

# West Hollywood **Summary Themes & Conclusions**

**HOUSING ELEMENT FOCUS GROUPS**



June 2013

Prepared for:  
the City of West Hollywood



**ATTACHMENT D**



# Introduction

The City of West Hollywood is currently updating the Housing Element of the City's General Plan. As part of the public outreach effort, City staff organized a series of focus groups to discuss housing issues and opportunities in the City. The purpose of the focus groups was to obtain honest feedback from local experts and stakeholders about housing in the City (feedback that can be difficult to obtain during public workshops) and to work with the groups to explore solutions to housing issues facing the City. Five focus groups were conducted between May 1 and May 22, 2013. The focus groups were organized by the City and facilitated by Raimi + Associates.

Each focus group had between 8 and 14 participants.<sup>1</sup> Participants were invited by staff, and the groups were designed to include stakeholders and community members with a range of perspectives on housing issues. Each group discussed the housing vision for the City, the primary issues with regards to housing in West Hollywood, potential solutions to the housing issues, and on-going methods used by the City for communicating with residents and stakeholders about housing. The first four focus groups were organized by stakeholder group as follows:

1. **Non-profit developers and service providers.** Participants in this group included representatives of organizations who regularly work in the City.
2. **Chamber of commerce and members of the business community.** This group included architects, business owners, and development professionals who are members of the Chamber's Governmental Affairs Committee.
3. **Tenants.** Tenants included those in rent-stabilized, affordable, and market rate housing, as well as two Rent Stabilization Commissioners.
4. **Owners, landlords and property managers.** The property owners and managers group included a mix of single-family property owners, condominium owners, representatives of property management companies, and two Rent Stabilization Commissioners.

The fifth and last focus group included a mix of new participants and individuals who attended one of the previous four focus groups. At the fifth focus group, Raimi + Associates provided an overview of the results of the other focus groups. This was followed by a discussion of the key themes, the successful programs and policies of the City, potential ways to improve the current housing issues, and, finally, how City staff could ensure continued discussion on housing issues and opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> In order to ensure confidentiality, the names and affiliations for participants in each focus group are being withheld.

## Strengths of the City

Housing is an important issue for many of the City's residents. While the participants identified a number of issues with housing (see discussion below), participants in every focus group complimented the City on its leadership and dedication to housing as well as its commitment to social service programs. Further, each group complimented the City's elected leadership for supporting programs and policies that encourage diversity and affordability and also for protecting the rights of tenants.

The following are some of the strengths of the City mentioned during the focus groups.

- **Commitment to housing.** The City is committed to providing high quality housing and housing for lower income residents. Examples of programs are the inclusionary housing program, rent control, and the density bonus for affordable housing. In addition, there is no negative stigma with affordable housing in West Hollywood as there is in many other cities.
- **Responsiveness.** City is responsive to the concerns of residents and, in particular, tenants' complaints about housing. Many residents feel that they have a good relationship with the City.
- **Social service programs.** West Hollywood provides a variety of social service programs and is a good partner with organizations working in the city that provide social services.
- **Special needs housing.** The City does a good job of providing housing for residents with special needs.
- **Communication.** The City does a very good job of communicating information to tenants and owners about rent control and the City's housing laws.
- **Location.** West Hollywood is an "A" location and many people want to live in the City. It has the feeling of being a small village in a large metropolitan area.
- **Public safety.** Participants commented that the City is a safe place to live and do businesses.
- **Diversity.** The City is very diverse and many participants expressed their desire to live in a diverse community.
- **Walkability.** The City is very walkable and there are goods and services within walking distance of most residents.
- **Sense of community.** The City has a strong identity and a strong sense of community. Many residents are involved in civic life and care about their neighbors.

# Key Issues with Housing

During the focus groups, participants identified a number of housing-related issues in the City. These are listed below.

- **Housing cost.** Housing in the City is expensive, relative to other cities.
- **Lack of Affordable housing.** More affordable housing is needed, particularly at the very low income level.
- **Supply of housing.** Some participants felt that there is a limited supply of housing and housing is difficult to find. There are long waiting lists for new units and affordable housing.
- **Age of housing stock.** The housing stock is old and needs repair, renovation or replacement.
- **Cost of renovation.** Due to the age and design of some structures, major renovations to housing systems – HVAC, electrical, plumbing and structure – is cost-prohibitive. The rent control laws exacerbate this issue and create disincentives for owners to renovate the housing stock.
- **Scale of new development.** Some participants felt that new development is out of scale with existing character of the City. Others believe that this perceived incompatibility is caused by the price of housing and the development regulations that require projects to maximize density.
- **Cost of new construction.** It is expensive to build in the City, which makes it difficult to build new affordable and market rate housing.
- **Small parcel sizes.** Many parcels in the City are small and/or irregularly shaped, thus making new construction more difficult.
- **Impacts of development.** Some participants felt that new development is exacerbating traffic and parking issues in the City.
- **Lack of moderate income housing.** Many groups discussed the lack of moderate income housing in the City and expressed that there is a widening gap between high-end and lower income housing.
- **Impact of development regulations on design.** The City's development regulations limit the type of housing that can be built and generally require larger buildings that some feel are out of scale with the existing character of the City.
- **Lack of education.** More tenant, owner and property manager education is needed on the variety of housing laws in the City. This education could mitigate some of the issues the City is confronting.
- **Fear of retaliation/harassment.** Some participants expressed a fear of retaliation and harassment from property owners if tenants complain about the quality of housing.
- **Enforcement of housing laws.** Some participants saw a need for greater enforcement of the City's housing laws, explaining that the City only responds to complaints rather than taking a proactive approach to enforcement.
- **Lack of very low-income housing.** Some expressed that there is a lack of housing at the very low-income category, in part because the City's regulations make it difficult to build housing at this income level.
- **Supply of low cost housing.** Some participants felt that the City's supply of affordable rent controlled units is diminishing due in part to outside investors purchasing buildings and increasing rents and converting apartments to condominiums.
- **Housing for seniors and special needs populations.** Many expressed that it is difficult for seniors to switch to a new housing unit as their needs change. There is also a lack of housing for certain special-needs populations.

