HEALTHY & EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT

TRENDS AND POSSIBILITIES IN THE SUBURBS

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The Resilient Communities Project (RCP) is an award-winning, cross-disciplinary program at the University of Minnesota that supports one-year partnerships between the University and communities in Minnesota to advance local sustainability and resilience. Their mission is to connect communities with the students and faculty at a world-class teaching and research institution to build local capacity around sustainability and resilience issues, train students to be future sustainability practitioners, and produce case studies, best practices, and tools that can inform sustainability practice throughout the state. Visit rcp.umn.edu for more information.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What prevents Minnesota communities from building healthier, more equitable developments? In this report, we share the thoughts of community members, elected officials, city staff, and developers in first-ring suburbs of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul on problems and opportunities around affordable housing and active transportation. Their experiences offer insights into the challenges and barriers that first-ring suburbs face, including:

- community opposition to active transportation infrastructure and new developments, including market rate and affordable housing;
- lack of tools for preserving unsubsidized affordable housing and building mixed-income housing;
- thinking only in terms of affordable housing, not affordable living;
- limited funding for affordable housing;
- meeting the needs and desires of residents who are currently car-dependent while working towards becoming more walkable and bikeable; and
- retrofitting streets with sidewalks—and deciding who will pay for and maintain them.

Although many of these problems may seem intractable, there are ways to move forward. In this report, cities, developers, and other stakeholders will find suggestions for overcoming obstacles to healthier, more equitable development in the suburbs, including the following:

**Community Engagement**

- Build authentic, long-term relationships with community members rather than transactional relationships.
- Engage the community early in the development process rather than after all decisions have been made.
- Create and fund ongoing, staffed community partnerships that help to create a cohesive community vision and make it easier for developers to engage productively in the community.

**Active Living**

- Use demonstrations and temporary installations to help community members understand how biking and walking infrastructure will work, and to gather a broader array of perspectives beyond just those of adjacent property owners.
- Make sidewalks part of the city budget and maintain at least a network of sidewalks that provide connectivity to key destinations.
- Work toward equity in pedestrian and bike infrastructure by creating holistic plans for bike/walk networks throughout your community, rather than only building such infrastructure when new development occurs.
Equity and Affordable Housing

- Anticipate the conversion of informal affordable housing to market-rate housing, especially in areas well-served by transit, and take proactive steps to protect and support vulnerable residents.
- Work to connect low-income or unemployed residents to jobs within the city, and support education or training needed to help residents compete for jobs, rather than fighting new affordable housing.
- Humanize affordable housing residents and correct misperceptions to reduce fear of the unknown among neighbors.
- Break down silos to focus on affordable living, not just affordable housing.

INTRODUCTION

The factors that make our communities healthy and equitable are hardly a mystery. We already know that how you site, design and operate a residential or commercial development shapes how often people walk, bike, take transit, or drive, and whether that transportation experience is comfortable or harrowing. Developers' choices and local regulations help determine whether people have easy access to healthy foods, jobs, and affordable housing, as well as community facilities like parks, trails, and schools.

Research, guidebooks, checklists, and toolkits on the subject of building healthy, equitable developments are plentiful. The International City/County Management Association and the Smart Growth Network have published books with hundreds of recommended policies for building smarter, such as “encourage developers to reduce off-street parking” and “create active and secure open spaces.” The Urban Land Institute recently published a Building Healthy Places Toolkit with 21 recommendations, such as “design visible, enticing stairs to encourage everyday use” and “support onsite gardening and farming.”

With all of these tools available, what prevents Minnesota communities from building healthier, more equitable developments?

To investigate this question, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota’s Center for Prevention partnered with the Resilient Communities Project, housed within the University of Minnesota’s Center for Urban and Regional Affairs. A multidisciplinary team of researchers studied development in four suburban Twin Cities communities and interviewed community members, elected officials, city staff, and developers to identify barriers to building better, and examples of potential Minnesota-specific solutions.

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1 [https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/getting-smart-growth-100-policies-implementation](https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/getting-smart-growth-100-policies-implementation)
This report represents the first phase of this study. First, we will explain how we decided the scope of the study, provide definitions for some key terms, and summarize our findings. Next, we will explore in more detail barriers and solutions identified through our interviews, quoting directly from our interviewees and providing case studies that bring the issues to life. Each section contains takeaways to help you quickly identify steps your community can take to overcome barriers to healthy and equitable development. Finally, we will ask you to reflect on what we have presented, and provide feedback on what topics to examine more deeply during the next phase of the study. We welcome your thoughts and reactions! Please send comments via email to Center.Communications@bluecrossmn.com.

WHO WE ARE

The project team was composed of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Center for Prevention staff members, and a staff member, faculty member, and graduate student from the University of Minnesota.

Maria Wardoku is a graduate student focusing on active living in the Master in Urban and Regional Planning program at the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs. She is the research assistant for the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Center for Prevention’s Healthy and Equitable Development project. Maria serves as board vice-president of the Minneapolis Bicycle Coalition and works in transportation planning.

Peter Hendee Brown, AICP, AIA, Ph.D., brings a multi-disciplinary approach to his professional work in city building and to his academic career, combining experience in architecture, planning, city government administration, and real estate development. Peter is an independent development consultant to private, public, and nonprofit clients. He teaches private-sector real estate development at the University of Minnesota and is also an author, most recently of the book How Developers Think (2015).

Mike Greco, AICP, is director of the Resilient Communities Project at the University of Minnesota’s Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA). He holds master’s degrees in urban and regional planning from the Humphrey School of Public Affairs and in Communication Studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Sam Rockwell holds a J.D. from Vermont Law School, where he focused on land use and environmental law. He works on transportation and land use issues in Minnesota as the Community Development and Innovation Director at the University of Minnesota Foundation Real Estate Advisors, a commissioner on the City of Minneapolis Planning Commission, and at the time of this report, as the health improvement project manager for physical activity at the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross.
WHAT WE MEAN BY “HEALTHY AND EQUITABLE”

Healthy
In the context of residential development, healthy can encompass a range of issues, from mental health and environmentally friendly building products to personal safety and air quality. For the purposes of this study, we defined healthy as active living. We operationalized healthy as the elements of a development that encourage or deter physical activity and access to public transportation and pedestrian/bicycle infrastructure. We limited our definition of healthy to active living to make the most of limited resources, capitalize on the expertise of research team members, and provide a meaningful contribution to the conversation around a contentious issue.

“I think if [our developments] were just healthy and equitable, that’s a missed opportunity. If they’re not sustainable, that makes it a lot more difficult for generations to be healthy and equitable.”

—Chris Velasco, founder and executive director, PLACE

Equitable
Equitable is a similarly broad term, and there is not a high degree of consensus around its exact definition. In operationalizing the meaning of equitable for the purposes of this study, we were guided by the principles of equitable development enumerated in the Equitable Development Scorecard, a tool developed with input from a broad range of Twin Cities community organizations. Those principles include equitable community engagement, transportation, housing, land use, and economic development. We also asked interviewees to tell us about their own definitions of equitable development, and incorporated those ideas into our thinking. We operationalized the term equitable development for the purposes of this study as that which provides affordable living options, is responsive to input from a representative range of community members, and supports multimodal transportation that provides access to key destinations.

WHAT IS EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT?

“Equitable development creates healthy vibrant communities of opportunity where low income people, people of color, new immigrants and people with disabilities participate in and benefit from systems decisions, and activities that shape their neighborhoods.”

—Metropolitan Council

“[An equitable development is] a project that provides a wide range of housing options [and] living wage jobs … for people that live in the community. A place where everybody is welcome.”

—Colleen Carey, president, The Cornerstone Group

3 http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/opi/pm/conf/docs/LSB5_Scorecard.pdf
HOW WE CHOSE OUR STUDY AREAS AND DEVELOPMENTS

We decided to study development in first-ring suburbs rather than outer-ring suburbs, exurbs, or the urban core for several reasons:

- they are understudied relative to the urban core
- they are a major site of demographic change, especially in terms of racial and economic diversity
- they have some of the “bones” of an active community, like urban-style street grids and potential for robust local bus service

While we chose to study first-ring suburbs, our findings are relevant to many types of communities.

We spoke with planners in nine first-ring suburbs of Minneapolis and St. Paul about residential development activities in their communities. Based on city and developer websites and news articles about recent and pending developments in these cities, we categorized developments based on health and equity measures. Four cities—New Hope, St. Louis Park, Hopkins, and Richfield—had a mix of developments within these categories. We studied these cities and developments in more depth because of the potential to learn the reasons behind different development outcomes within the same city and across jurisdictions.

Snapshot of our study areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Incorporation date</th>
<th>Pop.</th>
<th>Area in mi²</th>
<th>Pop./mi²</th>
<th>Median Household Income</th>
<th>Change in pct. White, 2000-2015</th>
<th>Change in pct. under 185% of poverty line, 2000-2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hopkins</td>
<td>1893</td>
<td>19,277</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4,702</td>
<td>$50,300</td>
<td>-25%</td>
<td>+20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hope</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>21,225</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>4,162</td>
<td>$50,200</td>
<td>-21%</td>
<td>+15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richfield</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td>36,557</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>5,222</td>
<td>$53,000</td>
<td>-17%</td>
<td>+13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis Park</td>
<td>1886</td>
<td>48,354</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>4,477</td>
<td>$66,400</td>
<td>-7%</td>
<td>+4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 Incorporation dates from City websites. Other data from Metropolitan Council Community Profiles, accessible at https://stats.metc.state.mn.us/profile/
HOW WE CHOSE OUR INTERVIEWEES

To learn who is influencing development processes, we started by interviewing the city planners tasked with handling development in Richfield, New Hope, Hopkins and St. Louis Park, asking for recommendations for interviewees, and then asking the next round of interviewees for recommendations, and so on. More than 60 potential interviewees were recommended through this “snowball” interview technique.

Importantly, only two people who appear to be non-white were identified through this snowball technique, revealing a lack of people of color who have influence over the development process in the communities we studied, despite the significant increase in the percentage of the population identifying as people of color in these communities during the last 15 years. This demographic imbalance undoubtedly shaped the findings of this research. We attempted to find interviewees of color through news articles and other information sources outside of the snowball process and had limited success in scheduling interviews. We recommend future researchers approach interviewee selection with greater intentionality to capture a broader array of perspectives. We have promoted perspectives from people of color in this report and in a forthcoming publication that will highlight reactions to the report from regional leaders of color.

This report is largely derived from recorded interviews with 33 elected officials, community members, city and county staff, and developers. Interviews were typically between one and two hours long.

DEFINITIONS

Bikeability: The degree to which using bicycles for transportation to key destinations is safe, comfortable, and convenient.

