



ALBERTA
REAL ESTATE
FOUNDATION

Enabling Housing Choice Project

Preliminary Research

Report #4:

Housing & NIMBYism

April 2022



LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Enabling Housing Choice Project encompasses all of what we call Alberta, and is the traditional and ancestral territory of many peoples, presently subject to Treaties 6, 7, and 8 including the Blackfoot, Cree, Dene, Saulteaux, Nakota Sioux, Stoney Nakoda, and the Tsuu T'ina Nation and the Métis People of Alberta. We acknowledge the many First Nations, Métis and Inuit who have lived in and cared for these lands for generations. We are grateful for the traditional Knowledge Keepers and Elders who are still with us today and those who have gone before us. We make this acknowledgment as an act of reconciliation and gratitude to those whose territory we reside on and that which we refer to in this research.

RDN is committed to supporting the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action, and believes in the need for meaningful engagement and consent with Indigenous peoples in the community. Colonialism is a current ongoing process, and we need to build our mindfulness of our present participation. As this project specifically touches on development and planning concepts which are built on a colonial system of governance and land use management, we also recognize that we have more work to unpack the systems in which we are upholding and working within.

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Zachary Weeks, Accessibility and Disability Consultant

Tamara White, Principal, Elevate Community Planning

Lenze Kuiper, Chief Administrative Officer, Oldman River Regional Services Commission

Lisa Drury, Senior Planner, City of Beaumont

Emily Sangster, Long Range Planner, City of Beaumont

Jason Syvixay, City of Edmonton, Principal Planner, Zoning Bylaw Renewal Strategist

Global Village Centre in Brooks, AB

Jacquie Fenske, Experience Alberta

Eva John-Gladue, Operations Manager

Natalie Gibson, Principal & Economic Development Expert, Innovisions & Associates

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And special thanks to our academic advisor:
Dr. Robert Summers, Academic Director, University of Alberta Sustainability Council; Co-Chair, Environmental Studies Program, Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences.

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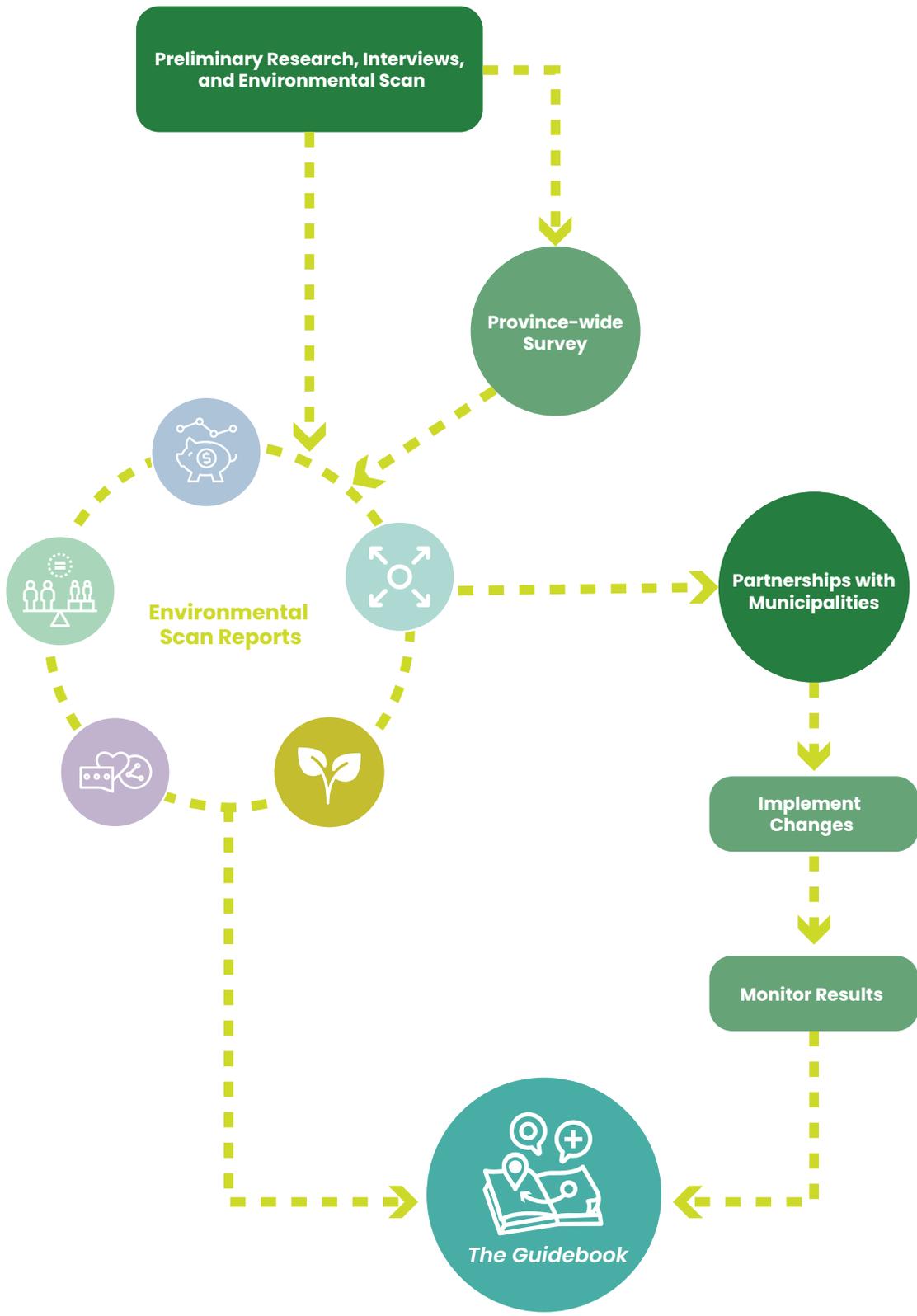
PROJECT CONTEXT