# Major Themes from the Discussions

The following are the major themes discussed during the focus groups. Please note that not every comment or discussion from the focus group is listed below; rather, this section attempts to encapsulate the major discussions that occurred. A comprehensive list of all comments can be found in the transcribed comments from each focus group.

## Theme #1: Many good things are happening in West Hollywood.

While there were many issues identified by participants, nearly everyone expressed that West Hollywood is a great place to live and do businesses and that the City is doing a lot to support its residents. Some examples of what the City does to support housing mentioned during the focus groups are the existing inclusionary housing policy, the density bonus program, commitment to social services, and City staff's responsiveness to housing-related complaints. (Note: not every example was mentioned during each focus group.)

## Theme #2: There is confusion about the definition of affordable housing.

During the discussions, participants mentioned that there is confusion among residents regarding the difference between *affordable housing* (subsidized, Section 8, etc.) and inexpensive housing that occurs because of rent control. Due to rent control, there are many longtime residents who are wealthy but pay little rent owing to the fact that they have been in their unit for many years. The City should continue to educate the community about different housing programs and should develop new policies and programs to promote both affordable housing and inexpensive housing from rent control.

## Theme #3: Demographics are changing.

Many participants expressed a belief that the demographics of the City have changed over time. Other participants said that the City is still diverse but that some long-time residents have moved out. While not substantiated by facts presented at the focus groups, there is a sense among some participants that the City is more transient than in the past and that there is a diminished sense of community.

## Theme #4: There is a middle income housing gap.

All groups expressed the sense that the City is becoming a city of extremes, with a widening gap between high-income residents who are generally newer to the City and lower-income residents who have lived in the City for a long time. Consequently, there is not as much housing available to middle-income residents. Participants also expressed that new middle-income housing can be addressed through the Housing Element and that this should be a priority for the City.

## Theme #5: The City's policies and regulations may result in unintended consequences.

Participants with extensive knowledge of the City's housing programs (particularly architects, affordable housing advocates, and developers) expressed that the City's policies and regulations may be having unintended consequences. Over the years, the City has developed a large number of policies and programs to address housing. These include the inclusionary housing program, the density bonus for affordable housing, the requirement that new projects build at least 90% of the maximum allowed density, and the requirement for a maximum average unit size. While each regulation and policy addresses an individual topic of concern, taken together they result in large buildings (which some said are out of scale with the City), inhibit creativity in design, and limit the types of housing

units that can be built in the City. Suggestions were made to examine the collective result of all these policies and develop solutions to address the issues.

Theme #6: Much of the housing stock is in poor physical condition.

While the City is a popular place to live and housing is expensive, there was general consensus that the quality of the housing stock is poor. There was also agreement that issues with housing could be divided into two categories: *structural* issues for items such as seismic, plumbing and electrical, and *cosmetic* issues for items such as paint, carpeting and appliances. To compound the problem, owners take wildly divergent approaches to maintenance. Some owners do regular upkeep and maintenance while others do only the minimum amount required. Some owners allow tenants to make improvements themselves while others do not. Another finding is that for some buildings, doing major structural repair is cost prohibitive due to the design of the building. In these instances it may be more cost effective to replace rather than repair the building. However, there is a fear that owners will let their buildings fall into disrepair in order to replace the building and, in doing so, displace the tenants. This fear may be justified as one owner stated that they do not make improvements in order to get rent-controlled tenants out of buildings. Multiple ideas were presented for how to pay for improvements, both structural and cosmetic. Owners stated that the current housing laws are a disincentive to make improvements since the costs of repair cannot be recouped through increases in rent.

Theme #7: There is disagreement over renovation versus replacement housing.

Following onto Theme #6, there was discussion and disagreement in the groups about whether some of the housing stock should be renovated or simply replaced. Some participants stated that rehabilitating the older housing stock is a way to maintain lower cost housing in the City. Others stated that while this may be a noble goal, there are some buildings that are not repairable and should be replaced. Likewise, some owners felt that if they could recoup the costs of repairs, they would be more likely to renovate their buildings. Based on the discussions in the focus groups, clearer guidance is needed from the City on the rules and regulations for replacing housing and the resulting displacement of tenants.

Theme #8: Education is crucial.

All focus groups agreed that additional tenant, owner and property manager education is critical. The City does a good job of providing information to its residents and owners but too often this information is ignored. Multiple suggestions were made about how to enhance education, including posting notices in buildings' common areas.

Theme #9: Proactive code enforcement was a popular topic of discussion.

Every focus group had a discussion about proactive versus reactive code enforcement and there were mixed opinions about whether the City of West Hollywood should create a program similar to the City of Los Angeles. Those in favor said that it would address the issue of poor quality housing stock. Those opposed said that it would be an "invasion of privacy" to tenants and could lead to the City becoming involved in other issues when inspectors enter units (such as hoarding, conditions of pets, and mental health issues). Some participants thought that tenant education about the maintenance requirements of owners would be a better way to address housing quality issues. Finally, some participants said that before resorting to a proactive code enforcement program, the City should identify the issue that it is trying to solve and then determine whether proactive enforcement is the best solution.



#### Theme #10: Harassment occurs in the City.

Multiple focus groups said that there are many instances of harassment and retaliation against tenants who ask for repairs or who report code violations. In addition, some tenants said that the fear of harassment and retaliation alone keeps many tenants from reporting violations to the City. Despite these comments from some participants, others expressed doubt about how big of an issue harassment actually is given the number of cases reported each year. Recommendations were made that the City get a better understanding of the prevalence and type of harassment before making a decision on how to address the issue.

