



THE FUTURE OF HOUSING IN SAN MATEO: CITIZEN AND STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUES

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Executive Summary | 3 |
| I: Introduction | 7 |
| II: A New Role for Civic Leadership | 8 |
| A. The Housing Nachos | 8 |
| B. Philosophy and process | 8 |
| C. Dialogue: A way to break through the gridlock | 8 |
| III: ChoiceWork Dialogues on Housing: Drafting a Citizens' Scenario | 9 |
| A. ChoiceWork Dialogues on housing in San Mateo County | 9 |
| B. Components of the citizen's view | 10 |
| C. Citizens' Scenario | 13 |
| IV: A Two-Way Learning Process: Stakeholder Dialogues | 13 |
| A. How housing came to be a crisis in San Mateo County | 14 |
| B. Creating a shared vision | 15 |
| C. Three key goals | 18 |
| 1. Redefine zoning and open the urban corridor to increased density | 18 |
| 2. Define and implement a regional approach | 19 |
| 3. Engage and educate citizens, decision leaders and stakeholders from all sectors | 20 |
| D. Surprise at common ground and desire to continue the dialogue | 21 |
| V: Conclusion | 23 |

The Future of Housing in San Mateo: Citizen and Stakeholder Dialogues

Executive Summary

I: San Mateo's Housing Crisis

San Mateo County today faces a growing crisis around the cost and availability of housing. This crisis affects not only lower-income San Mateans, but those of all incomes and walks of life. Young families have left the county, commuting from suburbs hours away. Businesses are having trouble recruiting professional and service workers. Traffic has become increasingly heavy as people commute farther to their jobs.

A new role for civic leadership

The housing situation had reached a crisis stage in early 2001, when a small group of civic leaders from the private and public sector came together. This group, now known as the Housing Nachos, formed with the express goal of working together to find creative and dramatic ways to improve San Mateo's stock of available housing. Instead of advocating for a particular solution or approach, the Nachos have made it their mission to engage and inform the community as a whole in order to create innovative regional solutions to the housing crisis. It was immediately clear that the public had not worked through this complex, value-laden "gridlock issue," and that in order to bring about bold, sustainable reform, it would be essential to engage the public along with key stakeholders in a totally new kind of conversation.

Dialogue: a way to break through the gridlock

Once the Nachos agreed on a policy of public engagement, education and facilitation rather than advocacy, they worked with Viewpoint Learning, a firm specializing in dialogue, to design a public engagement strategy that brought the voice of the general public into the conversation. They designed a process founded on the practice of dialogue. Dialogue, in this context, is not casual, but instead, a highly structured process by which people with different perspectives and viewpoints learn from one another and work to uncover common ground – an essential step in breaking through gridlock issues.

II: San Mateo Housing Dialogues

To date, the Housing Nachos, in collaboration with Viewpoint Learning, have facilitated four day-long "ChoiceWork Dialogues" with broad cross-sections of the community. Those dialogues were followed by two additional "Stakeholder Dialogues" that extended the conversation to include not only "regular" citizens but also elected officials, civic and business leaders, and advocates for housing and the environment. The results of these sessions are outlined in this executive summary and described in more detail in the full report.

ChoiceWork Dialogues: drafting a Citizen's Scenario

In the spring and summer of 2003, citizens from throughout San Mateo county participated in four “ChoiceWork Dialogues” in which they considered a range of possibilities for the future of the county. In these eight-hour sessions diverse groups of San Mateo residents (30-40 randomly selected participants per session) spent the day considering four distinct scenarios for the future of San Mateo County and talking through the advantages and disadvantages of each in order to craft their vision for the county’s future. The choices included a status quo option, a market based solution, a “smart growth” approach and a regional authority for all housing-related decisions. The citizen groups were remarkably consistent in their vision, the solutions they were willing to accept and the tradeoffs they found acceptable. All four groups followed a similar logical progression over the course of the day and ultimately created a vision that incorporated aspects of all four choices into a “citizens’ scenario.”

