and the presentation and meeting summary are posted online:

- Meeting #1 - Tuesday, November 10, 2020 | 12 – 1 p.m.
- Meeting #2 – Thursday, November 18, 2020 | 7 – 8 p.m.

Feedback received from the online survey and open house meetings had some similarities and differences. Primary themes of the feedback heard during the meetings include:

- Concerns regarding how an increase in housing density and affordable housing may affect established neighborhoods, infrastructure, school enrollment, and school assistance programs.
- Questions about funding mechanisms and tax implications.
- Desire for better accommodations and programs for seniors and people with disabilities.
- Support for programs that promote equity and engagement with diverse communities in the planning process.



POLICY/PROGRAM EVALUATION INTERVIEWS

The consultant team was tasked with evaluating existing County policies and programs to assess whether these interventions are effective in addressing critical housing needs and whether there are any gaps that need to be addressed. Outreach included 29 individual/group interviews and three virtual roundtable discussions with targeted stakeholders, reaching approximately 50 individual practitioners/stakeholders. In addition to County staff and organizations that partner with the County to provide key services, participants included members of the market-rate and affordable housing development community, the Age-Friendly Initiative Housing Workgroup, African American Roundtable, representatives of groups serving individuals and families with disabilities, and the immigrant community, among others. Results from this outreach are summarized in the Overview of Policy Research and Analysis section of the report.

SUMMARY

The public has been involved and their feedback incorporated throughout the development of the Howard County Housing Opportunities Master Plan. Members of the public were able to participate in two online public surveys, five online public meetings, and multiple Task Force meetings. Additionally, advocacy groups and organizations representing environmental justice groups were invited to participate in two online meetings. Between these efforts, thousands of people participated and shared their feedback with the planning team. This public engagement led to an inclusive set of goals and recommendations which address a wide array of housing-related issues in Howard County.