The Enabling Housing Choice Project aims to provide insight on how Albertan municipalities can support growth in their communities and help provide more housing options and choices to their residents through local policy changes and capacity building strategies. In the first stage of our project, we conducted a literature review, subject matter expert interviews, and case studies. We have broken our findings into five main themes, in order to make the relevant information more easily accessible.

This report on Housing and NIMBYism, along with our other four themed reports, can be used by municipalities and communities to help better understand the complexities of housing choice and to help guide the development of strategies to enable capacity building. It is important to note that all these themes intersect with each other. A holistic approach to enabling housing choice that considers all of these themes is required to make meaningful change that positively impacts various groups and their unique needs within a community. These preliminary findings will inform the next phases of our project, including the creation of our Guidebook for Enabling Housing Choice.

In this report we discuss:

- » The role community support plays in enabling housing choice;
- » The dynamics of NIMBYism and potential approaches to mitigate community opposition; and
- » The importance of thoughtful and accessible engagement with residents and the public.



OVERVIEW

The concept of NIMBYism (Not in My Backyard) represents a social response where those who live directly next to a proposed development oppose said development (Piat, 2000). This can be due to various reasons, but typically, NIMBYism pertains to community members who oppose development in their community, regardless of the development's merits or potential benefits. Often, projects where NIMBY opposition can be prevalent are projects that increase the housing diversity or density in a neighbourhood (Pendall, 1999). For example, a community may see opposition to housing types that go against the normal building form for their area, such as condominium projects or projects that aim to support vulnerable populations like social housing (Doberstein, 2020). The conversation of “not in my backyard” and the rebuttal of development proponents is shown in the below image. NIMBY influences are present in urban, suburban, and rural communities



The conversation on where certain developments should be located (Keenan, 2016)

and are one of the leading barriers to housing and infill development (Nesbitt, 2018). This pushback can lead to prolonged project timelines which can increase costs, create development uncertainty, and threaten potential investments. Although NIMBYism may differ by community, the leading cause of attitude is fear (Nesbitt, 2018). To combat this fear, it is important to bring awareness and understanding of what enabling housing choice means for a community.