Citizen Scenario

We love San Mateo County. Its open space is a vital part of our quality of life, and preserving this open space from development is our highest priority. To save our county's open spaces while creating housing, we are willing to increase the height and density of already developed areas and to move towards more mixed-use development. This will require an investment in better public transportation and improved regional planning. We understand that effective regional planning will entail some loss of local control, and we are willing to accept that (along with moderate tax increases), but ONLY on the condition that the regional authority, its funding and its decisions be open, transparent and accountable.

This scenario does not indicate where public opinion is today, but instead how it is likely to evolve and the sort of solutions people might accept given the opportunity to grapple with the tradeoffs and the leadership to help them do so.

Stakeholder Dialogues: A Two-way Learning Process

In the winter of 2004, several months after the release of the findings from the citizen dialogues, Viewpoint Learning conducted two daylong “Stakeholder Dialogues” with county residents who had participated in the previous ChoiceWork Dialogues, along with elected officials, civic and business leaders and advocates for housing and the environment. The Stakeholder sessions were similar to the ChoiceWork Dialogues, but differed in two key respects: 1) The starting point for the discussion was the citizen vision rather than the four scenarios and 2) participants went farther towards defining a set of practical steps that, based on their experience and expertise, would be essential to making progress on the agreed-upon vision.

After identifying factors and trends that had contributed to the current crisis along with the likely long-term outlook for the county given the status quo (a rather bleak picture), stakeholder participants refined their vision for the future of the county. Their vision, like that of the citizens groups, focused on quality of life. A number of key themes stood out:

- Thoughtful preservation of open space
- A wide range of housing options
- Vibrant, vital downtowns
- Broadening economic diversity
- Neighborhood parks and open space

They concluded that this vision required several important approaches:

- Development along the urban transportation corridor
- Community input into planning and design
- A focus on transit, with a vision of affordable and better integrated transit for all
- A fair solution that is shared by all of San Mateo's cities
- A regional approach (The extremely complex discussion on this point centered on issues of authority, accountability and participation.)

From this discussion emerged three key goals, all high-leverage steps that the groups felt would move the county towards their common-ground vision of the future.

- 1. Redefine zoning regulations to increase development along transit corridor**
- 2. Define and implement a regional approach**
- 3. Engage and educate county residents, citizens and stakeholders alike on the urgency of the situation, potential solutions, tradeoffs and roadblocks.**

These three goals are highly interconnected and if achieved will have a powerful impact on the future of San Mateo County's housing situation and the way important land-use decisions get made. They will also set the stage for a more knowledgeable and engaged citizenry, which could have benefits for the county that extend far beyond housing.

III: Conclusion

Participants in the ChoiceWork and Stakeholder dialogues were an extremely diverse group, coming from a wide variety of perspectives and bringing to the table a tremendous amount of experience and expertise in the interconnected issues tied into the development of housing. Yet no individual claimed to have the answer. Everyone who participated contributed something to the answer; each had a valuable piece of the puzzle, and the groups clearly recognized that there was enormous strength in working from common ground, especially when there was so much of it to go around. Citizens who participated in both the ChoiceWork and the Stakeholder sessions played a critical role, and ensured that the conversation was not co-opted by the regular players.

These sessions offer strong evidence that dialogue can play an extremely important role both in engaging citizens on difficult policy questions and in developing common ground on those issues among citizens, decision makers, leaders and advocates. For issues such as housing, where public support and shared solutions are essential for the development and implementation of sustainable reform, dialogue is not only useful, it is essential. This form of discourse will continue to serve as the underpinning of the important work that will grow from the results of these powerful and productive sessions.