#### Theme #11: New housing in the City.

Every focus group addressed the question of whether new housing should be built in the City. A few participants said that the City is completely built out and no new housing should be constructed, others said that while new housing is needed, recent residential development is out of scale with existing development. Many others supported new housing to address current housing shortages and expand economic development opportunities. In addition to the scale of development, concerns over new housing revolve around parking and traffic issues. Other comments about new housing in the City are listed below:

- West Hollywood is a great market for new, quality housing and this will enhance the City.
- More incentives should be provided to the for-profit sector in order to generate more Affordable housing and low-cost housing.
- It is expensive to build in West Hollywood so developers focus on high-end housing at the expense of providing housing for low and moderate income households.
- There are many challenges to new development in the City including the cost of land, parcel assembly, and the development process.

#### Theme #12: New models for housing and clarity on City's vision for new housing are needed.

Some participants expressed a desire to see the City support a wider range of building types. The existing laws and regulations prescribe a limited range of housing types. Ideas for new housing types mentioned by the groups included:

- Cottage clusters
- Zero-lot line
- Co-op
- Micro-housing
- Live-work spaces (not loft spaces)
- Senior housing
- Assisted living
- The ability to refashion existing housing for new types of tenants (bungalows to senior housing for example)
- Allowing groups of investors to buy a property and subdivide it

The discussion of the types of new housing led to comments that the City should be clearer on its vision for new housing, particularly the demographics of new tenants, the affordability levels, and the types of housing that should be promoted.



#### Theme #13: Aging in place as a common theme.

The ability for senior citizens to live in the City and to “age in place” was a common theme discussed by many participants. Overall, there is general support for the City to facilitate aging in place through design, policy, and programs. There are multiple issues that the senior population faces in the City. One is that seniors are unable to move to units to better serve their needs as they age since they will no longer have the benefit of rent controlled units. Another is that more assistance is needed to help seniors find age-appropriate housing in the City. Finally, recommendations were made to design and renovate units to support universal design.

#### Theme #14: Prioritization of new housing for existing residents.

Housing in West Hollywood is difficult to find and there are long wait lists for any new affordable housing in the City. Multiple participants expressed their opinion that the new housing being constructed in the City should be reserved for existing City residents before being made available to those living outside of the City. Numerous regulatory issues were identified; however, there was still a strong preference for a priority to be given to existing residents.

#### Theme #15: Housing is related to other topics.

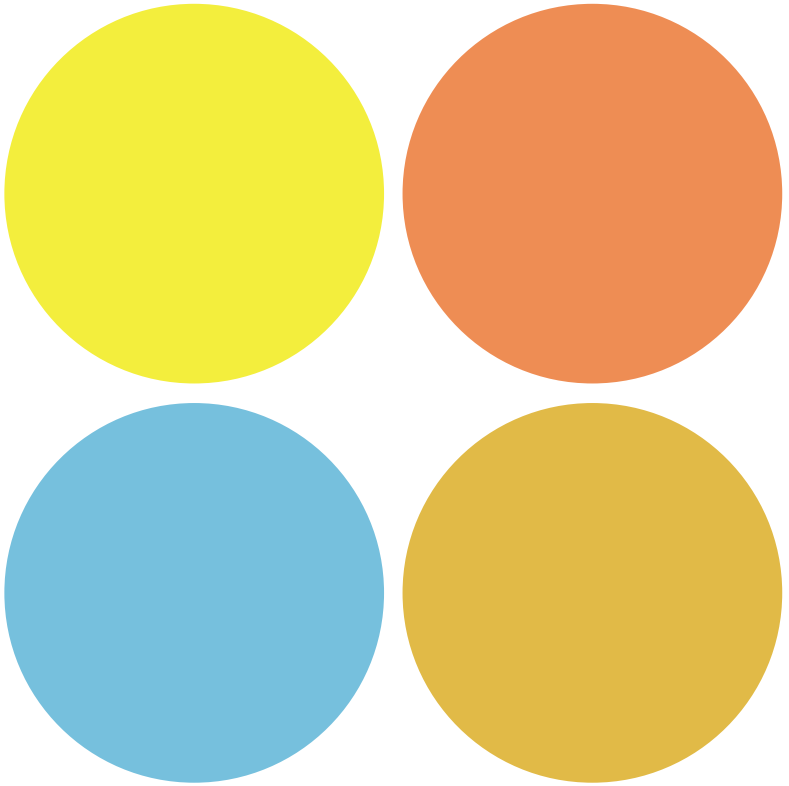
In addition to the conversation about affordability and the quality of the housing stock, there were multiple comments that housing impacts and is impacted by a number of related topics. These are:

- **Built environment.** New and renovated housing can improve the overall quality of the built environment in the City. This can occur regardless of the income level of the housing.
- **Sustainability/Green Buildings.** There should be stronger ties between the City’s Climate Action Plan and the housing being constructed/renovated. The design and redesign of new housing – including windows, solar panels, energy efficiency – can help the City meet its climate reduction goals.
- **Economic development.** There is a strong link between housing and economic development. Renovations to the housing stock and new housing can enhance economic development opportunities in the City and expand the tax base.
- **Transportation and Transit.** There were multiple comments that a better transit system is needed in the City, particularly as the region grows.
- **Streetscape.** The visual quality of the streetscape can impact the quality of housing and the City should look to improve streetscapes as a way to encourage property owners to invest in their properties.

## **Moving Forward: Recommendations for City Activities**

During the focus groups, participants made multiple recommendations for City programs and policies to support housing in the City. These recommendations are listed below.