Fair share: The portion of the region’s need for housing for low- and moderate-income families that a municipality must plan for, as required by the Metropolitan Land Planning Act and determined by the Metropolitan Council’s Allocation of Affordable Housing Need methodology.5

Naturally occurring affordable housing: Housing stock that is affordable without governmental subsidy. There are no controls on the rent charged (or, in the case of homes for sale, the sales price) for these housing units.

Section 8: A federal voucher program available to very low income families, as well as people who are elderly or living with disabilities. Generally, the voucher covers the difference between the rent and what the family is able to pay. It is now officially known as the Housing Choice Voucher program, but our interviewees referred to it by the old name, Section 8.

Walkability: The degree to which walking to key destinations is safe, comfortable, and convenient.

5 For details on current methodology, see Appendix B of the Metropolitan Council’s Housing Policy Plan: https://metrocouncil.org/Housing/Planning/Housing-Policy-Plan.aspx
BACKGROUND

To set the stage for our findings, it is useful to discuss the broader context for our interviews and the larger dynamics that reoccurred throughout our conversations.

SUBURBS, OR URBAN HOMETOWNS?

“The more auto-oriented, predominantly white suburbs in our study are experiencing a time of transition as market pressures, demographics, and cultural attitudes shift. These suburbs are seeing greater levels of racial and economic diversity, as well as experiencing pressure to attract walkability-minded millennials and baby boomers—a sharp departure from years of rapid development during a time of white-flight from the urban core and a culture oriented toward the personal automobile. The tensions inherent in shifting to meet future demands while accommodating current needs and desires was the background to all of our conversations with interviewees.”

How do these tensions play out on the ground? Richfield provides a particularly telling example. When the city was deciding what slogan to put on the new Crosstown monuments welcoming travelers to Richfield, some residents advocated for Richfield’s official slogan, “The Urban Hometown,” while many others lobbied for “Minnesota’s Oldest Suburb” as the tagline. Sean Hayford Oleary, Richfield planning commissioner, felt the conflict was emblematic of the competing visions residents hold for the future. “I think that there is a constituency of people who believe the

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6 For more information on the suburbanization of poverty and demographic projections, visit: [https://metrocouncil.org/getattachment/59e72e05-559f-4541-9362-7b7bf27fdeb/.aspx](https://metrocouncil.org/getattachment/59e72e05-559f-4541-9362-7b7bf27fdeb/)
Healthy & Equitable Development: Trends and Possibilities in the Suburbs

peak of Richfield was the 1950s, when it was filled to the brim with young families and new single family homes and beautiful lawns,” said Hayford Oleary. “And then there is a constituency of people who see Richfield as a very well-positioned area, with higher density, and more regional destinations, and better transit service than much of south Minneapolis, that truly has the potential to be an urban village.” Although “The Urban Hometown” slogan ultimately prevailed, the larger conflict over vision is hardly resolved, both in Richfield and other first-ring suburbs.

Key to the question of improving walkability and bikeability in the suburbs is the relative lack of places to bike and walk to. It’s something of a chicken-and-egg dilemma: How do suburbs create the will to invest in pedestrian and bike infrastructure when residents are convinced that no one will use that infrastructure because there are limited destinations to walk to? And how do suburbs create places to walk to without first providing the infrastructure to get there?

This dilemma, and the tensions between meeting current and future needs, can complicate the development process. Many proposed higher density and mixed-use developments are targets of community opposition because of their potential impact on traffic and parking. Density and land use patterns in the suburbs largely do not yet support the neighborhood business nodes and more frequent public transit that would increase walkability, so residents expect that new development will generate more traffic. Residents frequently oppose higher density and mixed-use development because of fears of increased traffic—ironically slowing the process of increasing density and changing land-use patterns that might ultimately ease traffic issues by allowing for better walkability and transit service.

“"The city is not connected. I would find it hard to prioritize [advocating for sidewalks] because even if there were sidewalks...we don’t have cultural spaces, we don’t have meeting places. Where would people be going?"

—Nelima Sitati Munene, Brooklyn Park community leader

"If it’s a mile from a residential space to other activities—whether a grocery store or a barber or whatever—most people aren’t going to walk that.... Sidewalks are great, they’re important, they’re a piece of the puzzle, but I think the conversation needs to shift more to thinking about location and proximity between those uses."

—Ryan Kelley, former planner, City of St. Louis Park

Without sufficient concentrations of destinations within walking or biking range, and without the density to support more widespread transit service, even supporters of bike-lane and sidewalk installations struggle to make the case for these investments. Nelima Sitati Munene, who lives in the suburb of Brooklyn Park, noted that for active transportation infrastructure to be a high priority in her advocacy work, she would need to see more transit connections to jobs and community spaces. She would support a sidewalk linking a neighborhood to a bus stop or facility, but wouldn’t put energy into
building a sidewalk for its own sake, given that many low-income people in her community are too tired from commuting long distances to multiple jobs to spend their remaining free time walking for recreation.

**WHO IS AT THE TABLE MATTERS**

“The perception was more apartments meant more low income, and [the public] wanted more homeowners...I was a renter in Hopkins for years, and now I’m a homeowner. You can’t discount the people who live in rentals because you never know where they’re going to be.”

—Jason Gadd, Hopkins city council member

The small cities we studied face both a challenge and an opportunity because of their size. One staff person or council member can have an enormous impact in a way that would not be possible in a core city. On the flip side, the departure of a staff person or council member can have an outsized effect on development in the city. “If one person is making a difference in a small city and that person leaves, and they weren’t in a position of authority—meaning the policies themselves hadn’t changed—or if they were in authority but didn’t have time to implement new policies, that can mean starting from scratch again,” said Karen Nikolai, healthy community planning manager at Hennepin County.

This dynamic, combined with the high degree of negotiation and informal input that go into planning new developments, means the perspectives that staff and council members bring to decision making are especially critical. **Lack of experience, even more than conscious opposition, can mean that decision makers neglect issues around affordable living and active transportation.** In Richfield, the presence of one planning commissioner who regularly uses transit has resulted in attention to transit users’ needs that would not have otherwise taken place. In Hopkins, two city council members were renters in the city for years before they became homeowners, and have used their experience to fight the notion that more apartments can only mean more low-income and transient people in the city. Diversity in decision-maker perspectives can shift priorities and outcomes.

**Aside from these notable exceptions, the make-up of city leadership is largely lagging behind cultural shifts and demographic changes.** Councils generally tend to be made up of mostly white residents with children who live in single-family homes. St. Louis Park resident and Health in the Park steering committee member Sara Maaske noted that “The largest population [in St. Louis Park] is our single population... Right now, all of our council members have families... With as much focus as the city tends to put on things for children, that’s one of our smaller populations.” Cities and individual leaders are working to correct these imbalances through initiatives such as trainings around racism and implicit bias, and by keeping in mind larger goals such as providing housing for people throughout their lifecycles, and attracting baby boomers and millennials who appreciate multiple transportation options.

“We are a changing community. We don’t look like it in our leadership yet, and we need to. We’re trying to be more thoughtful, methodical and intentional about addressing it.”

—Anne Mavity, St. Louis Park city council member
Community engagement is key to shaping the equity and active living impacts of a development. Photo by ITU Pictures, 2012. Used under a Creative Commons BY-NC 2.0 license.

Is community engagement a dreaded requirement of the development process or an opportunity to design a development to better meet local needs? In practice it’s usually the former, but at its best it’s the latter, according to most interviewees. Community engagement arose time and time again as key in shaping the equity and active living impacts of development.

“This is one of the problems with the way we grow communities. It’s that we’re looking for scale of product and not scale of good process. Process be damned as long as we’re putting up this many housing units and this many square feet of office space and this many Kentucky Fried Chickens and this many miles of roads.”

—Chris Velasco, founder and executive director, PLACE

“Some cities have a greater ease with engaging the community.... Even though it can be messy and unpredictable, they offer important learning opportunities – both about what the community values, and ways to improve on how to engage them. By avoiding community engagement, cities won’t always see what’s coming.”

—Gretchen Nicholls, program officer, Twin Cities LISC
This chapter considers the following community engagement-related themes and ideas for how to move forward:

- **Limited community engagement means primarily white and homeowner voices get heard**
  → Youth-oriented, interactive activities may be more successful in attracting the participation of families of color.

- **Who shows up shapes city and developer priorities**
  → City staff and developers should dedicate resources to reaching community members who don’t respond to written notices to join meetings at city hall, potentially resulting in a better development outcome for all.

- **Community engagement often means rehashing old battles instead of moving forward**
  → City staff and elected officials should build authentic, long-term relationships rather than transactional relationships.
  → City staff and developers should respond to ideas and concerns, and involve community members in decision making.

- **When the community is engaged too late, the only perceived course of action is opposition**
  → City staff and developers should engage community members early in the development process, rather than after decisions have been made.

- **Lack of resources and pathways for community engagement**
  → City staff and the philanthropic community should create and fund ongoing, staffed community partnerships that help to create a cohesive community vision and make it easier for developers to engage productively in the community.

**THEME: LIMITED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MEANS PRIMARILY WHITE AND HOMEOWNER VOICES GET HEARD**

“[People of color] don’t show up for development meetings because they don’t think it means them. They just don’t think they have a say. White people know they have a say in their government.”

—Kathi Hemken, mayor of New Hope

Cities and developers are generally not succeeding in reaching younger people, renters, low-income residents, people of color, and immigrants in the community through traditional community engagement practices. Interviewees told us that it is common practice to notify property owners within a certain distance of a new development via U.S. mail about opportunities to provide feedback. Cities also commonly post meeting notices in English on their website and in a local newspaper.

When they do dedicate extra resources to engagement, cities and developers can feel frustrated when they do not receive a response from the community proportional to their increased outreach effort. “I’ve been on the city council eight years now, and ever since I’ve been on it, there’s been a continuing effort through the Human Rights Commission and community services to try to get more involvement and exchange between the Hispanic community and the city, and it just hasn’t happened,” said Richfield City Council Member Pat Elliott.
One pathway that can lead toward broader community engagement is to orient outreach processes toward youth. In New Hope, Mayor Hemken noted that the City had more success engaging people of color through meetings related to parks. The parks are some of the most diverse public spaces in New Hope, and attract immigrant children who bring their parents. “We invite the public in to help us pick out the equipment for the parks,” said Mayor Hemken. “There’s where we get them. Because the kids will see the notice…and the kid wants to go.”

Developers and cities might consider hosting meetings in parks, schools, community centers, or other places where families feel comfortable.

“We want [our developments] to be integrated communities... We strive for that through our community process by making sure we’re not just reaching those who always come to community meetings, but also reaching folks who may think community meetings are not for them. We encourage them to have a voice in the project and help shape their community.... By talking to them, we not only make it feel like their space, but we can understand their design needs so that it can be their space.”