The Future of Housing in San Mateo: Citizen and Stakeholder Dialogues

I: Introduction

Almost nowhere in California is the need for reasonably priced housing more acute than in San Mateo County. Over the years, the county has become more and more expensive and home prices today for a small two-bedroom house can top \$650,000. The enormous jump in housing prices and the overall cost of living has led to troubling changes in the county, with far-reaching effects not only on lower-income San Mateans but those of all incomes and walks of life:

My sister is a teacher and she can't buy a house – she moves from apartment to apartment. I'm working on my own teaching credential and, seeing her experience, I have reservations about being able to stay. [CWD]

- Many workers and young people have moved to far-off suburbs, necessitating lengthy commutes and increasing traffic congestion.
- Businesses, hospitals and schools are having difficulty recruiting professional workers at every income level when their salaries can buy so much more “quality of life” elsewhere in California or the United States.
- Teachers, firefighters, nurses, government employees, small business owners and other workers who serve the community are forced to live far from where they work, which erodes the county’s sense of community.
- Traffic has become increasingly heavy throughout the county, as people have been forced to move farther and farther away from their jobs and have to drive long distances to work.
- Employers are thinking twice about locating businesses in San Mateo County, because the cost of living and housing is out of reach for most employees. This has long-term consequences for the economic health of the region.

II: A New Role for Civic Leadership

The housing situation in San Mateo had already reached a crisis point in early 2001, when a small group of civic leaders from the public and private sectors came together with the express goal of finding creative ways to improve San Mateo's stock of available housing.

A. The Housing Nachos

The group – called the Housing Nachos – was founded by a half-dozen community leaders in response to the mounting difficulties created by the lack of housing supply in the county. These difficulties impact both the founders' organizations and the community at large, making it more difficult to recruit and retain a qualified workforce and provide essential community services. In addition, existing government policies, albeit well-intended, have been designed to promote other aspects of economic development, while the public remains wary of the prospect of building additional housing. The result has been to squeeze out the most essential component of any community – the home.

The mission of the Housing Nachos is twofold: 1) to develop an environment that encourages housing at all income levels and 2) to create a new standard for addressing the complex regional challenges of meeting this goal in San Mateo County. Their approach is to engage the community, inform the community, and build a consensus that will address the housing supply crisis. While The Housing Nachos are advocates of housing supply, they do not endorse particular solutions or agendas. The stated goal of the organization then and now is to put a process in place, whatever it may be, that addresses the critical issue of housing in San Mateo County.

B. Philosophy and process

Existing housing advocacy groups have produced commendable results for their respective beneficiaries; however, no group exists that advocates housing for the community in its entirety. The economic health of a community depends on having housing for service workers AND professionals, not one or the other. Hence the Housing Nachos decided to focus their energies on developing a regional environment that supports an increase in available housing for all income levels. The Housing Nachos approach involves convening and facilitating dialogue among County residents, employers, the faith community, philanthropic leaders, elected officials, city managers and other city staff.

C. Dialogue: A way to break through the gridlock

When the Housing Nachos settled on a policy of public engagement, education and facilitation rather than traditional advocacy, they brought in Viewpoint Learning, a firm specializing in dialogue. The first step was to design a public engagement strategy grounded in the principle that the general public, not just the advocates and special interest groups, had to be a part of any sustainable solution to an issue as complex as land use and the future of San Mateo county.

Housing and growth are prime examples of “gridlock issues”: extremely complex issues in which values and emotions are closely intertwined with information. When it comes to serious gridlock issues like housing, the public tends to take refuge from hard choices in wishful thinking and denial. In circumstances like these, traditional models of communication – public education, information campaigns, public relations efforts or “spin” – simply do not work. Part of the reason is that there is a huge gap between expert views on these policy issues (based on close attention to and detailed knowledge of the issue) and public views (where attention is casual, information is sketchy and deeply held values are paramount). Sustainable, major policy changes like those necessary to bring about an end to San Mateo’s housing shortage must be based not only on technical expertise but also on the public’s deeply held values.

True dialogue is key to bridging the gap and moving past wishful thinking on gridlock issues. In this context, dialogue means much more than a casual conversation. Rather, dialogue is a form of learning in which people encounter a variety of viewpoints and work to identify areas of common ground. This broadening of perspective not only increases mutual understanding and trust, it also leads to a more communal outlook: one in which people can weigh potential tradeoffs against benefits for themselves and for the larger community.