- Expand education for tenants and landlords, beyond just an annual mailer on tenants rights.
- Continue organizing focus group discussions, including focus groups/working sessions for specific sub-populations. In particular, those who know the regulatory system the best – developers, architects, builders, etc. – should be brought together to help the City understand and address the issues with the current regulations. In addition, target discussions to address different areas of the City and different types of housing.
- Hold an annual housing summit to discuss housing issues
- Expand and improve unit registration
- Explore a proactive enforcement/systematic enforcement of rental units. Prior to doing this, identify the issue that the system is trying to address to ensure that the program is warranted and, if so, structured to address the concerns of the community.
- Create a companion animal registry to ensure that these animals are not used as an excuse to evict tenants.
- Create and implement an anonymous complaint system to protect tenants from harassment and retaliation.
- Have regular conversations with the Rent Control Board and the Planning Commission on specific housing-related topics.
- Create/sponsor a housing alliance that brings together a diversity of groups with an interest in housing.
- Create a “Landlord of the Year” program to encourage owners to take care of their properties.
- Provide an increased level of funding for affordable housing
- Remove barriers and create incentives for owners to renovate their buildings and to recoup the costs of construction.
- As the zoning code is updated, conduct an analysis of the impacts of various City regulations and policies on housing and work with stakeholders to address the issues that arise.



# **APPENDIX**

# West Hollywood Housing Element Focus Groups Complete Meeting Notes

*June 11, 2013*

The following is a comprehensive list of all of the comments from all five focus groups. The five focus groups were:

1. **Non-profit developers and service providers.** Participants in this group included representatives of organizations who regularly work in the City.
2. **Chamber of commerce and members of the business community.** This group included architects, business owners, and development professionals who are members of the Chamber's Governmental Affairs Committee.
3. **Tenants.** Tenants included those in rent-stabilized, affordable, and market rate housing, as well as two Rent Stabilization Commissioners.
4. **Owners, landlords and property managers.** The property owners and managers group included a mix of single-family property owners, condominium owners, representatives of property management companies, and two Rent Stabilization Commissioners.
5. **New participants and previous focus group attendees.** At the fifth focus group, Raimi + Associates provided an overview of the results of the other focus groups, including a discussion of key themes and next steps for the City.

The comments from each focus group are organized by subject as follows:

1. **Issues/Challenges** – what are the problems with housing in West Hollywood?
2. **Solutions/Opportunities** – how do we make housing better, safer, cheaper, and more accessible? What steps should the City take?
3. **Communication** – how can the City reach out to the community? How can various stakeholder groups communicate effectively amongst one another?

# Focus Group #1: Non-Profit Developers & Service Providers (May 1<sup>st</sup>)

## Issues/Challenges

- West Hollywood started as a city that provided a haven for activists, LGBT populations, AIDS hospices. This means it has a relatively transient population, with mobile visitors.
- There is not enough affordable housing in West Hollywood or the general LA area.
- Market-rate renters and high-income residents are well served by the housing options in West Hollywood.
- Moderate housing needs are not addressed; most live in the city's aging housing stock (Moderate housing = workforce housing)
- West Hollywood should look toward other small, high-density cities for housing solutions (San Francisco or Charlotte, which has a lower cost of living)
- Non-profits serve seniors, disabled, and lower-income residents, but the demographics indicate that there are other housing needs.
- The city needs to find the middle; West Hollywood is becoming a city of extremes.
- West Hollywood has tensions about traffic and density, but residents are mostly friendly toward affordable housing. The Sierra Bonita project had few detractors.
- Tensions between those who want growth and those who don't. Affordable housing doesn't have a stigma in West Hollywood, but concerns about growth affect affordability.
- Residents fear an undue burden from density. Residents are concerned that West Hollywood is growing too quickly. City needs to build an acceptance of the growth that is necessary to promote affordable housing.
- Renters do not have as loud of a political voice, so homeowners are sometimes the only ones that get heard.
- Density is needed to balance market rate and affordable housing needs.
- Transportation services are not age friendly.
- In the past, tensions in West Hollywood have been around residential/commercial, but now it is between old housing/new housing.
- Traffic is a major concern.
- Congestion is a problem. It is hard to access West Hollywood from the outside.
- City doesn't have universal design standards, especially for aging in place issues.
- Condo conversions are forcing existing residents out and are raising the cost of housing.
- Loss of rent-controlled units has affected affordability. City should do more to encourage affordable housing development.
- Cost of land makes it hard to develop moderate/affordable housing. Loss of redevelopment has created a vacuum to fill this need, since redevelopment provided funds for affordable housing.
- Need to find a program/funding source to replace redevelopment.
- West Hollywood is a very walkable city and that needs to be maintained.
- Three-story buildings don't pencil out for developers (most of Santa Monica Blvd is zoned for three stories).
- Small lot sizes make it hard to do land assembly.
- Sequestration is affecting affordable housing world, which already has other challenges to battle.
- Section 8 housing is hard to find in West Hollywood. Section 8 has lowered voucher amounts because of sequestration; changes to the program always affect the most vulnerable.

- Less restrictions on owner-occupied housing; West Hollywood has fewer opportunities for shared housing because it has fewer single-family homes.
- The federal programs that are in place for affordable housing are not working.
- West Hollywood already has affordable housing requirements so that developers can give back, but incentives are needed so that the for-profit sector will create more affordable housing than the minimum required.
- West Hollywood needs to prepare for older population. Housing is an important factor for age-friendly cities.
- Seniors are unable to move to units that serve their needs better because they are afraid to lose their rent-controlled rates.
- It is hard for families to find housing in West Hollywood. New construction tends to offer smaller, one-bedroom or studio units.
- Accessibility to transit is important.
- Diversity should be one of the city's housing goals (age, income).