—Alice Hiniker, PLACE team member

**THEME: WHO SHOWS UP SHAPES CITY AND DEVELOPER PRIORITIES**

“You end up with a sort of 'silent majority' issue where people who like the project say 'Oh, great — it's happening,' and don’t show up. The people who do show up are those who are upset and don’t want it to happen.”

—Sean Hayford Oleary, Richfield planning commissioner

City and developer priorities often reflect the priorities of the white homeowners who typically respond to meeting notices. Priorities are skewed this way because a limited amount of community engagement often limits input to those who are unhappy with the new development—and they are typically adjacent homeowners, who are often white. The longstanding tendency to give greater weight to the opinions of property owners, who are perceived to have greater interest and investment in the community, combined with limited community engagement, can serve to amplify the voices of the homeowners who show up to meetings. Cities often seek to protect property owners, typically owners of single-family homes, from the feared impacts of increased density. At open houses and public
hearings, cities and developers frequently find themselves responding to the same concerns: traffic worries, concerns about increased crime and decreased property values, and fears that tall buildings will result in shade issues and reduced privacy for homeowners.

Although greater efforts to engage community members don’t always result in more diverse attendance at meetings, when cities and developers are able to successfully reach beyond concerned homeowners, they receive much different feedback. For example, PLACE, a nonprofit developer that is planning a mixed-use, mixed-income development in St. Louis Park, recently held a public meeting at Perspectives, a local human services agency for women suffering from addictions, mental illness, and poverty. The attendees, a mix of the general public and Perspectives clients, brought up some of the typical concerns around traffic, but also raised other issues:

- How will this development be family friendly?
- When do we start applying for a unit?
- Could you include a health clinic on site?
- Could you heat the LRT platform within the site?
- What kind of supportive services will you have?

“If you get a lot of people that are coming out [to testify about a large development], that’s usually not a positive sign, because it means that between the three parties [city, community, developer], somebody’s not aligned.... *Usually the people that are concerned are those that have a house nearby. They’re worried about traffic, they’re worried about potential crime, they’re worried about larger, ugly buildings.*”

— Dale Willis, CEO, Centra Homes

“Before the meeting began, [the Perspectives clients] spoke with us about what community elements are the most important to them,” reported PLACE staff. “We learned that while affordability is certainly a huge factor, having a sense of a connected and trusting community is just as important.” This type of feedback is very rarely a part of the development process, but results in a development that better serves a broader range of community members.

**THEME: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OFTEN MEANS REHASHING OLD BATTLES INSTEAD OF MOVING FORWARD**

Interviewees reported that public meetings to discuss a particular development served as a stage to air broader concerns. St. Louis Park City Council Member Anne Mavity noted that in public meetings around a development, attendees would frequently be having two conversations simultaneously: one about the development at hand, and one about the future of the city as a whole. A new apartment building can bring up fears of urbanization and race/class demographic change that result in public opposition to the development as a proxy for broader concerns about the direction of the city, slowing the development process and increasing risk and costs for the developer.
This type of conflict happens most frequently when the vision of the city and developer and the vision of the white homeowners who show up to meetings are misaligned. Reoccurring conflicts revolve around questions of higher density, pedestrian and bike infrastructure, and subsidized affordable housing, with cities and developers in our study generally being in favor and some community members being opposed. These cities and developers are usually seeking to respond to market forces that favor denser development and active transportation, as well as respond to the need for affordable housing within their communities. Conversely, many white homeowners who show up to meetings are concerned with preserving the suburban character of their neighborhoods.

“One of the things that helps us accomplish some of those [active transportation and affordable/market rate housing goals], and maybe more quickly than others, is our ability to have a shared vision... That shared vision is driven forward because every year we sit down as a council and staff department heads and do a visioning process and strategic planning process.... So that when we have development opportunities...instead of each time trying to figure out that vision, we’re just working on meeting those benchmarks.”

—Jason Gadd, Hopkins City Council member

The City of Hopkins has largely avoided the dynamic of rehashing old battles and has been able to undertake innovative projects by building a broadly supported community vision. The city council and senior staff conduct a visioning process every year, allowing them to tweak the City’s vision continually and create ownership and a clear sense of direction among the city council and staff. These visioning sessions create space for imagination, as staff and city council are challenged to think of responses to hypothetical scenarios. For example, one year they were asked what they would do if they were granted $1 million. The annual strategy sessions help Hopkins get a head start on the comprehensive planning process, when they increase staff and city council attention to gathering community input.

“What I tell neighbors [at development meetings] is...understand that we’re having two conversations. One is, what is the development vision for our community in general—and we’re not all going to be in lock step agreement on that—and the next one is specific to this site and this particular proposal...But what happens every time a development proposal comes forward is that we’re having this large development vision conversation and sort of re-living it each time, which is a little bit challenging.”

—Anne Mavity, St. Louis Park City Council member

THEME: WHEN THE COMMUNITY IS ENGAGED TOO LATE, THE ONLY PERCEIVED OPTION IS OPPOSITION

A key component of community engagement is knowing when to include the community. Community members need to be involved when they still have the ability to influence a development. Otherwise, their only perceived course of action may be to oppose the development completely, resulting in adversarial meetings. By contrast, engaging residents in envisioning the future of a site before and
during the design phase energizes the community and helps to bring a greater variety of perspectives to the process. Staunch opponents may remain firmly entrenched in their positions, but with deeper, earlier engagement, other community members will have the opportunity to contribute ideas for improvement.

 Responding to and incorporating community comments in these early meetings is essential for building trust with, and ultimately support from, the community. When development plans don’t change at all after a public meeting, community members feel that their time and energy was wasted. This is especially true for racially and economically marginalized community members who may already feel overlooked in public processes. However, not every comment must be implemented in order to build trust with the community: when community members’ requests are not feasible, cities and developers can build trust by explaining their reasoning.

One strategy for pursuing community engagement early in the development process, and even before any development has been proposed, is to employ the Twin Cities Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) Corridor Development Initiative. Because development is a complicated process to understand, LISC has created a series of interactive workshops to help community members understand the process and the tradeoffs developers face in making a development financially viable. In the first workshop, attendees learn about local issues and respond to questions that help them articulate their ideas and concerns for the community. At the next workshop, the attendees participate in an interactive activity using blocks to build mock developments. LISC conducts a basic financial analysis in real time to help participants to understand how financially feasible their ideas are.

“I’ve attended city conferences where I’ve heard some of the issues other cities have with development. They’ll have someone coming up with the site plan for their new development at council, and the council chamber is full of people. We never see anybody [in our hearings because]...we try to do a lot of that communication ahead of time so that we don’t get that mad rush at the end.”

―Jason Gadd, Hopkins City Council member
At the third workshop, participants hear from a panel of developers. At the final session, participants agree upon recommendations for development.

**Corridor Development Initiative Process:**

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<tr>
<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<tr>
<td>6 Months</td>
<td>Establish Advisory Group, Define project area, work plan, and outreach strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community Workshop I: Gather Information, Community Workshop II: Block Exercise, Community Workshop III: Developer Panel, Community Workshop IV: Create Final Recommendations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Present Recommendations to Elected Officials</td>
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Image courtesy of Twin Cities LISC / Corridor Development Initiative.

This series of workshops allows participants to engage in a more relaxed way so that the issues don’t feel so urgent. “A lot of times development comes to a community at the 11th hour and there’s often a lot of frustration that there’s nothing you can do, so we’ll just block it. It’s not a negotiated step: decisions have been made so now it’s either thumbs up or thumbs down. Communities have become very good at obstructing,” said Gretchen Nicholls, Program Officer at Twin Cities LISC. “This [CDI] process has been very powerful in making people understand why things are happening and what it will take to get to the things that people want to do.”

“The problem in Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center is that the community engagement process is very transactional.... The city has chosen to engage people when they want to and how they want to, and also choose what they would like to put forward for the community engagement process. To me that is not community engagement, that’s more like community dictation to make us feel better about ourselves.... Community really doesn’t have any impact on the outcome of the decision. Real community engagement is bringing in community from the beginning, including them all the way, and involving them in the decision making process—and that still does not happen.”

—Nelima Sitati Munene, Brooklyn Park community leader
Interviewees frequently cited limited city staff capacity as a reason for lower levels of community engagement. In some suburbs, community engagement is not seen as a central staff role. Deep community engagement that reaches beyond those who typically show up requires significant time and effort, and in the suburbs, is most often done by mission-driven developers who seek to make a social impact.

Even when city or developer staff time is devoted to community engagement, it can be difficult to define and reach the community to be engaged. Neighborhood and community groups are more scarce in suburban communities than urban, making it difficult for developers to know where to start with community engagement. With the exception of St. Louis Park, many Twin Cities suburbs do not have neighborhood organizations. Advocacy groups tend to be smaller or non-existent.

As we explore in more detail in the case study below, community partnerships like Hopkins’ Blake Road Corridor Collaborative have proven helpful in deeply engaging community and in providing a link between developers and community members. This cross-sector partnership between stakeholders in the Blake Road area has helped to create a cohesive vision for development among community members and also has served as a community point of contact for a new affordable housing development in the neighborhood, allowing the developer and community to regularly exchange information.

In addition to community partnership organizations like the Blake Road Corridor Collaborative, another option cities have to support on-going community engagement in residential development is to create a housing advisory committee. Housing advisory committees can help keep the conversation around development alive and provide a place for longer-term discussions about the future of the community.

“The hard part with suburbs is there's often limited staff capacity—they have a lot on their plates. So carving out time to do a deep dive into engagement is tricky. A lot of the constraints are around resources.”

—Gretchen Nicholls, program manager, Twin Cities LISC

“I think there are two ways community engagement is good for developers. One, I think our projects are better when the community has helped to shape them, and secondly I think it makes it less risky for us in that it's not so scary to go through a public approval process because you know you have the public on your side. It's a hard thing to do, it takes a lot of energy, [but] having a community understand your thought process is better.”