Dialogues of this kind are conducted according to specific ground rules, and they are designed to bring values and beliefs into the conversation as well as technical information. It is important to distinguish the dialogue process from debate. In debate, the goal is to win and the underlying assumption is that you have the right answer. In dialogue, the goal is to define common ground and the underlying assumption is that everyone has a piece of the answer, whether the participants are members of the public that have spent little or no time thinking about the topic, or experts who have spent a career on it.

III. ChoiceWork Dialogues on Housing: Drafting a Citizens’ Scenario

To date, the Housing Nachos, in collaboration with Viewpoint Learning, have facilitated four day-long ChoiceWork Dialogues with broad cross-sections of the community. Those dialogues were followed by two additional “Stakeholder Dialogues” that extended the conversation to include not only “regular” citizens but also elected officials, civic and business leaders, and advocates for housing and the environment. The results of these sessions are detailed in the following pages.

A. ChoiceWork Dialogues on housing in San Mateo County

In the spring and summer of 2003, citizens from throughout San Mateo County participated in four “ChoiceWork Dialogues” in which they considered a range of possibilities for the future of the county. In these eight-hour sessions diverse groups of San Mateo residents (30-40 randomly selected participants per session) spent the day considering four distinct scenarios for the future of San Mateo County and talking through the advantages and disadvantages of each. (Details on these dialogues can be found in the separate report *Citizen Dialogues on the Future of San Mateo County*.) In the ChoiceWork sessions, the four scenarios were presented in a workbook along with relevant background information, key steps that would be required to put each scenario in

place, and a set of pros and cons for each choice. These scenarios were developed by the Housing Nachos and Viewpoint Learning and were based on input from a wide range of experts and opinion leaders involved in housing. The four scenarios that citizens started from were:

- **Continue on Our Current Path:** The first choice is to continue dealing with housing as we do now. We will make no major changes that might require us to pay higher taxes or change our habits and lifestyles. Housing will still be developed in each city according to local zoning rules, with no change in land use and limited countywide planning. There will be no improvement in the availability and the affordability of housing.
- **Rely on the Market:** The second choice is to make it easier for developers to build more housing by making available some of the land that is currently undeveloped, protected as open space or zoned for industrial and commercial use. Zoning and other regulations in the cities and county will be relaxed to encourage builders to provide more housing choices especially on land previously unavailable for residential development.
- **Invest in Existing Communities:** The third choice is for local and county government to encourage growth and new housing within existing communities in order to preserve open space and undeveloped land. Zoning, tax law and other incentives will encourage adding a mix of housing choices (town houses, apartments, condos, single family homes) to already existing communities. Areas in cities will be developed into more dense, walkable neighborhoods, with a mixture of housing, retail and commercial development located close to each other and easily available public transit.
- **Improve Governance in the County:** The fourth choice is to make our system of regional governance for housing and land use issues more responsive to the public by creating an elected, publicly accountable regional authority. This regional authority will have the power and the resources to deal more effectively with housing, land use and transportation for all of San Mateo County.

The citizen groups were remarkably consistent in their vision, the solutions they were willing to accept and the tradeoffs they found acceptable. All four groups followed a similar logical progression over the course of the day and ultimately created a vision that incorporated aspects of all four choices into a “citizens’ scenario.” This scenario then served as the key parameter for all the work done in the later stakeholder sessions.

B. Components of the citizens’ view:

The following key messages indicate where people can go, given effective leadership and the chance to engage the issue – and just as important, where they will not:

- **Preserve open space.** After thoughtful consideration, San Mateans placed the highest priority on preserving the county’s open space. They voiced an overwhelming preference for developing housing within existing communities rather than building on undeveloped land. While some people were surprised at how little of the county is currently developed at all and how much of the undeveloped land is not protected as open space, they were determined to keep green land green and wet lands wet.