### Solutions/Opportunities

- West Hollywood is a generous city, it provides lots of services and is responsive.
- Being in a smaller city means that constituents count and have a voice.
- Build a subway.
- West Hollywood needs to do more about Section 8 retention. There is no procedure to make landlords fix issues. The City should find leverage to require improvements for Section 8 voucher tenants.
- Housing stock is old, which makes it hard to upgrade for ADA standards. City should provide incentives to upgrade/retrofit older housing (ie: there is a building that couldn't get an elevator).
- City already has a housing trust fund and supports affordable housing non-profits, but West Hollywood can do more to educate residents about the need for economic growth.
- Economic growth is needed to pay for city services. Residents have a tendency to want to stop economic growth, but the City needs to communicate that it's needed.
- City can create a trust fund to help pay for retrofits (although this doesn't address the need for growth).
- Some older housing may need to be demolished to make way for current housing needs.
- Development has to go up (vertical), which means parking must go underground and that can be expensive.
- West Hollywood population includes many marginalized communities (Russian immigrants, LGBT, seniors). City has long been a safe haven for many groups.
- The City needs to think about planning for the aging population that will still need support.
- City should link housing growth to better transportation options.
- Provide incentives for smaller lot sizes (ie: density bonus; reduced parking requirements).
- Provide bonuses for moderate housing.
- West Hollywood needs to implement a carrot and stick approach; impact fees can be targeted to address housing needs and other city priorities.
- County inspection timeline needs to be sped up. Tenants sometimes have to pay for repairs, even though it is the landlord's responsibility.
- There are opportunities for more public/private partnerships.

- Inclusionary housing is an opportunity to build in diversity.
- West Hollywood could pass an ordinance that requires minor improvements for Section 8 housing and hold property owners to the same standards for all tenants.
- Housing design standards need to be implemented to address aging needs and the impacts of housing on the community.
- Inclusionary housing can be spread out throughout the city and in existing housing stock, but should be permanently restricted for affordability.

### Communication

- Housing is a common theme among vulnerable groups. Recent “WeHo Cares” study identified housing as a top issue.
- Hold quarterly meetings of affordable housing stakeholders; create an alliance of all the different players.
- Health advisory boards are a resource, but they don’t communicate with each other. Have the health advisory boards appoint an affordable housing representative and create an ad-hoc committee.
- There needs to be more collaboration between non-profit and for-profit affordable housing developers.
- West Hollywood should do more outreach to property owners on Section 8 and offer incentives to accept vouchers, especially for seniors. Incentives can include money for abatement that is required during inspections, so that tenants aren’t kicked out of housing.



## Focus Group #2: Tenants (May 8<sup>th</sup>)

### Issues/Challenges

- West Hollywood has changed over time:
  - Harder to get residents engaged in neighborhood events
  - Less effort has been made to include/work with neighborhood leaders and who they are isn't very clear
  - West Hollywood was a friendlier place
  - Police were very responsive; different from other cities.
  - Safe place, but not as affordable as it used to be.
- Gentrification is becoming a problem; pushing longtime residents out.
- Housing is too expensive in West Hollywood.
- There is a tension between scale of new construction and the existing character of the community.
- West Hollywood has been rezoned, but some single family homes were saved
- Businesses used to be more receptive to residents' concerns (ie: mitigated against noise issues, etc.)
- West Hollywood has always been supportive of HIV residents and still has a strong LGBT community.
- Apartments sometimes have mold.
- Affordable housing should be easier to find.
- Schools are different; they lured students from neighboring areas
- Only 30+ units pencil out for developers, so new construction is heavy on megaprojects.
- Housing is expensive to build; city doesn't provide funds for affordable housing, so state and federal contributions require that units be open to outside residents.
- Luck shouldn't determine a person's chances in a housing lottery.
- Complaints about landlords shouldn't lead to eviction. Landlords need to be accountable for law-mandated repairs.
- It's hard to find Section 8 housing in West Hollywood.
- Landlords shouldn't be able to bully Section 8 tenants.
- Section 8 housing gets annual inspections and they are very thorough.
- Section 8 housing is not getting renewed in West Hollywood.
- Housing authorities are reducing their share of Section 8 vouchers because of sequestration; landlords are not accepting reduced rents.
- Housing harassment is an issue in West Hollywood.
- Tenants sometimes have to do their own repairs to avoid conflict with landlords.
- The city doesn't do enough to support tenants.
- Seniors are very vulnerable to housing issues.
- Quality of rental housing is an issue; tenants don't bring it up because they are afraid to lose the housing.
- More affordable housing units are needed for seniors.
- Seniors would like to have option to live in mixed-housing neighborhoods and not just in senior housing buildings.
- West Hollywood doesn't have enough economic diversity.
- West Hollywood needs to have more moderate housing options.
- People who work in West Hollywood cannot afford to live there.

- Rent increases are pushing HIV patients out of West Hollywood, but most of the supportive services they need are in the city.
- The city needs a more aggressive rent stabilization ordinance and commission.
- There are instances when tenants get pushed out of housing units and the buildings sits empty for a long time.
- West Hollywood needs to establish a foundation to address its housing issues.
- More resident participation is needed on housing issues.
- The city should organize a housing summit.
- There is less outreach taking place between businesses and the community.
- There should be an ethics code for councilmembers on housing issues.
- Too many affordable housing units are being torn down and not replaced
- The city has seen a rise in the number of children living in the city; also has seen a rise in the number of children living in poverty.
- Aging housing is an issue; but some people would prefer to stay in aging housing rather than move out of the city.
- New housing on Santa Monica & Fountain is not taking into account the impacts that it will have on the community.

### Solutions/Opportunities

- More enforcement/code inspectors to enforce the existing standards.
- Code enforcement now is complaint-driven, but tenants are afraid to speak up. Proactive code enforcement is needed, especially in rent-stabilized units.
- The city should implement regular inspections on buildings and provide owners with a 30-day notice so that it incentivizes them to make repairs.
- West Hollywood had a pilot proactive code enforcement program; it wasn't as aggressive as needed and more outreach was needed for tenants.
- Make it easier for residents who get pushed out of housing to find new opportunities in West Hollywood.
- West Hollywood should make more financial contributions toward affordable housing construction/maintenance.
- Foreclosed properties should be purchased by city and converted into affordable housing.
- Small lots make it difficult to build affordable housing.
- Tenant contributions should be based on income/ability to pay.
- Open the closed wait lists for low-income housing.
- The type of funding used determines the city's housing population; more diversity is needed.
- People prefer one-bedroom units to studios.
- Units that are being built are too small.
- Open the affordable housing wait list; give priority to current residents.
- Protect existing housing stock through proactive code enforcement.
- Help seniors move to age-appropriate housing without losing their rent control price.
- Market rate increases should come with added services and improvements.
- Fair housing laws/address housing harassment

- City should subsidize workforce housing
- Create a rent-to-own housing program
- There should be more assistance to help residents find age appropriate housing; city should have a role in making this possible.
- City needs to refine its definition of housing harassment.