—Colleen Carey, The Cornerstone Group
**CASE STUDY: BUILDING AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

**THE BASICS**

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<tr>
<th>The Blake Road Corridor Collaborative (BRCC) is a cross-sector partnership of public agencies, social service organizations, businesses, and a faith community that builds relationships and creates connections among residents and community partners to address the challenges and opportunities facing the Blake Road neighborhood in Hopkins.</th>
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**THE CONTEXT**

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<th>In the mid-2000s, the area around the Blake Road corridor was worrisome for the city. Lower income families were moving to the area because the housing stock was aging and affordable, but there were few activities available for kids in the area, and Blake Road was auto-oriented and dangerous.</th>
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<td>“Cottageville Park, which was previously an area that attracted crime and negative activity, became the rallying point for police, city, and residents to work together around a number of community improvements. Today the area has become transformed,” said Gretchen Nicholls, Program Officer at Twin Cities LISC.</td>
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**THE RESPONSE**

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<th>In 2005, the police chief brought together stakeholders, including residents, property owners, nonprofit leaders, business owners, faith community members, school officials, and local government officials. They conducted surveys and gathered data to better understand the area, and then raised money to support police patrols, youth programming, and a community assessment conducted by the Wilder Foundation. In 2009, Twin Cities LISC came in as a key investor to build organizing capacity. The City of Hopkins also provided funding early on.</th>
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**THE RESULT**

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<th>The City and community’s investment of time, effort, and money into the Blake Road Corridor Collaborative has paid dividends for the development processes in the area and for the city as a whole.</th>
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<td>The BRCC helped to attract support from Twin Cities LISC to Hopkins, the only suburban community that LISC is focused on intensively. “Hopkins was selected because, at the point when LISC was developing our Developing Sustainable Communities initiative, the city was creating this Blake Road Corridor Collaborative,” said Nicholls. “They had created a table of key stakeholders that could work together, and the Blake Road community was essentially a low-income community in the suburban context. It just ended up being a really good fit for our ability to explore the suburban context for the supports we provide…. We brought a lot of grants and resources to help staff the BRCC and some project-specific grants, essentially to provide the capacity for them to organize and work with the community.”</td>
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The creation of the BRCC is just one example of the collaborative spirit in Hopkins. “Creating partnerships is really a philosophy of Hopkins. The partnerships become stronger when a development or opportunity comes up,” said Jason Gadd, Hopkins City Council member.

When Project for Pride in Living (PPL) proposed an affordable housing development by Cottageville Park, PPL staff communicated with the coordinator of the Collaborative, providing updates and responding to community concerns. PPL staff have also attended the BRCC’s meetings.

When several sites in the neighborhood came onto the radar as possible development sites, the BRCC and the City of Hopkins partnered with LISC to conduct deep community education and visioning work. Using LISC’s Corridor Development Initiative process, the partnership held a series of four conversations about development in the community, including a developer panel, community visioning session, and interactive block exercise where participants could try out their ideas and learn how feasible they were from a financial standpoint. That process produced a community development guidelines document that now guides development in the neighborhood.

What elements are key to the BRCC’s success? “All the partners around the table are very eager and willing partners, which is a big necessity... I think it also really requires a dedicated staff person... It couldn’t happen just based on volunteer efforts, to continuously coordinate all of the activities and meetings that need to happen,” said Ann Beuch, BRCC coordinator. “It’s also using creativity and flexibility to respond to community interests. There might be a big push to talk about light rail, but if community members feel that there may be more pressing needs, you can’t really ask community members to set those aside to focus on your issue. If there was a similar group starting in another community, they’d have to have an openness to responding to whatever topics arise.”

Applying the BRCC’s model has proved to be a challenge from a funding perspective, however. “That small investment of a community organizer can go so far. Our philanthropic community hasn't fully grappled with how important that resource can be, especially if you get a really good organizer who can really mobilize partnerships and build a community base of active residents,” said Nicholls. “The work that Ann Beuch has been doing in Hopkins has been so phenomenal, and it has made such a dramatic transformation in that community. It hasn’t taken that much money...but it’s just immensely valuable. I wish we could help others see that as well... But it’s a little too amorphous, it’s not like counting housing units. It has qualitative and not quantitative aspects to it.”
TAKEAWAYS AND INTERVIEWEE SUGGESTIONS

- City staff and elected officials should build authentic, long-term relationships with community members rather than transactional relationships.
- City staff and developers should engage the community early in the development process rather than after all decisions have been made.
- City staff and developers should respond to ideas and concerns, and involve the community in decision making.
- City staff and the philanthropic community should create and fund ongoing, staffed community partnerships that help to create a cohesive community vision and make it easier for developers to engage productively in the community.
- City staff and developers should dedicate resources to reaching community members who don’t respond to written notices to join meetings at city hall, potentially resulting in a better development outcome for all.
- Youth-oriented, interactive activities may be more successful in attracting the participation of families of color.
The Twin Cities region is home to many older apartment buildings that provide unsubsidized low-cost housing, also known as naturally occurring affordable housing. Photo courtesy of Maria Wardoku.

“\textit{We have a couple of cities that we’ve brought [affordable housing] projects to, and they’ve said ‘come back to us in a couple years, we want to try and see if we can get a market rate project in this location’... We’ve had a couple just say no, and they are in areas where they have quite a bit of affordable today, but not a lot of quality affordable.}”

\textemdash Mike Waldo, CFO, Ron Clark Construction

Many of our interviewees struggled with an issue that is perplexing to people across the nation: so-called “naturally occurring” affordable housing, which is the term used for unsubsidized private housing that is lower cost because it is older and sometimes poorly maintained. Common across interviews was the notion that some suburbs already have enough affordable housing because, according to data provided by the Metropolitan Council, they have more than a typical community’s share of naturally occurring affordable housing.

Some interviewees reasoned that, to diversify the housing stock, cities should seek out other forms of development like luxury apartments before accepting subsidized affordable housing projects, whereas cities with low levels of affordable housing...
should meet their “fair share” by doing their part to build affordable housing to meet the region’s housing needs.

Others were interested in improving the conditions of the naturally occurring affordable housing, but struggled with how to improve conditions without raising rents and displacing current residents.

This chapter discusses the following naturally occurring affordable housing-related themes and ideas for how to move forward:

- **Focusing on “distributing” low-income people and people of color throughout the region, rather than doing more to support housing choices for them**
  - Reframe the conversation around affordable housing from “distributing” low-income people and people of color to focus on increasing social service provision in the suburbs and dedicating resources to supporting low-income residents in accessing jobs.

- **Lack of tools for preserving naturally occurring affordable housing**
  - Building strong, cohesive communities in advance of a property ownership change is key to ensuring a strong City and community response to the threat of resident displacement. Cities can support and lead efforts to connect the broader community with people living in naturally occurring affordable housing.
  - Cities can act as an advocate for residents, fund social services to respond to displacement, and mobilize community stakeholders to provide resources for residents.
  - New owners of multi-family housing can consider relaxing income and criminal background screening standards for existing residents.
  - Cities can adopt ordinances requiring developers to accept Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8) and allowing residents right of first refusal when their housing is up for sale.
  - Cities can provide financing for low-interest rehabilitation in exchange for affordable units, use community development block grants to underwrite low interest loans to finance preservation of naturally occurring affordable housing, and make tax increment financing (TIF) contingent on the inclusion of affordable units in the development.
  - Cities can support subsidized affordable housing projects within their cities to provide options for low-income residents when formerly affordable housing is upgraded.
  - The new, nation-leading Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH) Impact Fund provides a funding resource for preserving 10 to 20 percent of affordable apartment buildings in the Twin Cities.

“For us, redevelopment is very site specific. Since the majority of our rental housing is affordable, we look at bringing in housing types that we don’t necessarily have a lot of. The luxury market was a good fit for one site. We have a concentration of subsidized housing in proximity to [the new luxury Moline development]...so it’s a good way of mixing incomes in the neighborhood. But we also have sites that are a great fit for affordable housing. We have two projects under construction—one affordable and the other luxury—and hope to have both developments online at the same time.”

—Kersten Elverum, director of planning and economic development, City of Hopkins
Community members and city officials in some blue-collar suburbs felt that their city had more than its fair share of affordable housing due to high levels of naturally occurring affordable housing. Interviewees frequently referenced University of Minnesota professor Myron Orfield’s research about the ill effects of concentrations of poverty to support their case against increased affordable housing. In some cases, community members have been able to stop the development of new affordable housing projects.

In Richfield, for example, multiple interviewees felt that because of its relatively large amount of naturally occurring affordable housing, Richfield shouldn’t focus on building more affordable housing. Doing so, they said, would amount to taking the heat off the neighboring city of Edina and would contribute to concentrating low-income people in their community. A group of residents organized in opposition to Ron Clark’s proposed Pillsbury Commons affordable housing development, calling it “dumping Affordable Housing.”

“The suburbs don’t know how to deal with the issue of low-wealth, under-resourced communities of color.... They’re saying, ‘Oh my god, we have these poor people, we have this concentration of poverty, they’re overburdening our city, we have our fair share...’ Their solution is to say these people are the problem, so let’s distribute them.

... The problem is not the people moving into the community, it’s the disinvestment that happens to these communities once they move into the suburbs.”

—Nelima Sitati Munene, Brooklyn Park community leader

In Richfield, I started seeing what I would call “dumping Affordable Housing.” It happened in Brooklyn Center, Hopkins—and they’re running into problems out there. We have a lot of affordable with a small “a”... The low wage jobs are in Edina... [T]he need for affordable housing is in Edina. They have a low amount.”

—Joe Hoover, Richfield community member

In 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court decided a Fair Housing Act (FHA) case, Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs et al. v. Inclusive Communities Project, Inc., et al. The case was brought by the Inclusive Communities Project, Inc., which alleged that the way the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs distributed low-income housing tax credits perpetuated historic geographic racial segregation. The Court agreed, holding that disparate impact claims—which recognize statistical evidence of discrimination, even absent intent—were cognizable under the FHA. The case seems to imply that cities must do more to support housing choices for low-income residents of color.
“Servants Quarters for the 21st Century.” Joe Hoover, a leader of the group, expressed concerns about economic segregation caused by affordable housing being “dumped” on Richfield and advocated for mixed-income housing instead to promote neighborhood stability. While some residents feel that the concentration of poverty is increasing in Richfield, the area of concentrated poverty in Richfield actually shrunk between 2007-11 and 2011-15, according to American Community Survey data.\(^7\)

Other interviewees urged cities not to fixate on “distributing” low-income people and people of color, but instead to develop strategies for helping low-income people in their community access jobs and resources. Nelima Sitati Munene, a community leader in Brooklyn Park, believes that suburban cities are in a position to support low-income residents in moving out of poverty, and should devote their energies to that cause rather than fighting over whether everyone is doing their fair share to provide affordable housing.

**THEME: LACK OF TOOLS FOR PRESERVING NATURALLY OCCURRING AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

Interviewees reported that most of the multifamily housing in their suburbs was built around the 1950s and 1960s, and is in need of maintenance. Some cities espouse a desire to maintain and preserve this housing, but say they lack the tools and resources to do so. The actors who do have the resources are private developers, who see an opportunity to profit by upgrading the housing and charging higher rents. That solves the investment and maintenance problem, but creates a displacement problem that puts vulnerable low-income residents at risk.

A primary concern around naturally occurring affordable housing is its potential to be sold and upgraded at any time. Richfield City Council Member Pat Elliott has spoken to many residents living in informal affordable housing who have a fixed income, and are unable to pay $50 or $100 more for rent per month when their apartments turn over to new ownership. “When they talk about fixed income, it is fixed. There’s no flexibility,” said Elliott. From a health and equity perspective, preserving naturally occurring affordable housing near transit is of particular concern. For developers, access to good transit is an amenity, making apartment buildings near transit more attractive for the renovation and upgrading that results in higher rents.