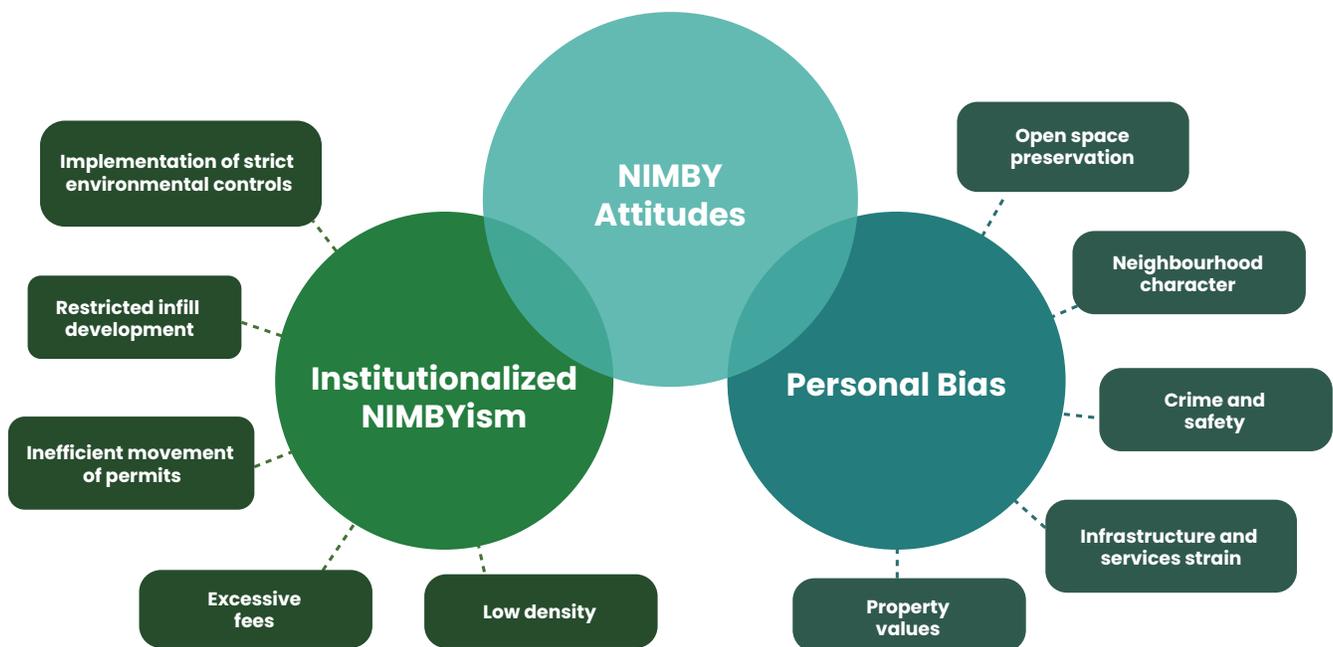
Community engagement plays a crucial role in promoting change in a community. Building awareness and understanding can help alleviate potential problems and NIMBYism pushback. There are a variety of concerns community members can have and this report explores the concept of NIMBYism and how it relates to public engagement, and the ways for municipalities to open communication channels to combat it. The graphic below represents what is needed to be considered to have holistic community engagement. By taking steps to partnering, preparing, and progressing, municipalities can hear the voices of all community members, and not just the vocal few.



The Community Action Model illustrates what is relevant in creating a healthier, engaged community. The outer ring highlights the community's context, the middle ring shows the essential practices need to be done, and the inner ring is the 3P Action cycle which expresses the community change process (Healthy Places By Design, 2022).

NIMBY ATTITUDES AND FEARS

NIMBY fears can be broken down to personal bias and institutionalized actions, as seen in the diagram below (ACT, 2009). Identifying, challenging, and dismantling the cultural and social perspectives of NIMBY fears is a key way communities can work to enable diverse housing choices. This section delves further into personal biases that people hold in opposition to developments, like economic fears, social concerns, and spatial anxieties. It also touches on the institutionalized opposition that is embedded in some land use policies and politics.



PERSONAL BIASES

Personal biases can be prevalent when proposing new or more diverse types of housing development like garage suites, social housing, and other forms of higher density development. Regardless of if these biases reflect reality, they impact an individual's perceptions on development and change. Below, we highlight the three main fears associated with personal biases.

Economic Fears

Economic fears primarily stem from homeownership worries. Homeowners want to “protect and enhance the values of their homes” (Nesbitt, 2018, p. 6). Many times homeowners believe if new types of development (such as affordable housing) are

in proximity to their houses, their property value will be negatively affected (Pendall, 1999). This is a perceived bias. There are many studies that have determined that being in the proximity of affordable housing has no impact on property values (ACT, 2009). In a study undertaken in British Columbia, the findings concluded that close proximity to affordable housing across seven different communities had no negative impact on any of the nearby property values (ACT, 2009). A study in Sydney, New South Wales, concluded that high densities do not negatively affect property values of low density housing and can even make the properties more valuable (Sodhi et al., 2021).