### Communication

- Establish a housing committee.
- Increase transparency on housing issues.
- City already has good communication with residents (newsletters, translation services)
- Communicate via emails (although a recent survey showed that only 50% of West Hollywood residents rely on email)
- Need to find a way for residents to report issues without fear of retaliation.

## **Focus Group #3: Chamber of Commerce & members of the business community (May 9<sup>th</sup>)**

### Issues/Challenges

- West Hollywood has a middle-income housing gap.
- Current incentives cater to affordable housing, but not enough is being done to promote middle-income housing and home ownership.
- West Hollywood has improved in the last decades, but it is hard to move into the city. Newcomers are getting priced out.
- Aging housing stock is a problem (although they provide opportunities for affordable housing). Limited housing supply also means that owners can get market-rate rents on aging housing.
- It is expensive to build in West Hollywood, so developers focus on high-end housing to get better returns.
- For a while, most of the new construction was focused on condos, but the economy has changed the market.
- Explore new housing typologies based on geographic location (ie: cottage clusters, zero lot lines, moderate housing options).
- Groups of investors should be able to buy a property and subdivide it; city makes it difficult for that to be a viable option.
- Housing element is an opportunity to address middle-income housing gap.
- Small households bring down the city's median income because they tend to have more single-income vs. double income earners).
- Housing is dilapidated, partly as a result of rent control
- Housing on eastern neighborhoods of West Hollywood doesn't look like they are maintained; there is no attention to landscape.
- It's challenging to convince property owners to invest in their properties (such as electrical, HVAC systems).
- Rent stabilization disincentivizes upgrades, investments on property.
- Live/work housing also requires attention to commercial development (but it also requires density).
- Growing number of people who want to live in cities and are not afraid of density. They understand the sacrifices that it entails, but it comes with needs such as public spaces, good schools, pocket parks.
- What kind of resident is the city trying to encourage? West Hollywood may never be a family community because of limited housing options for families.

### Solutions

- Need to think about how we deal with preservation, old housing and new construction.
- Older housing can be transformed for aging in place; change it to co-ops
- LGBT seniors have a social community in West Hollywood, but they are getting pushed out of city.
- Refashion existing housing (bungalows can be converted to senior housing, rather than being torn down for new construction).
- Encourage planning staff to find new creative housing options (look to other communities, such as Washington cities, to find best practices and solutions).

- Some people in West Hollywood view housing as a service, protection. However, it is important to also look at the built environment consequences of housing.
- Advocacy on aging in place issues has been ignored.
- How do we complete the city not based on requirements but on vision?
- If we know that new housing will be infill, what do we want it to look like?
- New housing construction has not been consistent with the West Hollywood image as an urban village with mixed demographics.
- West Hollywood has been too focused on affordable housing and density.
- The 90% build-out requirement is creating areas with too much density.
- Existing housing laws and requirements make it difficult to build housing diversity.
- West Hollywood should implement qualitative criteria to its quantitative requirements.
- West Hollywood is becoming a commodity (developers entitle property with no intent to build, then flip for profit).
- Developers can sometimes make more money by building less.
- Development process in West Hollywood needs to be changed.
- Fees, zoning is too focused on affordable housing, but the city needs to think beyond that.
- West Hollywood may need to provide financial incentives to get the kind of housing that the community wants.
- Bloomberg's project (300-sq. feet apartments) may serve as a model for affordable housing - would be a great tool for transitional youth in West Hollywood.
- Density should be geographically targeted.
- West Hollywood needs more live-work spaces (shop on bottom, housing at the top, rather than large loft spaces). Existing code makes it hard to build.
- West Hollywood needs to make it easier to build accessory housing units (granny flats).
- Should encourage detached studios, zero lot lines, cottage clusters with shared green space
- Some developers are buying smaller lots and building mini mansions (becoming row housing in West Hollywood). Need to create incentives so that this is not the only type of housing that is getting built.
- Establish qualitative criteria for West Hollywood. How do we want to live in the city? Create criteria based on the lifestyle that the city wants to promote.
- There are 42 historically designated buildings in West Hollywood; the city should create a historic building fund for repairs.
- Create a program to highlight a landlord of the year. Call it something like "Reinvest in WeHo" to encourage property owners to invest in the community.
- West Hollywood needs to do more to promote sustainability (solar power, new windows).
- West Hollywood should implement new streetscape requirements to enhance sense of community and make streets more interesting.
- Focus on incentive structures to get landlords to invest in their properties.
- Downzone (or put in place the appropriate zoning) to disincentivize megaprojects.
- Landlords should be able to increase rents based on investments that are made.