At the time of our interviews, no city had found a way to preserve its naturally occurring affordable housing, but the playing field has since shifted. News broke in 2016 of a new regional pool of money intended to help buyers preserve affordable housing called the Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH) Impact Fund. The new fund is expected to launch in 2017 with an offering of $25 million in equity and will seek to enable the preservation of 10 to 20 percent of affordable apartment buildings.

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\(^7\) [http://pillsburycommons.76street.org/](http://pillsburycommons.76street.org/)


that are offered for sale each year in the seven-county Twin Cities area through the provision of low-interest loans and tax benefits to developers.

“There’s a reason apartments are cheaper: they are not well maintained. [If you think your suburb has enough naturally occurring affordable housing,] you’re just saying basically you don’t care about the conditions under which people are living... If no public investment went into it, it’s not affordable because it can turn at any moment.”

—Nelima Sitati Munene, Brooklyn Park community leader

“There’s a definite need for housing that people can afford...There was an apartment building that was purchased about a year ago....They raised the rents, they’re redoing the outsides of the building. Obviously, free enterprise is here and they have a right to make a purchase, but what’s happening is there are some folks who live there who ... can’t afford to live there anymore. So I don’t know what we do about that, or if we need to do anything about that.”

—St. Louis Park community leader
CASE STUDY: MANAGING THE AFFORDABLE UPGRADE TRANSITION AT MEADOWBROOK MANOR, ST. LOUIS PARK

THE BASICS

Meadowbrook Manor, built in 1953 by Ben and Helen Bigos, consists of 551 units of “naturally occurring” affordable housing. The apartments are mostly small one- and two-bedroom units. Many residents are low-income and approximately 40 percent are immigrants. Meadowbrook Manor is within the walkshed of the proposed Southwest Light Rail Transit Louisiana Station.

THE CONTEXT

Ben and Helen Bigos owned Meadowbrook Manor from 1953 to January 2016. During that time, Helen allowed residents some flexibility, sometimes allowing late payments without penalty.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Meadowbrook Manor was perceived as an unsafe, high-crime development. A new property manager came onboard, convinced the owner to dedicate two apartments as community space, and worked with the city, Park Nicollet Foundation, local schools, and other partners to develop the Meadowbrook Collaborative in 1993. The Collaborative opened a center onsite to connect residents to services, including tutoring for students. For years,
community members have volunteered there and built relationships with residents.

“We very much feel that [the residents of Meadowbrook Manor] are our people, our neighbors... The larger community very much supports retaining the affordability of that development... Our community values this. This is an asset to our community. This is not something we tolerate; this is something we want,” said Anne Mavity, St. Louis Park City Council member.

In January 2016, Helen sold the building to her son, Ted. The new owner decided to upgrade the apartments and raise rents.

**THE RESPONSE**

When news of the ownership change and possible resident displacement spread, community members and residents were concerned and demanded action.

The city responded. “We took a much more aggressive advocacy role with the private owner to try to keep those units affordable,” said Mavity. The City took a mitigation approach and brought together the police chief, elected officials, and others who cared about the residents at Meadowbrook and were in a position to do something. With the support of partners, the City used its own resources to translate information on housing resources and made sure flyers were hand delivered to get information out to the residents.

City officials met with the new owner to encourage him not to automatically evict residents based on income eligibility and criminal background. They pushed for him to delay any evictions of families with children until the end of the school year. The City attempted to balance the desire to keep the units affordable with the desire to improve the condition of the property. “We wanted good property management in there too... (I)t’s a balance between wanting the private owner to be responsible and frankly, spiff it up—it’s a tired looking property and it needs investment—without [the rents] going up,” said Mavity.

**THE RESULT**

The advocacy effort resulted in changed income screening requirements for current residents, accommodations for families with school-aged children, and an agreement to continue accepting Housing Choice Vouchers. The Meadowbrook Collaborative will keep its home onsite. Beyond the advocacy effort, the City took the additional step of providing $15,000 to the St. Louis Park Emergency Program (STEP) for emergency rental assistance.

Still, many families have been forced to leave, and the approximately 350 households that received new lease agreements are seeing rent increases of $100–$125 per month.
TAKEAWAYS AND INTERVIEWEE SUGGESTIONS

- Suburban cities and community organizations should anticipate the conversion of informal affordable housing to market rate housing, especially in areas well-served by transit, and take proactive steps to protect and support vulnerable residents.
  - Cities can support subsidized affordable housing projects within their cities to provide options for low-income residents when formerly affordable housing is upgraded.
  - Cities can focus on connecting low-income or unemployed residents to jobs within the city, and supporting any education or training needed to help residents compete for jobs.
  - Cities can adopt ordinances requiring developers to accept Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8) and allowing residents right of first refusal when their housing is up for sale.
  - Cities can provide financing for low-interest rehabilitation in exchange for affordable units and use community development block grants to underwrite low interest loans to finance preservation of naturally occurring affordable housing.
  - Cities can make tax increment financing (TIF) available only if affordable units are included in a development.

- As the Meadowbrook example shows, community building in advance of an ownership change is key to ensuring a strong city and community response to the threat of resident displacement.
  - Cities can support and lead efforts to connect the broader community with people living in naturally occurring affordable housing.

- Although cities may have little formal power in cases of private transactions like the sale of Meadowbrook Manor, cities can act as an advocate for residents, fund social services to respond to the crisis, and mobilize community stakeholders to provide resources for residents.
  - New owners can consider relaxing income and criminal background screening standards for existing residents.
  - Developers can apply for financing from the Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH) Impact Fund.
The Twin Cities suburbs we studied face dilemmas and debates around affordable housing that mirror those faced by communities nationwide. They struggle with how much is needed and how much they should provide relative to other communities. Some interviewees thought of subsidized affordable housing as a key component of advancing equity in suburban residential development, especially in light of the vulnerability of naturally occurring affordable housing to rent increases. Others felt that adding new subsidized affordable units in areas with naturally occurring affordable housing would result in concentrations of poverty that would be detrimental to their communities. Even when cities want subsidized affordable housing, developers encounter funding limitations that make it difficult for them to benefit from economies of scale. They also struggle to provide the mixed-income housing that cities and residents desire because of a lack of financing tools.

Others took the view that the focus on affordable housing missed the mark, asserting that the actual issue at hand was affordable living, of which affordable housing is only one piece. Siloed funding and

“I think equitable development is the ability to put a development in that a community needs, and then to be able to make it affordable to the people that live there or want to live there...It should be located in a specific area where access to educational and job opportunities don’t additionally burden budgets.”

—Elise Durbin, transit-oriented development program manager, Hennepin County
development processes are resulting in the production of affordable housing that—because of location and quality—passes on increased transportation, energy, and other expenses to other government agencies, the public, and residents of affordable housing.

This chapter discusses the following affordable housing-related themes and ideas for how to move forward:

- **Thinking in terms of affordable housing rather than affordable living**
  - Breaking down silos at the state level, as well as within individual development processes, can produce efficiencies that save government, community, and resident resources.

- **Lack of capital**
  - Cities can do their part to support the financial viability of affordable housing projects through providing tax-increment financing, supporting developer applications for low-income housing tax credits, taking care of environmental clean-up costs, and providing land at a discounted price.

- **Lack of financing tools for mixed-income housing**
  - Cities can adopt inclusionary housing policies that require a portion of units in new market-rate housing developments to be affordable. This is most likely to be successful if there is a robust housing market in the city. Cities can use the new mixed-income housing calculator tool available at [http://mncalculator.housingcounts.org/](http://mncalculator.housingcounts.org/) to understand the financial feasibility of mixed-income housing in their communities.
  - Governmental bodies and foundations can support efforts to develop new financing tools to encourage mixed-income housing.

- **Community opposition**
  - Much opposition to affordable housing stems from fear of the unknown. Humanizing people who live in affordable housing and correcting misperceptions is key to overcoming opposition.

**THEME: THINKING IN TERMS OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING, NOT AFFORDABLE LIVING**

“Affordable housing is a tool for affordable living, and that's it. We've mistaken, somewhere along the line, the tool for the outcome. The outcome is affordable living.”

—Chris Velasco, founder and executive director, PLACE

In the quest to provide more housing with rents that are affordable to low-income people, the purpose of affordable housing—making an affordable life possible—is sometimes lost. Interviewees reported that Minnesota Housing Finance Agency’s (MHFA) focus on producing the most units per dollar is leading to worse outcomes for state and local government budgets and residents’ pocketbooks. MHFA uses a point system to rate affordable housing project proposals and determine which receive low-income housing tax credits from the state. MHFA takes into account soft costs and cost containment as part of the assessment, and also awards points for location efficiency.
According to interviewees, it’s generally cheaper to build a development on a greenfield location than to do infill development and risk environmental clean-up costs, but a greenfield development is likely to be less walkable and offer less access to transit. This then forces car dependence, which strains residents’ finances and contributes to negative health outcomes that can be costly. Similarly, cheaper building materials may drive down initial costs but typically result in higher energy use for heating and cooling. These costs may be borne by renters or by government agencies.

The ultimate outcome of MHFA requirements is that the health, environmental, and energy costs of building as cheaply as possible are shifted to residents, neighbors, and agencies that assist with healthcare and energy bills. Although interviewees were sensitive to the need to stretch the limited funding available for affordable housing as far as possible, they felt that an overemphasis on building cheaply ultimately resulted in higher overall costs to society.

Working in interdisciplinary teams can help to break down the siloed thinking and funding strategies that create inefficiencies and drive up the cost of a project. PLACE, a nonprofit developer of mixed-income housing, uses a process of integrated project delivery to keep costs low across the entire project. In contrast to the more traditional design-bid-build process, in integrated project delivery, all the key players come together at the beginning of the process to build trust and establish agreed-upon values and goals.

PLACE is a proponent of interdisciplinary processes and would like to see silo busting happen at the state level. “If you took the same integrated project delivery approach with siloed-off government departments that are not talking to each other, there could be a lot of opportunities to pool their resources together…. Everybody should be looking at the pool of resources and thinking about how to

“With the Housing Finance Agency, on the one hand, they give you points for being cheaper, which would drive you away from a transit area, and on the other they give you points for being near transit…. Let’s build [a 50 or 100-year building] building near transit. Let’s think really long term about this thing, and then it costs what it costs.”

--Chris Wilson, Project for Pride in Living

Integrated project delivery is one way of breaking down silos and improving efficiency in development processes. Photo by Allagash Brewing, 2014. Used under a Creative Commons BY 2.0 license.
maximize its potential by working together instead of just protecting their one portion of the pool,” said Alice Hiniker, PLACE Team Member. Integrated project delivery is an idea that is still gaining traction and which may present challenges to government agencies, because the “design, bid, build” process is easier to understand and gives the appearance of being more transparent and fair.