Although perceptions that housing diversity decreases property values may not be reality, people may still have skepticism when presented with studies from other areas that are not their own (ACT, 2009). Therefore, it is important to use the local context and data to communicate the relationship between economic fears and diverse housing.

Social Concerns

NIMBY attitudes often stem from the traditional value of owning and living in a single-detached home. Across Alberta, single-detached homes make up 61.9% of housing (Statistics Canada, 2016). In a study conducted across 202 Canadian communities, the majority of residents who own single-detached homes are two-parent families with children (Doberstein et al., 2016). Oftentimes, said households believe their lifestyle will be threatened if other forms of housing are to 'invade' their neighbourhood (Doberstein et al., 2016).

Although municipalities have the power to enact zoning bylaw changes, the cultural norms and the status quo often influence planning decisions. The status quo of owning a single-detached home as the ultimate goal often reflects the opinions of the privileged. There is also a large perception by some that high density housing brings crime and poverty, especially with rental units (Nesbitt, 2018), however, this is largely disproven, and ignores the reality that a diversity of housing serves a diversity of people.

Single-detached homes do not fit the needs of all groups, and having a diversity of housing types would open up the housing market to better address the needs of everyone. A single-detached home may not be suitable for a young person who does not need as much space or a smaller family who enjoys active transportation and desires to live near amenities. People have various incomes and ages, yet many communities do not realize the differing preferences of other residents within their policy frameworks because of the idealization of single-detached homes (Doberstein et al., 2016).

Housing choice may not be adequately provided, prioritizing the demands of those with the loudest and often most privileged voices over the needs of those with limited access to housing. There needs to be broader concern for the housing needs of everyone and solving housing problems should be a public concern because housing is a human right (Un-Habitat, 2014).

Spatial Anxieties

Many communities feel an emotional bond to a place or environment, which can be referred to as a “sense of place”. When the built environment is altered, residents may feel concerned that changes to the physical environment will change the community characteristics and its sense of place (Nesbitt, 2018). There are often regulations requiring new development to align with the neighbourhood’s character even if the neighbourhood has a variety of land uses. However, NIMBY fears still arise and are difficult to overcome because residents feel a sense of place in their neighbourhoods that they want to take pride in and protect.

The proximity of new housing developments to an individual community member can play a large role in how much opposition a community member may have. The closer a resident is to a new housing initiative, the more likely they are to oppose it (Nesbitt, 2018). Residents often use arguments such as how increased density would cause more traffic or put a strain on public services and infrastructure (ACT, 2009). Many of these perceived biases are not true and are based on assumptions. However, with education and communication from institutions, organizations, and proponents of housing diversity, this can be tackled.

INSTITUTIONALIZED ACTIONS

Along with NIMBY attitudes stemming from personal biases, institutionalized actions also contribute to these NIMBY fears, which are highlighted below.

Play in Politics

Politics play a significant role in NIMBYism. If there is a lack of consultation or transparency in the process of implementing affordable and diverse housing from the government, residents may feel negatively towards these developments because they feel deceived (Nesbitt, 2018). Further, groups with a higher socio-economic standing may have stronger political connections, enabling them to push their NIMBY attitudes and take institutionalized action against new housing developments (McNee & Pojani, 2021).

Many politicians want to gain the trust of their residents because those are the people who elect them, so there is a strong incentive for municipal councillors to support community opposition (Ontario Housing Affordability Task Force, 2022). At times, there are vocal and influential people who take a stance against housing developments which contributes to councils not investing in long term affordable housing because it coincides with the electoral cycle and may damage their campaigns (Nesbitt, 2018).