It’s ironic that we have a crisis given the amount of open space that we have – but we just don’t want that land to be developed. [CWD]

- **Conditions on developing open areas.** Participants expressed deep-seated resistance to developing in currently open areas. It was clear that any such proposal that hopes to gain a foothold with the wider public must take place within the context of a larger commitment to preserving San Mateo County's open space. Developers will need to make substantial, visible contributions to improving the county's open space, including:

A lot of the time, planning is driven by developers. I think we need something community-driven that trickles up to the developers.... [CWD]

- infrastructure improvements that mitigate the development's impact
- making open space more accessible for recreational use (e.g. by building hiking or bike trails)
- establishing nature preserves
- building on the smallest possible footprint within a developable parcel.

- **Density over sprawl.** When they come to terms with the tradeoffs, residents would much rather increase density in developed areas than chip away at the county's open space. This tradeoff becomes more appealing if concerns of traffic, crime and design considerations are answered right from the beginning. Pointing out good examples helps dispel common fears: in the dialogues, people shifted their views on dense development when others brought high quality projects to their attention.

I think people need to change their perception that what they need is a big plot of land. [CWD]

- **Re-development and mixed use.** San Mateans are open to projects that re-use existing, underutilized buildings, and they come to see many benefits to a mixed-use approach, from fostering a sense of community to maintaining the cities' tax base. They will be willing to reconsider regulations and restrictions hindering this kind of development if they are confident that the project is well-conceived and well-coordinated.

- **Public Transit.** One important condition for supporting mixed use, higher density development is that it be well-planned and coordinated with improvements in public transit. Residents will be looking for transit systems that are seamless, have well coordinated routes and schedules (across Cal-Train, BART and Sam-Trans), operate over longer hours, offer more east-west routes, increase safety and comfort, and generally provide better integration of transit with housing development.

- **Regional approaches.** People recognize that developing and implementing the approaches to housing and transit they want will require more coordinated and effective regional governance mechanisms. But to be acceptable, any such mechanisms will need to meet a number of conditions. In particular, they will need to provide

San Mateo County isn't that big, and we're talking about keeping each city totally separate. But we need to think of it as one big neighborhood or we're not going to get anywhere. [CWD]

more effective coordination on issues of regional (not purely local) concern, they must not result in an additional layering of bureaucracy, and they need to be transparent in their operation and more accountable to the public (including providing ongoing opportunities for engagement by unorganized citizens).

- **Taxes: with conditions.** While residents can come to terms with the need to pay more for capital improvements and are willing to do so in principle, they are also extremely concerned with how their money is spent. Proposals to raise taxes for transportation or other initiatives will be met with a demand for accountability, transparency and a way to follow the money. Meeting these conditions – for example through third party verification, public documentation and a clearly stated set of funding priorities – will be a necessary step to overcoming public mistrust.
- **Engagement as a tool for reform.** Seriously engaging citizens on these issues is in itself a promising avenue towards real reform. When given the tools and the opportunity to grapple with the implications of change and the county’s alternatives, citizens are far more open to new possibilities (regional governance, additional taxes, mixed-use development) than polls or town hall meetings might indicate.
- **Regional solutions require regional engagement.** On entering the dialogues, most participants were primarily concerned with their own neighborhoods or cities. As they engaged in dialogue with people from other parts of the county, however, their perspective broadened dramatically to include regional issues. Our experience in land use has shown that when people are engaged solely on a local level, the locality becomes the frame of reference and the range of acceptable solutions is sharply curtailed. Any exploration of regional approaches – whether with citizens or with planning boards – should be careful to bring together perspectives from across the region to encourage more innovative and sustainable solutions.

As someone who owns a home, shops and lives in San Mateo County, I don't want to pay more taxes, but sometimes you have to bite the bullet. [CWD]

It is important to remember that these findings do not reflect the general public’s views today. Polls of the general public would likely yield results similar to those the participants themselves expressed at the beginning of their dialogues. Rather, the findings detailed above indicate where people *can* go, given the opportunity to work through the choices and the leadership to guide the process. The results of these sessions should be taken as a starting point for leaders interested in how the public is likely to resolve the difficult tradeoffs necessary for any sustainable policy reform dealing with housing and related issues.