**THEME: LACK OF CAPITAL**

The widely recognized lack of funding for affordable housing is related to the emphasis on producing affordable housing rather than affordable living. “What is missing in the equation is the amount of capital,” said Chris Wilson, director of real estate development at Project for Pride in Living. “I could build ten more buildings every year if I had the opportunity. That is the choke point... [T]here’s just not much government money, which is why the finance agency is so sensitive to cost.”

Lack of funding also prevents nonprofit builders from benefiting from economies of scale; having to develop one project at a time drives up costs. Large for-profit builders can leverage their market-rate projects to achieve lower construction costs, but are not in the business of providing social services, so they may produce housing that is overall less beneficial to a community than housing built and operated by a mission-driven nonprofit.

Cities can do their part to support the financial viability of affordable housing projects through providing tax-increment financing, supporting developer applications for low-income housing tax credits with information and council resolutions, covering the costs of environmental clean-up, and providing land at a discounted price. The City of New Hope supported the Compass Pointe affordable housing development using all of these strategies, as we explore in the case study below. Cities can also consider identifying particular areas for redevelopment, which reduces uncertainty for both the community and potential developers, and thus drives down costs.

“We’ve been falling behind year after year on affordable housing. [Increased funding for Low Income Housing Tax Credits] would change the equation dramatically.... If you’re able to do more, typically you’re able to do it more cost effectively.”

—Chris Velasco, PLACE

“As a for-sale builder, we build cheaper than a lot of the non-profits ... One of these [affordable] buildings will be $9 million, but we’re doing $15–20 million of other volume. We just approach things like this: How do you value-engineer it? How do you deliver a high-quality product, but not break the bank doing it?”

—Mike Waldo, CFO, Ron Clark Construction

**THEME: LACK OF FINANCING TOOLS FOR MIXED-INCOME HOUSING**

Many community members, city staff and officials, and developers we spoke with expressed a preference for mixed-income housing over one-hundred percent affordable housing. Chief among the concerns motivating a desire for mixed-income housing were worries over concentrating poverty and
the anticipated negative social and economic impacts. Some felt that those living in affordable housing developments would be stigmatized, whereas residents of mixed-income housing would not face the same stigma.

Developers expressed frustration with the difficulty of financing mixed-income housing. The affordable housing industries and the market rate industries are very different from each other, and it is difficult to find the right mix of funding to support a mixed-income development. Because of financing limitations, developers are forced to build all units in a mixed-income building to either the luxury standard or the affordable standard, a challenging situation.

One step cities can take to encourage mixed-income housing is to implement an inclusionary housing policy. Both St. Louis Park and Richfield pursue inclusionary housing strategies requiring developers of market-rate housing to include affordable units in their developments when the city provides tax increment financing. St. Louis Park’s inclusionary housing policy requires 10 percent of units to be affordable at 60 percent of the area median income or 8 percent of units to be affordable at 50 percent of the area median income when a development receives tax increment financing.

Cities can have different experiences with inclusionary housing policies depending on their rate of growth and level of developer interest. Pat Elliott, a Richfield City Council member, noted that enforcing inclusionary housing policies can be difficult once the development is in process, especially when cities need to attract development.

Another way forward is to develop alternative financing sources and mechanisms. For example, Twin Cities LISC is developing a mezzanine loan to bridge the affordable and market-rate finance systems. Colleen Carey of the Cornerstone Group recommends the creation of a regional development innovation fund that could help developers test new ideas and prove their viability, allowing them to attract more traditional financing to future projects. Governmental bodies and foundations can consider supporting these efforts in order to encourage mixed-income housing.

“The developer will come in and say, ‘we presented 164 units with 20 percent affordable units, but your comprehensive plan or zoning won’t allow the density we need, so we’ve got to cut the number of units back. If we cut that back, we can’t do the affordable units because then we can’t get a return on investment’…. That’s where the tension always comes up. Everybody has...the best hopes and intentions, but economics and the realities of development gets in the way sometimes.“

—Pat Elliott, Richfield City Council member

“A lot of people say they do mixed-income housing, but what they mean is they have a range of low incomes. I think that rich people and poor people- or at least moderate income people and poor people- should all live together in the same good neighborhoods. We shouldn’t have poor neighborhoods where poor people live, with schools that aren’t as good and parks that aren’t as good and roads that aren’t as good.”

—Colleen Carey, president, The Cornerstone Group
NEW TOOL: MINNESOTA MIXED INCOME HOUSING CALCULATOR

A new tool available on the Housing Counts website at http://mncalculator.housingcounts.org/ helps cities understand the feasibility of mixed income projects in their communities, and the financial impact of density bonuses, parking requirements, and other policies.

The project could be worth $40.1 million but it would only cost $46.6 million to develop - a profit of $2.4 million (5% profit).

Affordable housing requirements reduce the developer’s potential profit by $9.6 million so that the net cost of the requirements is $0,200,000.000000007 million.
Community opposition to affordable housing developments surfaced as a major barrier to equitable development. Interviewees almost universally noted that fear of “those people” lies at the root of much community opposition. Community members typically believe that affordable housing residents will all have extremely low incomes and are surprised to learn that, in some cases, the average family in their community would qualify for affordable housing. This dynamic is by no means limited to the suburbs.

To allay fears, it is important for cities and developers to humanize people who live in affordable housing as much as possible. The Family Housing Fund has created fact sheets that can help dispel common misperceptions about affordable housing, available at http://www.fhfund.org/fact-sheets/.

“[People aren’t supportive of affordable housing because] we still look at low-income people as riff-raff.... We don’t look at those kinds of people as really people—that might be overstating it. There’s an attitude about people of color and people with low-incomes. We think that they’re dangerous.... [W]hen someone talks about affordable, low-cost housing, a big red sign goes up. [People say] ‘this is terrible! This will destroy our community!’”

—Camillo DeSantis, Richfield community member and affordable housing supporter

“I think we have a misperception about what affordable housing is, which I think is one of the biggest barriers. When you say affordable housing, people think Section 8 housing... They do not want Section 8 housing... You have to explain that, ‘no, someone making my income would probably benefit from affordable housing’... We live in the suburbs and they don’t want us to become urbanized. They say there will be more crime, more transience.... What can we call [affordable housing] that doesn’t have a stigma associated with it?”

—Sarah Maaske, Health in the Park Steering Committee member, St. Louis Park
Several interviewees noted that building affordable housing sometimes requires that politicians get out ahead of their constituency and take a political risk. They noted that once such housing is built, opposition typically dies away and complaints from community members are rare.

Community engagement was such a pervasive theme throughout our interviews that we devoted an entire chapter to it. Read the community engagement chapter for numerous strategies for tackling community opposition to affordable housing, such as engaging community early and often and supporting long-term, authentic engagement rather than transactional engagement. For an in-depth look at how a developer and city worked to overcome community opposition to affordable housing, read the case study below.

THE IMPACT OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

Mount Laurel, NJ, a wealthy Philadelphia suburb, is a paradigmatic example of community resistance to affordable housing development. The effort to bring affordable housing to Mount Laurel began in 1967, was the subject of two state supreme court cases (1975 and 1983), and culminated in the opening of 100 affordable units in 2000. Yet, despite more than 30 years of powerful negative sentiments about affordable housing and associated fears about crime and declining property values, a 2009–2010 study showed the development “did not increase crime, decrease property values, or raise property taxes either in the township or in adjacent neighborhoods” (98) and that only one-quarter of residents in adjacent communities could even name the project. (102). Douglas S. Massey et al., Climbing Mount Laurel: The Struggle for Affordable Housing and Social Mobility in an American Suburb (2013).
CASE STUDY: OVERCOMING OPPOSITION TO SUBSIDIZED AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN NEW HOPE, MN

THE BASICS

Compass Pointe is a 68-unit subsidized affordable housing project located in the northeast corner of New Hope, just across the street from the city of Brooklyn Park. It includes units reserved for formerly homeless tenants. Ron Clark Construction and Design opened the building in August 2015.

THE CONTEXT

Ron Clark Construction and Design is a for-profit developer that entered the affordable housing market in 2011 with the construction of affordable apartments and townhomes in Savage, MN. The company’s chief financial officer, Mike Waldo, once lived in subsidized affordable housing and feels a strong personal connection to Ron Clark’s affordable developments.

For several years before purchasing the land for Compass Pointe, Ron Clark was eyeing the site, which once was home to a gas station and a fourplex apartment building. “What was there was pretty low level housing and the people managing it were not doing a good job,” said New Hope Mayor Kathi Hemken. “It was basically despicable with a lot of police calls.”
Ron Clark wanted to buy the land, but the owner of one of the parcels wouldn’t sell. When the owner ended up in tax forfeiture, the City bought the parcel. Ron Clark bought that parcel along with four other parcels of land, some of them owned by the City, to assemble the Compass Pointe site.

The City promised to take care of any brownfield clean-up costs on the site of the old gas station, and Ron Clark was responsible for demolishing the fourplex and handling asbestos from the demolition. The City also provided around $700,000 in tax increment financing (TIF).

When neighbors caught wind of the affordable housing development planned for the site, they raised an uproar that was widely covered by local media.

“Whenever you build multifamily housing, the first thing people get in their minds is that it’s going to be 100 percent Section 8 housing,” said Mayor Hemken. “The second concern is ‘I don’t want those people moving into my neighborhood,’ which tells me you don’t know the people who are moving in. I’m sure they think we’re flying them in from Chicago or someplace.”

Waldo took New Hope City Council members on a tour of three similar developments to help them understand the proposed development. “They were supportive before, but then after that, it was like, ‘How soon can we get this in the ground? Let’s go!’”

The City and the developer worked together to assuage neighbor concerns. Ron Clark altered its plans in response to neighbor concerns about the height of the building, cutting 12 units from the top floor of the neighborhood-facing side of the building. Although this change cost Ron Clark some money, it did allow them to achieve the goal of one underground parking stall for every unit.

Ron Clark distributed pamphlets that called Compass Pointe “workforce housing” and stressed that the people living there would be workers like teachers, firefighters, and paramedics. The City and developer held multiple open houses and public meetings, and knocked on doors to gather feedback and answer questions.

In the end, Ron Clark and the City were able to overcome resident opposition and Compass Pointe was built. “The building seems to be functioning very well,” said Mayor Hemken. “I think it’s an excellent addition to the community. It’s pretty classy housing without real high rents.”

“With Compass Pointe, I think that was a great example of a development that occurred in the midst of contention, that wound up being super beneficial for the city,” said Jeff Sargent, New Hope’s community development director. “Obviously with a waiting list of 700 the demand is there.... That’s one of those
[developments] where we were kind of holding our breath and hoping everything was going to work out, and it did.”