Planning Processes

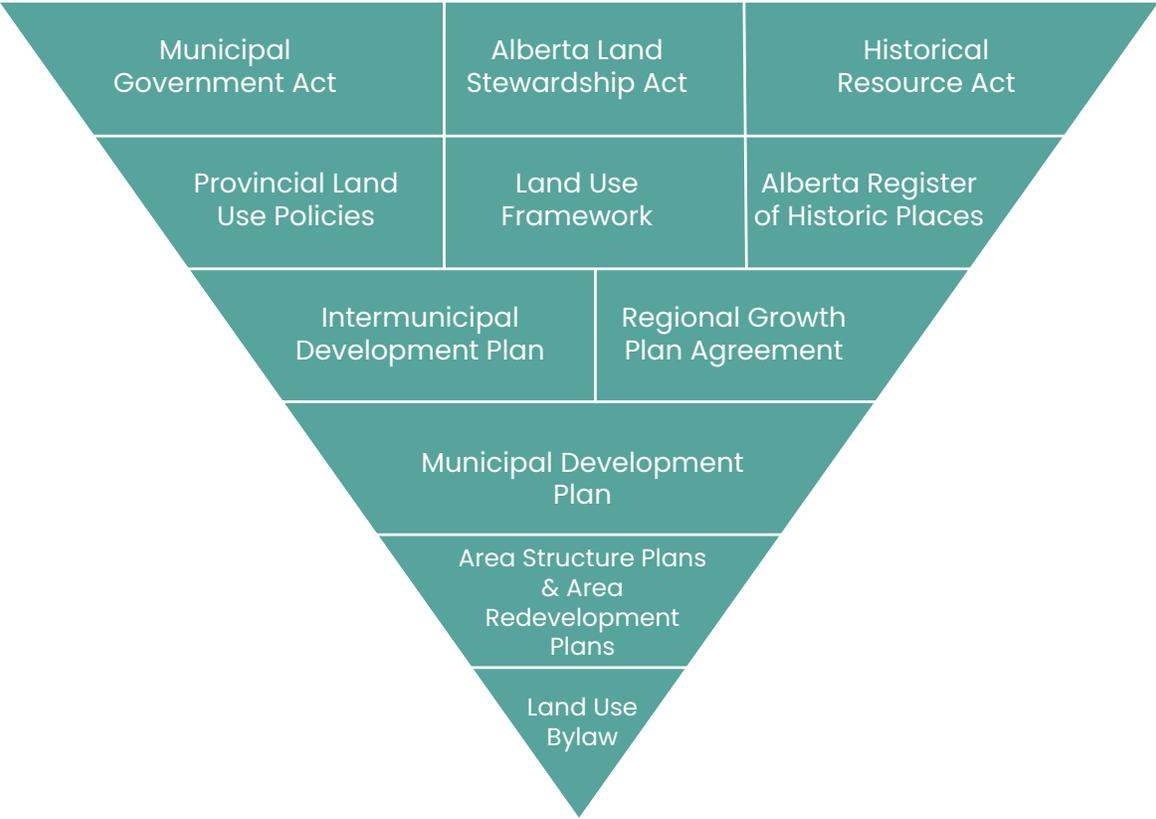
The planning process, a hierarchy of statutory plans and planning bylaws implemented by municipalities, can also influence NIMBYism. Sometimes municipalities have a disconnect between higher level strategic documents and statutory plans which can lead to uncertainty and misunderstandings (Nesbitt, 2018). While these plans go

through multiple stages of engagement and often get plenty of support, when it comes to approving development applications there are a lot of people who oppose it.

Pushback in a community can be minor, but loud. An example of this can be seen in RedLine Construction’s six-storey, multi-unit development in the Edmonton neighbourhood of Westmount (Riebe, 2022). Media attention was focused on this development, with titles of articles that the community was not in favour. In a neighbourhood of well over 6000 residents (City Facts, 2020), 30 letters of opposition is less than 1% of residents, yet this type of feedback often informs decision makers, even when it does not accurately reflect the feelings of the community. This feeds into outdated policies that do not work well with other planning documents, as it can give more credence to the few voices of opposition than it should.

In the case of RedLine Construction’s development, two levels of planning documents did not agree with each other - the Municipal Development Plan having been updated recently, and the Area Redevelopment Plan not having been updated in over 20 years. When there are discrepancies and conflicting points between different levels of policy, many people can fill in the gaps with their own opinions and personal biases. While ultimately council approved this development as it met the goals of their Municipal Development Plan, the disconnect between policy and the ambiguity of development approval processes contributes to the creation of pushback and NIMBYism.