## Communication

- Need to have district-based discussions (eastside, Westside, Santa Monica corridor)
- Pursue idea of creating community plans that are based on geography and housing type.
- Have finer grained discussion based on the geography, housing type, and desired outcome
- Talk about the issues with dingbat housing
- Focus discussions on different housing types (single-family home, multifamily, different zoning designations)
- Invite academics to discussion and invite other jurisdictions that are also dealing with similar housing issues to share ideas and best practices
- Have both focus group discussions and community forums
- Online surveys, live web conversations and increased use of social media as a communication tool
- Direct mail is not the most effective form of communication
- City needs to engage people in a new way of thinking about the future of housing
- Provide GAC (Chamber's Government Advisory Committee)
- Invite policy makers to attend housing discussions (Concerns were raised about Brown Act and ensuring that community had a safe space to provide comment on issues)
- More community events around housing topic so that residents have an opportunity to engage and understand issues (such as a recent meeting on general plan/housing element)

## Focus Group #4: Owners, landlords and Property Managers (May 9<sup>th</sup>)

### Issues/Challenges

- What is great about West Hollywood?
  - It has a feeling of being like a small village within a large metropolitan area.
  - Feels like both a small city and an urban area
  - West Hollywood has a lot of diversity.
  - It is nice to be able to walk to restaurants, etc. (walkability)
  - The City has good nightlife and is affordable.
  - West Hollywood is still a great market for quality housing.
  - West Hollywood is a highly valued place to live.
- West Hollywood has a strong sense of community. In particular, LGBT communities create a sense of friendliness and community.
- West Hollywood was once very affordable, safe and inclusive.
- West Hollywood is an "A" location; investors like to buy older, rent-controlled apartments and boost rents to recoup their investment.
- Owners are concerned about strict, rent-control laws, but companies feel that their investment and lobbying can help change those laws.
- Prices for housing in West Hollywood vary from affordable to very expensive.
- Women want to live in safe communities.
- Residents generally feel that they have a good relationship with the City.
- Rent is sometimes less than market rate, but owners feel that it can be good business.
- Yet, West Hollywood lacks systematic code enforcement, which leads to lower quality housing.
- Hearing officers are very fair to landlords and owners, at the expense of tenants' rights.
- There is a lot of interest to own in West Hollywood.
- Incentives (rent increases or other funding) would help encourage owners to invest in their property.
- Los Angeles has higher code enforcement standards.
- Tenants should be entitled to minimum livability requirements.
- Systematic code enforcement leads to ongoing improvements in LA, but small improvements help owners avoid deterioration.
- Improvements like a new roof can sometimes lead to rent increases in West Hollywood, but it is a complicated process for owners, so they often avoid it.
- Can't buy a building under a five-cap (which limits profit to 3-4% of investment?)
- Owners often have to figure out if investments will pencil out based on limited rent increases.
- In LA, rent increases have to be done at half-cost over 72 months and 60 months for capital improvements.
- Often times, simple improvements like windows and panes don't get replaced.
- The demographics of the City mean that young people will not be able to absorb the increased housing prices.
- Owners like to let buildings go so that they can demolish them and build new construction.
- Other places provide incentives so that owners will pay for their improvements (NYC)
- Rent increases will lead to a loss of diversity.
- West Hollywood has caps on capital improvement cost recovery.
- Owners don't like to let tenants pay for their own improvements because it will incentivize them to stay.



- Owners who buy have to try to get rent-controlled tenants out to recoup their investment.
- In “A” markets, owners need higher rents to make up their investment.
- Landlords neglect to make repairs as a way to increase their profits.
- Large, five-story buildings are going up in neighborhoods, but it raises concerns about parking and traffic.
- One-bedroom condos will always have two cars, but existing parking requirements do not reflect that reality in West Hollywood.
- The demand to live in West Hollywood should be shared regionally.
- West Hollywood doesn’t need more housing.
- Development can encourage economic activity.
- The City’s aging housing stock needs to be replaced and renovated, but that comes with concerns about displacement.
- New construction devalues existing housing stock in West Hollywood. And at what point is the City too overcrowded that it fails to draw people in?
- The area around Robertson Avenue has improved and property values have increased.
- We have to ask how existing West Hollywood residents feel about growth.
- Allowing developers to build out to the sidewalks means that there is little room for green space.
- New development should fit with the character of the City. New buildings seem out of scale.
- Hayward residents were displaced and replacement units were made available to people who weren’t West Hollywood residents.
- There has been an increase in break-ins and a decrease in police patrols. West Hollywood Police Department is understaffed.
- Safety is decreasing; would like to see more patrols on the street.
- There are concerns that lack of senior housing/assisted living facilities will mean that seniors have to leave their social and civic networks in West Hollywood. It is getting harder for seniors to live here.
- The City has few rehab options available.
- Need more co-op housing for all income levels.
- Housing Element allows 11-story density on Santa Monica Blvd.
- Developers are concerned that increased regulation in West Hollywood will make it harder to invest in the City.
- Existing public transportation infrastructure doesn’t support massive developments
- Owners who are disciplined about repairs can save money by being proactive
- Despite these issues, West Hollywood is a great city.

## Solutions

- Have more rent-to-own options.
- Replace/renovate aging housing stock. The City could help by providing financial incentives, with the requirement that housing remain affordable.
- Income levels should determine housing needs.
- Regular inspections would prevent disrepair. Annual maintenance can help owners avoid costly one-time repairs, but owners need to be included in the process.
- Provide maintenance incentives to make improvements (tax decreases, programs that give owners incentives if the rent can be reduced).

- Existing housing should meet minimum code requirements.
- Would prefer that development be controlled more in West Hollywood; Environmental reports don't accurately reflect traffic impacts.
- Need stronger zoning laws; current zoning requirements are negotiable, often get waived.
- City needs to build flexible parking that residents can use.

### Communication

- Continue hosting focus group discussions with housing/industry leaders with different ideas and views.
- How can stakeholders generate ideas and send them to City Hall?
- Developers shouldn't be allowed to contribute to campaigns.
- West Hollywood code enforcement is more responsive.