“All the people, when they first heard about it, said they were selling their houses. Not a single house has gone on the market,” said Mayor Hemken. Where once she heard a lot of talk about “those people,” she now hears community members calling Compass Pointe residents by name. Mayor Hemken encouraged the church across the street from the development to adopt the Compass Pointe residents, inviting them to events like trick-or-treating at Halloween. The City and developer have also brought community members into the building to meet the residents.

However, signs of the early neighbor opposition remain: Compass Pointe is isolated from the single-family homes that border it to the south by a seven-foot wall that the developer agreed to construct in response to neighbor demands.

TAKEAWAYS AND INTERVIEWEE SUGGESTIONS

- Much opposition to affordable housing stems from fear of the unknown. Humanizing people who live in affordable housing and correcting misperceptions is key to overcoming opposition. After affordable housing is built, opposition typically dies away and complaints from community members are rare.
- A significant increase in available Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) funding could lead to decreased initial costs for affordable housing developments, decreased costs to society and residents over the long term, and an increase in the number of units built.
- Breaking down silos at the state level as well as within individual development processes can produce efficiencies that save government, community, and resident resources, fostering affordable living
- Cities can do their part to support the financial viability of affordable housing projects through providing tax-increment financing, supporting developer applications for low-income housing tax credits, taking care of environmental clean-up costs, and providing land at a discounted price.
- Cities can implement inclusionary housing policies that require a portion of units in new market-rate housing developments to be affordable. This is most likely to be successful if there is a robust housing market in the city. Cities can use the new mixed-income housing calculator tool available at http://mncalculator.housingcounts.org/ to understand the financial feasibility of mixed-income housing in their communities.
- Government agencies and foundations can support efforts to develop new financing tools to encourage mixed-income housing.
Most interviewees reported a widespread cultural shift in suburban communities toward walkability and bikeability. Cities and developers are working to attract millennials and baby boomers by catering to this desire, but face an uphill battle in building for the future while meeting the needs and desires of current residents, for whom the notion of a car-free life is often impractical.

“It’s not like everybody has to agree all at once. Cities need to identify some places where they are going to make those kinds of investments to make walkable places, and recognize that there are all sorts of places that are not going to be that in the next ten years.”

—Colleen Carey, president, The Cornerstone Group

“We’re in a period of transition where we want to reduce the use of cars, and so are promoting reduced parking at development sites, and increasing transit availability, sidewalks, and the other infrastructure and development patterns needed to not have to use a car. Yet, we’re not quite there. We’re at this point where you still need a car because there’s not enough service to get around or enough density of uses in an area for people to not have to drive….. I think this transition period, this shift in development pattern, is a reason why there is friction within communities about introducing more dense developments and more mixed-use developments.”

—Ryan Kelley, former planner, City of St. Louis Park
This chapter discusses the following active living–related themes and ideas for how to move forward:

- **Parking and traffic issues continue to dominate the development conversation**
  → When faced with car-related barriers to development, developers should show concerned elected officials, staff, and community members real-life examples of how parking and traffic have been minimized at similar developments.

- **Silent majority, vocal minority dynamic means more public pushback on bike and pedestrian infrastructure**
  → Cities should use demonstrations and temporary installations to help community members understand how biking and walking infrastructure will work, and to gather a broader array of perspectives beyond just those of adjacent property owners.

- **Difficulty in determining who pays for and maintains sidewalks impedes sidewalk installation**
  → One approach to the tricky issue of sidewalk costs and maintenance is for cities to follow St. Louis Park’s lead, making sidewalks part of the city budget rather than assessing individual homeowners, and maintaining at least a network of sidewalks that provide connectivity to key destinations.

- **Inequitable distribution of active living facilities**
  → Elected officials can work toward equity in pedestrian and bike infrastructure by creating holistic plans for bike/walk networks throughout their communities, rather than only building such infrastructure when new development occurs.

### THEME: PARKING AND TRAFFIC ISSUES CONTINUE TO DOMINATE THE CONVERSATION

The real and perceived need for large amounts of parking for suburban residential developments continues to dominate the conversation around new developments, limiting progress on active living and affordability. Cities and banks force developers to build more parking than they would like, driving up rents. Resistance to losing street parking crops up whenever cities propose sidewalks and bike lanes in place of parking.

Concerns over parking and traffic can be somewhat contradictory, with members of the public and elected officials demanding both that developments cater to cars by providing ample parking and that developments limit their impact on traffic. In St. Louis Park, concerns over traffic and

“On 66th Street, they had to take out all these homes. Staff and city leaders try to be very clear that the driving reason they’re taking out the homes is widening the street for automotive purposes. And now that there’s the space, we’re going to also [create] bike lanes. It’s very important that the way infrastructure projects are presented to the community is that we’re not doing anything radical just for bikes.”

—Sean Hayford Oleary, Richfield planning commissioner
parking have presented huge barriers to the PLACE development, which plans to offer relatively few parking spaces and more access to car/bike sharing and transit for its mix of market-rate and affordable apartments. Neighbors have argued that PLACE will have insufficient parking, causing residents and visitors to park on nearby residential streets, while at the same time expressing concern that PLACE will add too many cars to the streets.

No developer or city seems to have found a perfect solution, but Ron Clark’s efforts with the Compass Pointe development in New Hope can serve as a starting point. When Ron Clark wanted to put in fewer parking spaces than required by the City, the developer took city council members on a tour of similar developments to show them how many parking spaces were truly needed. The City agreed to a lower parking requirement, and the developer set aside land on the site that can be turned from grass to pavement if additional parking is needed.

Theme: Silent Majority, Vocal Minority Dynamic Means More Public Pushback on Bike and Pedestrian Infrastructure

Interviewees reported a silent majority, vocal minority dynamic around issues of installing pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure like sidewalks and bike lanes. The vocal minority—typically adjacent property owners—most frequently voices concerns and fears about increased crime because more people will be traveling by foot or bike on their street, the city ‘taking’ their property, bearing the burden of sidewalk maintenance, parking loss, and wasting taxpayer money on infrastructure that won’t be used.

Several factors contribute to the silent majority, vocal minority dynamic:

- For sidewalks especially, cities often fail to meaningfully engage community members other than those whose property is directly impacted by the infrastructure installation, even though sidewalks benefit the larger community.
- Traditional community input opportunities like open houses at city hall or commission hearings typically attract an older, white demographic that may generally be less supportive of these kinds of changes; most interviewees felt that younger residents and young families generally tend to be more supportive of bike and pedestrian infrastructure.
- People with low-incomes, people living with disabilities, children, and others who may have less access to cars make up a key constituency on this issue, but can be hard to organize due to language barriers, lack of familiarity with government processes, lack of time and energy, and other factors.
- Perhaps the largest driving force behind the dynamic is that most people are supportive but not passionate; the issue isn’t a high enough priority to inspire action.

“We have a 15-foot set back, but people who live in houses think that it’s actually theirs, and they mow it and plant gardens on it, so to put in a sidewalk in front of their house, in their minds we’re taking away ten feet of their property.”

—Kathi Hemken, mayor of New Hope
One way around these barriers is to show rather than tell, as the City of Hopkins did for its planned Artery project, which is aimed at creating a “pedestrian seductive” corridor downtown, complete with a separated two-way cycle track, wide sidewalks, and community spaces, in the words of Kersten Elverum, the City’s director of planning and economic development. The City held a temporary demonstration of the proposed changes with art, music, and food. “About 2,000 people came to this event, and it was really amazing to see; we were reaching all ages, people with a wide range of abilities, every ethnic group that we have living in Hopkins,” said Elverum. “None of our public engagement projects has ever had that kind of reach before.” More than simply demonstrating interest in the proposed project, Elverum added, “It gave us political support to move into the final design, it got the community excited, and we obtained really good feedback... I’ve become a real convert for doing demonstrations whenever you have any kind of significant project that you want to get feedback on.” One resource for demonstration projects is the book Tactical Urbanism by Mike Lydon and Andy Garcia.⁹

“"If we’re truly putting sidewalks out there as a community benefit that’s not just for the people living in that neighborhood, then we really need to treat it that way. When you start doing informational meetings, you need to invite the community, not just the people who live in proximity. "

—Sarah Maaske, Health in the Park Steering Committee member, St. Louis Park

⁹ https://islandpress.org/book/tactical-urbanism
THEME: DIFFICULTY IN DETERMINING WHO PAYS FOR AND MAINTAINS SIDEWALKS IMPEDES SIDEWALK INSTALLATION

“You’ve got Minneapolis with sidewalks on both sides of almost every single street, and then you have newer suburbs—Apple Valley, Lakeville even—that have sidewalks on at least one side of every residential street. Nobody in either situation thinks the sidewalks are particularly bad; they like having them. But you have this in-between area, the inner ring, where sidewalks weren’t built when the original streets were completed, and it can be very hard to convince some people that it’s worth building them now.”

—Sean Hayford Oleary, Richfield planning commissioner

“Getting the residents to pay for something they don’t want in the first place doesn’t fit in the budget.”

—Kathi Hemken, mayor of New Hope

Sidewalks occupy a gray area between public and private space that makes maintenance and finance difficult for suburbs to figure out. In first-ring suburbs, many of which were built without sidewalks on residential streets, building a sidewalk means making changes to a space that homeowners perceive as their property. Without a network of sidewalks already in place, it can seem unfair to add a sidewalk and assess the cost to adjacent homeowners (who may not want the sidewalk in the first place); it can also seem unfair to pass the cost to all residents by paying for it with the city budget (when the sidewalk seems to only serve a small percentage of residents who have direct access to it). In addition, assessing sidewalks to adjacent property owners presents an equity issue, as sidewalks are harder for low-income neighborhoods to afford.

Maintenance also presents a barrier to building support for sidewalks because of the costs it imposes on either the city or the property owner. If maintenance is the responsibility of the property owners, they may see the sidewalk as a financial or physical burden. Some argue against sidewalks because of the difficulty older residents may have in shoveling snow, while others argue that seniors’ health and quality of life would improve if they were able to walk on safe, clear sidewalks year-round.

St. Louis Park has come closer than most to solving the riddle of sidewalk costs and maintenance. The City created a plan for a network of sidewalks, and decided to make the sidewalks a City cost. “One thing we did was recognizing that streets and sidewalks are not for the benefit of the
homeowner which they are in front of... **So we took the assessment off of the individual and made this a City cost, a City investment,**” explained Anne Mavity, a St. Louis Park City Council member. The city took a middle-of-the-road approach to maintenance: “Depending on the sidewalk and what it connects to, some are managed by the City and others the homeowner has to take care of,” said Sara Maaske, Health in the Park Steering Committee Member. “I heard from people: ‘I’m a senior, I’m in my 80s and you’re going to put a sidewalk in front of my house and I have to scoop it.’ I feel like the City has done a fairly good job of listening and hearing that, and there are programs that people can sign up for to have someone come and do their snow removal.” St. Louis Park’s efforts are examined in more detail in the case study at the end of this chapter.