C. Citizens' Scenario

The citizens' thinking in the ChoiceWork Dialogues can be described in the following scenario:

Citizen Scenario

We love San Mateo County. Its open space is a vital part of our quality of life, and preserving this open space from development is our highest priority. To save our county's open spaces while creating housing, we are willing to increase the height and density of already developed areas and to move towards more mixed-use development. This will require an investment in better public transportation and improved regional planning. We understand that effective regional planning will entail some loss of local control, and we are willing to accept that (along with moderate tax increases), but ONLY on the condition that the regional authority, its funding and its decisions be open, transparent and accountable.

(A more detailed analysis of the ChoiceWork Dialogues can be found in the report "The Future of Housing in San Mateo County: A Report on Dialogues with Residents on the Housing Crisis")

IV: A Two-way Learning Process: Stakeholder Dialogues

In the winter of 2004, several months after the release of the findings from the citizen dialogues, Viewpoint Learning conducted two daylong "Stakeholder Dialogues" with county residents, elected officials, civic and business leaders and advocates for housing and the environment. These dialogues, funded by the Peninsula Community Foundation, were designed to build on the citizen dialogues and take the process further.

The Stakeholder Dialogues brought together citizens who had participated in the initial ChoiceWork sessions with key decision makers from around San Mateo County in a highly structured conversation that used the citizens' proposed solution to the housing crisis as its starting point. The dialogues were designed to produce two outcomes:

1. To further develop the citizens' vision for the future of their county (blending it with their own) and how to address the housing shortage.
2. To agree on a small number of high priority, high leverage goals that, if achieved, would move the county closer to this shared vision.

The Stakeholder sessions were similar to the ChoiceWork Dialogues in that they were highly structured and based on dialogue, not debate. However, the Stakeholder sessions differed in two key ways: 1) The starting point for the discussion was the citizen vision rather than the four scenarios and 2) participants went farther towards defining a set of practical steps that, based on their experience and expertise, would be essential to making progress on the agreed-upon vision. The participants worked together to define a vision that took into account the perspective of citizens as well as decision makers, business leaders and other important voices. All of the participants discovered a great deal of

common ground, and both stakeholder groups expressed similar concerns and came to similar conclusions.

The Stakeholder Dialogues followed a three step process, in which participants worked to:

- (1) Find common ground between the citizens' scenario and their own perspectives,
- (2) Further evolve that thinking into a shared vision, and
- (3) Identify and flesh out a number of high-leverage goals to achieve that vision.

Participants tackled the first two tasks in the morning, while spending the afternoon session on the third. In all of their efforts, stakeholder dialogue participants were asked to start from the citizen's scenario and, if they diverged from that vision, to be able to explain their reasons.

A. How housing came to be a crisis in San Mateo County

The first task for Stakeholder Dialogue participants was to find common ground between the citizens' scenario and their own perspectives. They began by identifying factors or trends that had contributed to the current crisis. Several themes stood out in their analysis:

- Rapid growth and changing demographics.
- Unintended consequences of Proposition 13, which over time have reduced incentives for local communities to build housing instead of retail development.
- Tremendous increase in the San Mateo and Silicon Valley economy, which has attracted a wealthier population to the Peninsula.
- The trend towards very large, expensive single-family homes instead of more dense housing.
- Impediments to private development, including extensive and expensive fees and extractions, environmental legislation, and increased transaction costs which often vary dramatically by city.
- A breakdown in community and increasing NIMBY-ism driven by resistance to change, fear of diversity and stereotypes about affordable housing and who actually needs it.
- The relentless upward spiral in home prices, which has led people to look at homes as investments.
- The purchase of large tracts of property to protect as open space, which has placed much of the developable land in San Mateo County off limits in addition to reducing property tax revenue.
- A preference for solving problems through litigation rather than consensus and community building.

Stakeholder participants all agreed that unless significant changes are made, the future for San Mateo looks bleak. Schools, health care and other public services will be compromised as the middle class workers who staff them leave the county. Many participants anticipated an even more significant polarization of the haves and the have nots, with a contraction of economic diversity. Young families and middle to lower income households would likely look elsewhere for a decent “quality of life.”