## Focus Group #5: Confirm themes and identify solutions (May 22<sup>nd</sup>)

### Issues/Challenges

- The 20% requirement maximizes bonus, but it disincentivizes very low-income affordable housing.
- The 75% increase based on the county index prioritizes renters over buildings; it creates a disincentive for owners to do upgrades because they lose money with inflation.
- City doesn't have a climate action plan that addresses housing from a built environment perspective.
- Many buildings in West Hollywood are dingbat housing.
- System replacement in older buildings (electrical, plumbing) is not a viable option, even with incentives.
- There are concerns that the City can't protect the average resident from harassment and displacement.
- Example of issues in West Hollywood: the courtyard housing ordinance gives incentives for meeting criteria. To address affordability, the ordinance restricted unit size, but then became incompatible with the idea of courtyard housing. City often creates these conflicts with codes.
- Other issue: prevailing building size in a neighborhood will be two to three stories, but now new development is required to max out density, which results in five-story buildings. The 90% unit size precludes other solutions.
- The older, non-historic housing stock serves as the de facto affordable housing stock.
- West Hollywood is a good partner with social service providers.
- Existing housing caters to non-to-low income, not much variety for other income brackets that also have housing needs.
- Not every complaint gets personal attention from City Hall.
- The design community in West Hollywood doesn't have input in development because developers are so focused on meeting code requirements.
- Affordable housing is not the same as rent stabilized housing. There are a lot of wealthier people in West Hollywood who live in nice, cheaper apartments.
- Regulations that are in place result in unintended consequences.
- The City's development decisions are hard to understand. The big picture doesn't always get translated for residents.
- The Planning Commission has discretion of some issues, but not on others, and this results in inconsistencies.
- We are the implementers (architects, developers); we don't feel that our knowledge and professional expertise is reflected in City Hall.
- Goals would be better achieved if City Hall had implementation expertise.
- The City is trying to work with limited set of tools.
- Great that West Hollywood has inclusionary housing and is trying to create more housing opportunities.
- Managers can harass tenants in ways that don't necessarily violate the law.
- City is very responsive to residents' concerns.
- Companion animals are sometimes used as an excuse to get rid of tenants.
- Landowners are constantly looking for ways to get more money out of their property.
- City needs to do more tenant education. Small violations can lead to eviction. Other landlords refuse to take rent checks and later tenants get sent to court and required to pay overdue rent or get evicted.

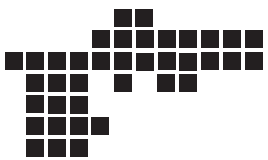
- The City needs to implement a better method of unit re-registration (for example, merge the information gap between registration and parking permit information).
- Harassment begins when tenants complain about housing conditions; proactive code enforcement helps.
- Los Angeles has systematic code enforcement program. Every four years buildings get inspected and reported online. Code enforcement would need more resources.
- Managers are required for buildings with 16 apartments or more; they have a unique perspective on housing issues. Managers should be convened by the City to address code issues.
- The City needs to do more to help people age in place.
- Tenants may not want the City to do regular inspections. The City needs to better understand the problem to tailor the solution. For example, perhaps it should focus on buildings that are regular offenders.
- The City would then also need to deal with issues of illegal activity. It will require coordination with social services and public safety (hoarding, pet issues, poverty).
- Proactive code enforcement may work in Los Angeles, but it might seem too much like police powers in West Hollywood.
- Companion animal registry may help resolve that specific issue.
- Tenants receive a lot of information from the City, but they don't always pay attention to it.
- Landlords should be given a list of information they need to post, such as tenant rights.
- Newer residents may not be aware of their rights.
- There are 4,400 residential properties in city.

## Solutions

- Issue of cost: infrastructure quality. Some buildings are older, built cheaply and have inadequate electrical systems. These issues are expensive to upgrade, such as plumbing issues, fixing galvanized steel.
- Implement anonymous complaint system.
- Replacement vs. renovation raises issues of aging in place.
- What kind of affordable housing does West Hollywood want? Funding determines housing. City should provide more on-site housing units rather than have them pay in-lieu fee. Need to have better housing integration and this would help.
- We need to question what the threshold should be, but what kind of housing do we want.
- Maintenance issues should be addressed every few years to save aging housing stock.
- In Los Angeles, tenants pitch in for code enforcement/maintenance costs.
- How long will it take to do proactive code enforcement? Depends on cost and implementation.
- City needs to hear from zoning experts and incorporate their feedback.
- West Hollywood needs to better understand the extent of housing harassment issues.
- Need to protect historical assets (there are different tools available to do so).
- If the City doesn't implement proactive code enforcement, then it needs to implement a tenant's rights code/bill of rights.
- Need to do more to protect tenants. Ask residents what should be included in rent stabilization ordinance.
- City's housing requirements are muddled, but the zoning code is very clear on the requirements. It was developed dealing with issues as they came up and now needs a comprehensive revision. Articulation of the vision is sometimes too clear and inflexible.

## Communication

- Define the difference between cheap rents and affordable housing.
- Tenant issues tend to dominate housing discussion, but also need to talk about the built environment and land use/zoning issues.
- There is a lot of potential to use land use and built environment regulations to help address aging in place issues.
- City does a good job of providing housing to special needs; City should have a better understanding of the needs to fill in the gaps.
- Host townhouse series to get public participation. Topics should include:
  - Housing needs
  - Landlord/tenant tensions
  - Housing we want in West Hollywood
  - Policy: what's working and not working
- Invite other jurisdictions to see how they deal with similar housing issues (older housing rehab; tenant issues; code enforcement). Figure out what lessons learned are applicable to West Hollywood.
- Help residents understand the trade-offs, zoning, policy.
- Need to discuss the complicated land use and housing issues with professionals who deal with these issues, but it can become a complicated discussion that is not accessible to the general public.
- Housing commission should have more study sessions on focused topics.
- Electronic newsletters
- Need to have communication with other cities on how they are dealing with housing issues, i.e. seismic retrofits.
- The City needs to have better communication with housing community. Needs to do more than the annual mailer on tenant rights.
- City needs to determine a better way of getting information to residents, especially information about tenant rights.
- Needs to be better communication among City departments to find a solution regarding rehabilitating older buildings and maintaining the affordable housing stock.



City of West Hollywood