**THEME: INEQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF ACTIVE LIVING FACILITIES**

A pattern emerged in the course of our interviews: people living in new developments appear likely to have better access to active living facilities than those in older housing. Why? As established in the previous two themes, there are multiple barriers to installing sidewalks on residential streets in the suburbs. There are few, if any, barriers to installing sidewalks when a new development is built, because the costs can easily be assigned to another actor: the developer. Additionally, because of a market shift toward walkable and bikeable neighborhoods, developers are incentivized to provide active living facilities like sidewalks and in-door bike parking.

“When the sidewalks are put in when the development happens, it makes sense... [A]t that stage, it’s just as easy to put in a sidewalk as to put in grass.”

—Kathi Hemken, mayor of New Hope

“We don’t have a lot of sidewalks in the community in residential areas...In places where we’ve talked about putting in sidewalks, we’ve gotten pushback from the residents...Whenever new developments go in, we require that they put in sidewalks and maintain those sidewalks.”

—Karen Barton, Richfield community development assistant director

When combined with the findings in previous chapters that cities tend to prefer that new developments are market rate rather than subsidized, the implication for equity here is that those living in older, “naturally occurring” affordable housing may live in neighborhoods without pedestrians and bike infrastructure, while those who can afford to pay higher rents have access to these facilities.

Even those living in new, subsidized affordable housing may lack facilities for exercise. Affordable housing developments often do not have amenities like exercise rooms because of the pressure to keep costs low and the high demand for affordable housing. “**Lack of an exercise room won’t keep anybody from renting,**” said Chris Wilson, director of real estate development at Project for Pride in Living. “**It will just keep them from exercising.**”

One way for cities to combat the disparity in access to active living facility is to create a city-wide plan that ensures access to the sidewalk and bike-trail network throughout the city, rather than constructing...
infrastructure piecemeal as plots are redeveloped. St. Louis Park’s efforts to create such a plan, detailed in the case study for this chapter, point to a potential way forward.

Photo by Jalan’s Place, 2014. Used under a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 2.0 license.

**CASE STUDY: CONNECTING ST. LOUIS PARK**

**THE BASICS**

The City of St. Louis Park is building a network of sidewalks and trails throughout the community over a 10-year period, following their “Connect the Park” plan.

**THE CONTEXT**

Like many first-ring suburbs, St. Louis Park was founded in the late 1800s and experienced intense growth in the years following World War II. This pattern of development led to a largely auto-oriented transportation system within the city, with a disjointed and incomplete sidewalk network. By the 1990s, the City had begun to put in place a new vision focused on walkability, density, and transit. Out of this visioning process came the Excelsior & Grand mixed-use development, frequently described by interviewees as a game changer, sparking a shift in development not only in St. Louis Park but in Twin Cities suburbs in general. As the approach to development changed, the City needed to develop infrastructure to support the vision of a walkable community.

**THE RESPONSE**

In 2007, with the support of Active Living Hennepin County and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, the City of St. Louis Park worked in collaboration with community members to create a plan for sidewalks and trails. The plan identified gaps in the pedestrian and bicycle networks and prioritized recommended improvements. In 2013, the city council approved the “Connect the Park” plan, which guides implementation of improvements over a ten-year period, with the goal of creating a network of bikeways every half mile, and a network of sidewalks every quarter mile.

The plan has been controversial: “It was just stunning to me how much people hate sidewalks,” said Sara Maaske, Health in the Park Steering Committee member. “They don’t want them if they don’t already have them in front of their house... [I]t’s an ugly, ugly conversation.” Opponents worry about increased
crime, decreased property values, costs and maintenance, and effects on gardens and trees.

The City took steps to alleviate these concerns, deciding not to assess property owners for sidewalk installation and creating a hierarchy within the sidewalk system, with some routes designated as community sidewalks and plowed by the City. Project Engineer Jack Sullivan has played a key role in the implementation of the plan. “He is the best emissary for the City that I could imagine,” said City Council Member Anne Mavity. “He is calm, he directs the contractors to mitigate the impact on homes to the maximum extent possible.” As a result, the homeowners get what they want—sidewalks weave around their trees—and the City gets what it wants: a complete network of sidewalks.

Although some planned sidewalks are now off the table because of community opposition, the Connect the Park plan continues to move forward. Opposition typically dies down significantly after installation.

“I had to take the hit, two years ago, when they did my ward first,” said Council Member Mavity. “We had a vote on putting a sidewalk on 39th Street, which is the major thoroughfare connecting 39th & France in Minneapolis to Excelsior & Grand, and it had no sidewalk. And two days after I voted for the sidewalk, there were signs up and down the block for my opponent. Now you walk there, and it’s absolutely blended into the neighborhood. It’s been done very well and it’s used constantly. So I argue that the market would indicate that the vision we have is a very attractive one. It’s a hard adjustment for some folks who have lived there for a long time.”

“Everybody loves biking and walking facilities until they’re in front of their house,” said Planning and Zoning Supervisor Sean Walther. “Each project is its own little battle, but I think once they’ve been installed, they’re well accepted.”

**TAKEAWAYS AND INTERVIEWEE SUGGESTIONS**

- When faced with car-related barriers to development, developers should show concerned elected officials, staff, and community members real-life examples of how parking and traffic concerns have been minimized at similar developments.
- Cities should use demonstrations and temporary installations to help community members understand how biking and walking infrastructure will work, and to gather a broader array of perspectives beyond just those of adjacent property owners.
- One approach to the tricky issue of sidewalk costs and maintenance is for cities to follow St. Louis Park’s lead, making sidewalk construction part of the city budget and maintaining at least a network of sidewalks that provide connectivity to key destinations.
- Elected officials can work toward equity in pedestrian and bike infrastructure by creating holistic plans for bike/walk networks throughout their communities, rather than only building such infrastructure when new development occurs.
- When community engagement is limited primarily to adjacent property owners, elected officials may have to take a political risk to achieve the kind of density and infrastructure required to make the transition to a walkable community. In most cases, opposition dies down considerably after developments and infrastructure are in place.
MOVING FORWARD

As you work toward healthier, more equitable development in your own community, consider trying some of these strategies to overcome common barriers:

Request for feedback: We would love to hear what you think of this report, and what you think should happen next with this project. Please send comments via email to center.communications@bluecrossmn.com.

CITY STAFF AND ELECTED OFFICIALS

→ Use demonstrations and temporary installations to help community members understand how biking and walking infrastructure will work, and to gather a broader array of perspectives beyond just those of adjacent property owners. (Page 43)

→ Make sidewalks part of the city budget and maintain at least a network of sidewalks that provide connectivity to key destinations. (Page 44)

→ Work toward equity in pedestrian and bike infrastructure by creating holistic plans for bike/walk networks throughout your community, rather than only building such infrastructure when new development occurs. (Page 45)

→ Take the political risk to achieve the kind of density and infrastructure required to make the transition to a walkable community. In most cases, opposition dies down considerably after developments and infrastructure are in place. (Page 46)

→ Support the financial viability of affordable housing projects by providing tax-increment financing, supporting developer applications for low-income housing tax credits, taking care of environmental clean-up costs, and providing land at a discounted price. (Page 32)

→ Implement inclusionary housing policies that require a portion of units in new market-rate housing developments to be affordable. This is most likely to be successful if there is a robust housing market in the city. Cities can use the new mixed-income housing calculator tool available at http://mncalculator.housingcounts.org/ to understand the financial feasibility of mixed-income housing in their communities. (Page 32)

→ Anticipate the conversion of informal affordable housing to market-rate housing, especially in areas well-served by transit, and take proactive steps to protect and support vulnerable residents. (Page 24)

→ Work to connect low-income or unemployed residents to jobs within the city and support education or training needed to help residents compete for jobs, rather than fighting new affordable housing. (Page 22)

→ Build community support for people who live in naturally occurring affordable housing in advance of an ownership change to ensure a strong response to the threat of resident displacement. (Page 24)

→ Act as an advocate for residents who are displaced when unsubsidized affordable housing is upgraded. Fund social services to respond to the crisis of displacement and mobilize community stakeholders to provide resources for residents. (Page 24)
→ Cities can adopt ordinances requiring developers to accept Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8) and allowing residents right of first refusal when their housing is up for sale. (Page 24)

→ Cities can provide financing for low-interest rehabilitation in exchange for affordable units, use community development block grants to underwrite low interest loans to finance preservation of naturally occurring affordable housing, and make tax increment financing (TIF) contingent on the inclusion of affordable units in the development. (Page 24)

→ Build authentic, long-term relationships with community members rather than transactional relationships. (Page 13)

→ Engage the community early in the development process rather than after all decisions have been made. (Page 14)

→ Respond to ideas and concerns about new developments, and involve the community in decision making. (Page 13)

→ Dedicate resources to reaching community members who don't respond to written notices, encouraging them to join community meetings. (Page 12)

→ Create and fund ongoing, staffed community partnerships that help to create a cohesive community vision and make it easier for developers to engage productively in the community. (Page 17)

→ Humanize people who live in affordable housing and correct misperceptions to reduce fear of the unknown among neighbors. (Page 35)

### DEVELOPERS

→ When faced with car-related barriers to development, show concerned elected officials, staff, and community members real-life examples of how parking and traffic concerns have been minimized at similar developments. (Page 41)

→ Relax income and criminal background screening standards for existing residents when upgrading unsubsidized affordable housing. (Page 26)

→ Apply for financing from the Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH) Impact Fund. (Page 24)

→ Engage the community early in the development process rather than after all decisions have been made. (Page 14)

→ Respond to ideas and concerns about new developments, and involve the community in decision making. (Page 13)

→ Dedicate resources to reaching community members who don't respond to written notices, encouraging them to join community meetings. (Page 12)

→ Break down silos to focus on affordable living, not just affordable housing. (Page 30)

→ Humanize affordable housing residents and correct misperceptions to reduce fear of the unknown among neighbors. (Page 35)

### STATE/FEDERAL

→ Increase available Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) funding to decrease initial costs for affordable housing developments, decrease costs to society and residents over the long term, and increase the number of units built. (Page 32)
→ Support new financing tools to encourage mixed-income housing. (Page 32)
→ Break down silos to focus on affordable living, not just affordable housing. (Page 30)

FOUNDATIONS

→ Support new financing tools to encourage mixed-income housing. (Page 32)
→ Create and fund ongoing, staffed community partnerships that help to create a cohesive community vision and make it easier for developers to engage productively in the community. (Page 37)
→ Break down silos to focus on affordable living, not just affordable housing. (Page 30)