One of my concerns is being able to recruit teachers and have them live in the area where they're working, so they become part of the community.
[School Superintendent]

If the housing situation were to stay the same or worsen, participants expected that the region would likely face the loss of jobs and a serious threat to economic growth. Businesses would likely look elsewhere to locate their workforce as it becomes more and more difficult to offer employees a salary commensurate with the cost of living. And everyone agreed that San Mateo’s roads and transit would only get worse, with workers traveling from farther and farther away to reach their jobs within the county.

The groups were very consistent in their analysis of the trends that precipitated the current crisis, as well as the potential consequences if nothing changes. This shared understanding of the current situation and its likely outcomes provided the jumping off point for the rest of the day’s dialogue.

B. Creating a shared vision

The next step was to evolve this thinking into a shared vision for San Mateo County’s future. This step in particular required careful attention to the citizens’ vision created through the ChoiceWork Dialogues. If they diverged from that vision, they had to be able to explain the reasons why.

All participants shared a strong sense that the quality of life that had attracted so many residents to San Mateo was threatened by the housing crisis. When participants broke down what went into creating “quality of life,” a number of issues stood out:

- **Thoughtful preservation of open space:** This was one of the strongest findings from the citizen dialogues, and it was important to the participants in the stakeholder dialogues as well. However, participants in the stakeholder sessions took issue with citizens’ earlier definition of open space as “anything not paved over” and agreed that a far more nuanced approach was necessary.
- **A wide range of housing options:** Participants wanted to see a wide range of housing options, both in terms of design and cost, and they emphasized that this should include more affordable housing options for low-income county residents. Stakeholder participants were clear on this point, which had remained unresolved in the citizen’s dialogues. The stakeholder groups used the principles of “smart growth” to help shape their vision, agreeing to add density when possible in lieu of building on undeveloped green space.

- **Vibrant, vital downtowns:** Stakeholder participants focused on the need for lively downtowns with a variety of appealing shopping, entertainment and cultural activities made available to all residents
- **Broaden Economic Diversity:** The stakeholder groups strongly supported solutions that encouraged more diverse communities, especially in terms of economic diversity. In the citizen dialogues, participants had been less confident that the county could accommodate low-income residents without negative impacts of crime, decay and declining property values. Stakeholder participants, by contrast, saw economic diversity as the key to all other forms of diversity.
- **Neighborhood parks and public space:** With a focus on increasing density and development of the urban core came a recognition of the need to plan for attractive and accessible neighborhood parks, playgrounds and public spaces. This position echoed citizens' desire to keep San Mateo connected to the natural environment and amplified it with a planner's perspective.

My concern is the growing chasm we have between the "haves" and the "have nots." We need a holistic approach to resolving the social, economic and environmental issues that are going to be involved if we're going to solve the problem and not just push it somewhere else. [Citizen]

As participants saw it, creating and maintaining the quality of life they wanted for San Mateo and meeting the housing needs of the growing population required a number of important approaches that served as a foundation of their core vision:

- **Development along the urban transportation corridor using existing public infrastructure:** This approach mirrors that favored by county planners, organizations such as SAMCEDA and many other local decision makers. This kind of development places a heavy emphasis on design and coordination, and requires a re-thinking of some codes and restrictions (such as height limits, parking requirements and restrictions on mixed-use development) currently governing development in many of San Mateo's cities.
- **Community input into planning and design:** Stakeholder participants recognized citizens' strong call for direct community input into the design process. However, they did not want to see more of the same planning meetings and committees where the same faces made the same arguments no matter what the proposed project. Instead, participants wanted to create new and more open forums for community input, bringing in residents who typically do not participate in these processes. This tied into the citizen's desire for more input, although citizens' desire arose from a sense that the current system lacks transparency and accountability as to how decisions are made.