Planning Hierarchy in Alberta



COMBATING NIMBYism

While some people may not be able to be persuaded, this should not stop governments or housing developers from executing strategies to combat NIMBYism, as reducing general opposition to diverse housing development can lead to larger scale benefits down the line. There are three common and successful strategies identified through this preliminary research which include:

- » Community Outreach;
- » Planning Tools; and,
- » Education.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Community outreach is essential in diffusing NIMBY attitudes (Doberstein, 2020). When diverse housing developments are being established, they are often being proposed on lots with single-detached homes. Many NIMBY fears centre around the fear of density next door, and people may be opposed to this type and scale of change in their neighbourhood. Instead, if the conversation is started in a way that highlights what they want in their community and directs them in a positive way, people can come to want these changes in their own time.

How messaging for new housing development is delivered has a great influence on how people react and what they believe. Engagement should be framed through how higher density housing development could provide public benefit through, for instance: environmental and economic benefit from reduced congestion and lower carbon footprints (Doberstein et al., 2016). The longer the conversation is, the more engaged people can be, and the more accepting they will be to learn and understand that change can be valuable for them. Residents in communities are already connected with one another, so when planners from outside their community join the process, they can feel threatened and fear the community will change. This resistance is difficult to solve but can slowly be overcome with time and effort.

When a municipality or developer communicates and helps residents understand what a new development would mean to their community, residents may start trusting the process and future development in their area. Making residents feel empowered and heard gives them a sense of agency within the development process. It is also important to understand who the engagement needs to be with and ensure an equitable perspective is applied when considering who to engage.



Public engagement is mandated by the Municipal Government Act (2000), but there is often low satisfaction for those who are engaged (Doberstein, 2020). Traditional engagement can be seen as hosting an open house where citizens are asked to share their views on particular issues. The minimum required engagement for housing development may not adequately reach an adequate diversity of people to provide unique insights. A study in British Columbia, Canada, attempted a different engagement approach through role playing. Instead of getting participants to share their views, they were asked to articulate the views of neighbourhoods or members of groups that were not their own (Doberstein, 2020). This playful engagement tactic created a space for learning, tolerance, and mutual understanding. The results showed that

“ THOSE WHO WERE RANDOMLY ASSIGNED A ROLE TO PLAY WITH ATTITUDES DIFFERENT FROM THEIR OWN WERE MORE LIKELY TO REPORT HIGHER SATISFACTION WITH THE GROUP DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION THAN THOSE WHO WERE NOT ASSIGNED A ROLE DIFFERENT FROM THEIR OWN IDENTITY AND ATTITUDES ” (DOBERSTEIN, 2020, P. 2).

When people take on perspectives other than their own, they can be more empathetic towards one another and have more tolerance for decisions like different housing choices being implemented. This is one of many examples of engagement practices that can improve a sense of understanding from participants.

PLANNING TOOLS

To successfully enable housing diversity, the strategic use of planning tools must be used. These can be policies and strategies relating to infill and intensification and long-term planning goals, such as well-developed statutory plans. In general, Canadian communities have only seen one wave of development through the initial urbanization of agricultural land and natural environments. Albertan communities will change, and certain characteristics will change through that evolution, like the urban form.

Urban form is important for communities and many times there is less resistance to gentle density that is coupled with effective urban design.



URBAN FORM IS THE PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS THAT MAKE UP BUILT-UP AREAS, INCLUDING THE SHAPE, SIZE, DENSITY AND CONFIGURATION OF SETTLEMENTS” (WILLIAMS, 2014, P. 6).

Instead of segregated land uses, communities can implement policies in which land uses can mix if the urban form and design integrates well into the neighborhood. The use of design regulations can have a significant impact on how a development is received by the public. Examples of design regulations that help integrate density include: variations in the facade, building setbacks, architecturally compatible design, or height limits and step-backs (ACT, 2009). Gentle density and urban design could aid with easing residents into accepting different housing types. However, it is essential to understand that the housing need and supply concerns in some communities are critical. These communities may not have the time needed to introduce gentle density and allow for incremental change over time. Urgency sometimes requires municipalities to make quicker choices and actions to help their most vulnerable populations, regardless of NIMBY attitudes. There must be a thoughtful balance of combatting NIMBY attitudes while recognizing that housing is a fundamental human right (Un-Habitat, 2014).

