



MORE HOMES, ALL SHAPES AND SIZES, FOR ALL OUR NEIGHBORS

FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS WITH SEATTLE RESIDENTS ON HOUSING AND AFFORDABILITY

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Sightline Institute commissioned Lake Research Partners to conduct four “triad” focus groups, facilitated 90-minute conversations with three or four participants each. Groups were generally segmented by ethnicity in order to promote open conversations among respondents. The four groups included Seattle residents identifying as Asian-American, African-American, white women homeowners, and millennials (under 35) mixed in gender and from diverse backgrounds.

CONTEXT:

Worry over expense and displacement, eagerness to address the problem

To identify prevailing attitudes about growth and change in Seattle, we asked participants about experiences in their communities. We asked about values, ideal places to live, and a range of affordability solutions.

- Seattleites of all kinds say the city is **too expensive**. Affordability concerns were top-of-mind in each triad.
- People are **open to addressing the housing problem**. They want a city that all types of people can afford.
- Residents see the downsides of growth, but most see the **booming economy as a good thing**. They are realistic that Seattle's growth cannot be stopped.
- **Traffic, congestion, and transit** are priority concerns that participants link to Seattle's housing problems.
- Seattle residents are concerned about the increase in **homelessness**.
- There is broadly shared concern about people being pushed out of the city. African-American participants are particularly worried about **displacement**, though people in all the groups feel vulnerable.
- Participants see **more "affordable housing"** as an obvious solution to Seattle's housing crisis, with an emphasis on subsidized homes and support for people who need help.
- Rather than lifting costly restrictions on building, Seattle residents gravitate toward the opposite: imposing **rules and taxes on developers**.
- Overall, people stress the need for **balance**, or a better "ratio" of affordable housing to more expensive housing.
- In the African-American group, participants emphasized solutions aimed at expanding opportunity more broadly and **addressing the root causes** of income inequality and poverty, including education, criminal justice reform, rehabilitation, and job training.
- Participants **offered other ideas** to promote affordability in Seattle, including making employers pay for transit, transit subsidies, higher taxes for higher earners, and alternative types of living spaces.

- When asked to describe **a great place to live**, residents point to affordability and good neighbors, as well as proximity to good transit, schools, restaurants, shopping, and nature.

MESSAGE TESTING AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

More homes, of all shapes and sizes, for all our neighbors

We tested messages for and against building more homes and increasing density. We also solicited participants' feedback on 1) a "musical chairs" analogy illustrating how a shortage makes prices go up (video) and 2) Sightline's Seattle Neighbors project, a series of portraits and narratives of locals' housing experiences.

- The message that "Seattle needs more homes, all shapes and sizes, for all our neighbors" resonated positively and proved memorable. Participants **repeated this language verbatim** as a solution.
- When it comes to values, people see Seattle striving for shared ideals of **inclusion, forward-thinking attitudes, and social justice**, but acknowledge the city is not necessarily achieving those yet.
- Strong messages centered the shared city aspiration that **all kinds of families and people** should be able to live near good schools, transit, jobs, and green spaces. Note: It's better to use "good" rather than "best" to describe schools and parks and other amenities.
- The **highest-scoring messages** followed a basic formula: They are
 - aspirational
 - focus on people
 - acknowledge the problem (and people's experience of it)
 - offer a solution that fits shared community goals.
- When the conversation was framed with **people, not buildings**, there was more openness to a range of solutions. In fact, images and stories of real people made opposition to housing solutions seem harsh and out of touch.
- The most persuasive stories portray **hardworking Seattleites** who are contributing to the city but struggling to live near jobs and community.
- Stories that show housing solutions that are **affordable, safe, and appealing** to a wide variety of people were viewed favorably. Conversely, when participants perceived living situations to be unsafe or undesirable (like a van or garage), they focused on the individual's choices or problems

rather than systemic solutions.

- The **musical chairs analogy** generally worked to describe the housing shortage, but there was pushback on the solution it presented: building a new house for the wealthiest family and freeing up a smaller house for the least wealthy family. This felt unfair.
- One **big obstacle** is that people don't understand how more housing of all kinds will reduce overall prices. It might be simple in economic terms, but it is not intuitive or easily explained. It could be more effective to show the converse, or what would happen if homes, including luxury units, were not built.
- People responded most favorably to the messages that emphasized the need for a **variety of housing options** in every neighborhood. It may be counterproductive to mention luxury homes explicitly.
- Talking about **modestly sized homes** leads to openness about building and growth.
- People are more open to density when it's **framed as "options."**

Overall, we found that shared, big-hearted values, alongside a vision for a city that is affordable to all kinds of people at all income levels, have the power to lift Seattleites' skepticism and make solutions more compelling. People readily make the connection between affordability and Seattle's identity: who we are as a city and who can live here. Participants want Seattle to live up to its full potential and to work toward becoming who we say we are. Our best messages start with people and connect to people's commonly held aspirations—a shared ideal for the kind of city Seattleites want to live in.

Qualitative research cannot be generalized, but it maps noteworthy obstacles and opportunities for productive messages about solutions.

Lake Research Partners is a leading public opinion and political strategy research firm providing expert research-based strategy for campaigns, issue advocacy groups, foundations, unions, and non-profit organizations. LRP has studied attitudes and messaging on affordability in a handful of growing US cities.

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