In many municipalities, there may already be small, more affordable dwellings like basement suites; however, they are not always obvious because they are often illegal suites. These suites are critical in these communities because they give another opportunity for housing, especially for young people. Municipalities can establish policies that allow and legalize smaller dwellings like these basement suites or adding a suite to their garage to homes that already exist in a community. Gentle density is one way to reduce potential outrage, but it is important to note the need for certain housing types and to be critical of which groups are providing comments.

EDUCATION

Strong efforts to engage in early and open communication with the community can help dispel and alleviate NIMBY fears. When residents are engaged early in the process, “building their support” becomes much easier (Graham, 2020). Community engagement must increase public awareness and promote the values aligned with housing choice (Nesbitt, 2018). How language is used matters to create certain dialogues with residents, whether the goal is consultation, engagement, or education (Graham, 2020). Generally, when people think of affordable housing projects, they think of buildings of the past that were of subpar quality. There needs to be a better job communicating to the public that the design of affordable housing can be the same as that of market housing. The demographic of a housing type does not necessarily impact the look of the building.



In addition, education can be a two-way street that benefits both municipalities and residents. There needs to be a collaboration with municipal officials and developers or agencies with those who benefit from diverse forms of housing (ACT, 2009). While municipalities and developers should have a comprehensive plan for their development, sometimes it is beneficial to have some initial discussions with the community on a project before having a definite plan. Municipalities and developers must think about the community they are building in and understand from previous experience or relationships if there would be anticipated community backlash (MacNeil, 2004). Essentially, people want to know what is happening and how new developments would impact their community.

A part of educating municipalities and developers is researching local issues of the community or the potential impacts their development might have on the community (Nesbitt, 2018). This could also mean talking to the local community members to identify different groups of perspectives and segments of the project (MacNeil, 2004). When considering what someone's 'community' is, this can be broader than simply the people next door. It could be at a neighbourhood, town, city, or even regional level.

As well, the people in one's social circle impacts their perspective on who is in their community. Keeping this in mind can help developers create and communicate context sensitive, well-developed plans with potential outcomes and concerns addressed. This would make residents more open to having positive feedback instead of NIMBY attitudes. Having earlier conversations with community members allows municipalities and developers to try and mitigate NIMBY attitudes into their project design (Graham, 2020). Even if residents disagree with a development project, municipalities and developers can hope that residents can trust the process they did with taking in their concerns and evaluating them in the context of their specific project. When there is communication and understanding among citizens and the government, many NIMBY attitudes can be alleviated, and better relationships can be built. There can be benefits to both parties when education through engagement is practiced.

CASE STUDIES

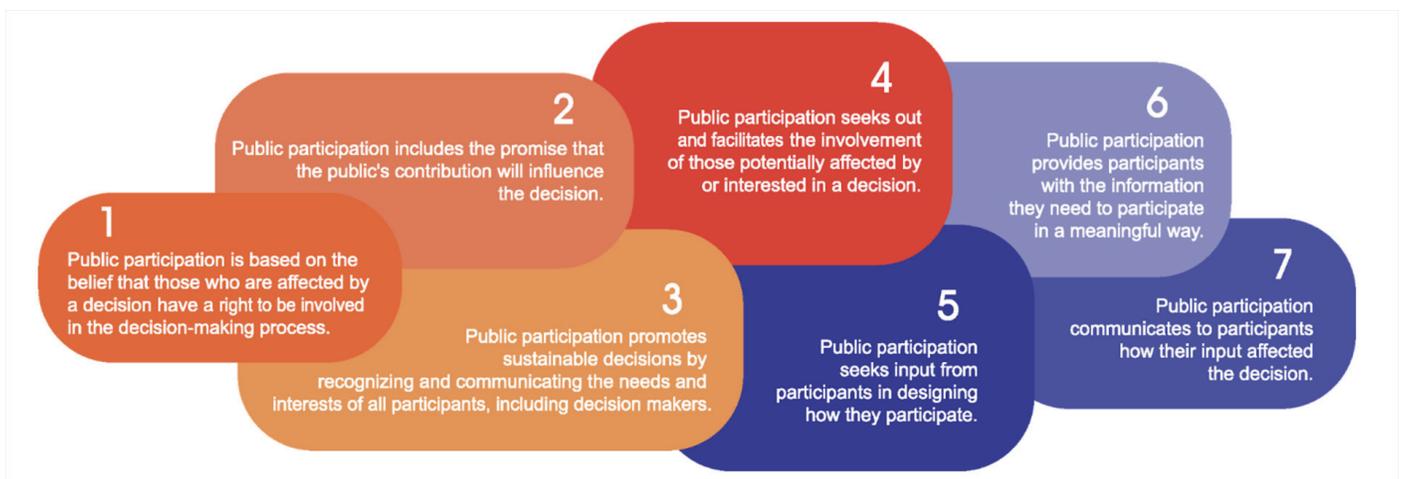
This section features two Albertan case studies from the City of Beaumont and the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River where innovative engagement methods were used to great success.

CITY OF BEAUMONT: GO TO THE PEOPLE

Instead of getting the people to come to the city’s venue like a town hall, the municipality came to them for public engagement. When the City of Beaumont was developing its new Land Use Bylaw and Municipal Development Plan, they had a very detailed and holistic engagement process, as it is very challenging to engage the community regarding zoning and policies due to their technical nature. To be more strategic about engagement, Beaumont concentrated on engaging key groups and met with people from the annexation lands previously part of Leduc County, the agricultural societies, business communities, and other interested parties. When working with the general public, Beaumont wanted to increase their engagement reach, so instead of traditional open houses, they determined places that were frequently visited. This included hosting engagement events at cafes or recreational facilities and at local grocery stores.

Beaumont’s engagement approach also acknowledged the different degrees of knowledge and interest between different parties. They also employ principles of engagement from the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) best practices for public engagement, with the core values for public participation shown below.

IAP2 Core Values for Public Participation (IAP2 Canada, n.d.)



Because the general public often has different interests and levels of knowledge compared to developers, changing the language of communication is important to creating a welcoming environment for the public to express their opinions and learn about what is happening in their community. Beaumont made an effort to target groups that have not been engaged, like young families or Indigenous groups; however, this was more difficult when the residents were newer to the community. Although Beaumont is still working on making efforts to connect with these groups, they saw success in going to the communities rather than having the communities come to them.

MUNICIPAL DISTRICT OF LESSER SLAVE RIVER: MAKE IT CONVENIENT

Lesser Slave River was also in the process of implementing changes to their Land Use Bylaw, and the municipality took a similar approach to engagement as Beaumont. Like Beaumont, Lesser Slave River went to where people were already going instead of asking people from a large area to come far out of their way to attend information sessions. The municipality knew that internet access was not available to every resident, especially for its older population. Because they knew how their population worked, they knew it was important to facilitate in person engagement sessions.

Because of the vast area in Lesser Slave River the population is spread out and there is not necessarily one community hub to access, so a more customized approach was needed. Thoughtful planning targeted more populated areas or even popularly frequented locations like an Industrial Park and held their engagements sessions there. By understanding where their residents are and where they go, Lesser Slave River was able to find the most convenient ways for the public to meaningfully participate which was key to their engagement success. They also found that targeting areas convenient for their residents meant they heard from a more diverse group of people and were able to have open communication and buy-in from the community.



NEXT STEPS

Municipalities can better communicate with their residents by thinking outside the box for engagement methods. By coming to where people already frequent, they can hear from a more diverse population base which can also help shift attitudes of NIMBYism.

Making communication more accessible and open can be the best way to gain buy-in on projects and deliver effective policies. If people come from a place of understanding and empathy, communities can grow by supporting and building inclusive housing (Piat, 2000). Although many of these strategies can be implemented across the board, municipalities should adapt their methods to meet the needs of their residents and the goals they are hoping to achieve, as each community is unique with different needs and considerations. When a municipality can accomplish successful engagement, they are able to build relationships with their residents and combat negative NIMBY attitudes.



GET INVOLVED

Our Sustainable Housing Initiative (SHI) Enabling Housing Choice Project team is working to support communities across Alberta to create innovative and transformative local policies that promote housing diversity, access and choice. If you are interested in learning more about the project, current partnership opportunities, and research, please get in touch by contacting us here at housingchoice@ruraldevelopment.ca or by visiting our [webpage](#).



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Email: housingchoice@ruraldevelopment.ca

Website: <https://www.housingredefined.ca/enabling-housing-choice-project>