[It's so important] to find out not just what the very few who are frustrated enough to come to City Council and Board of Supervisors meetings and Planning Commissions feel. [You also need] to find out what people who came to dialogues like this one feel, because that isn't always being remembered. [Citizen]

- **A focus on transit, with a vision of affordable and better integrated transit for all:** Participants agreed that increased density must be coupled with improved transportation and transit. They also agreed that building new freeways is not a practical solution, although existing freeways must be maintained and improved so that they continue to function as well as possible. Participants viewed a focus on transit options, ranging from bike and carpool lanes to mass transit, as a critical component of any approach that would truly have an effect on the housing situation. This was nearly identical to the views voiced in the citizen dialogues.
- **A fair solution that is shared by all of San Mateo's cities.** Stakeholders and citizens shared a strong sense that some San Mateo communities are bearing the brunt of the housing crunch while others are less directly affected. ChoiceWork participants wanted to see solutions where every city contributed something to the answer. Participants in the stakeholder sessions agreed, asserting that any workable solution will be built on countywide buy-in and contribution to the solution.
- **A regional approach.** As the stakeholders' vision began to take shape, it became clear that creating the future they desired would require the involvement of the entire county, and that some more formalized system of regional planning and oversight would be essential. What that regional approach should entail and how to achieve it generated some of the most complex and difficult discussion in each Stakeholder Dialogue.

*I don't think we can possibly build all the housing we're going to need, so I think we need to look ... at how other areas can assist us in this and still get people here without having them drive two hours to get places.
[Elected official]*

In general, participants agreed that the county needs stronger regional oversight and planning mechanisms but at the same time must allow cities to maintain their local identities. This point, however, also initiated some of the most complicated discussion in the stakeholder sessions. For all of the benefits afforded by a possible regional mechanism, many participants also expressed some major concerns about its implementation and possible consequences.

The groups concluded that stronger regional planning could provide a range of benefits, including:

- Streamlined permit process and updated regulations
- Vision-based and proactive approach to housing
- Common ground for solving conflicts among cities
- Specific mechanisms to encourage greater citizen involvement
- Integrated transit, housing and land use planning
- Increased financial leverage

- Incentives for local communities to participate

All the groups also articulated concerns and questions about regional planning. These centered on three key areas:

- **Authority:** What authority would the regional body have over local decision-making, funding streams, land use decisions and infrastructure projects? What existing organizations and entities would be affected?
- **Accountability:** How would this body be accountable to county residents? What kind of systems would have to be in place to allow residents and other stakeholders to be involved in the decision-making process and to follow any money that funnels through this body?
- **Participation:** Who sits on the regional body? How are they selected? How do cities maintain autonomy or make sure their voice is heard in the context of the larger organization? Where do citizens fit in?

Once participants agreed on the elements of the vision described above they went on to spend the remainder of the day talking about how to get there and what specific steps were necessary to move San Mateo closer to the future they wanted to see.

C. Three key goals

In the second half of the day, participants worked to identify a small number of “high leverage” steps that would move the county towards the larger group’s common-ground vision of the future. Participants considered what needed to be done, who would do it, and by when. They also noted likely roadblocks and thought through ways to overcome them. In the end, three clear goals emerged as key to a solution that would work for San Mateo:

- 1) Redefine zoning regulations to increase development along transit corridor**
- 2) Define and implement a regional approach**
- 3) Engage and educate county residents, citizens and stakeholders alike on the urgency of the situation, potential solutions, tradeoffs and roadblocks.**

The three highly interconnected goals, if achieved, will have a powerful impact on the future of San Mateo County’s housing situation and the way important land-use decisions get made. They will also set the stage for a more knowledgeable and engaged citizenry, which could have benefits for the county that extend far beyond housing.

1) Redefine zoning and open the urban corridor to increased density

Two primary themes ran through the conversation about development within the urban corridor.

- ***A regional approach to defining and protecting open space:*** A more formal regional plan for open space would result in more effective management of land to both meet housing needs and protect valuable open space.
- ***Zoning and regulatory change:*** This goal involved an overhaul of zoning and other regulations that currently limit higher density residential and mixed use development. This overhaul would be designed to 1) quickly intensify residential development along the corridor and 2) encourage an affordable mix of housing options through development of condominiums, apartments and smaller family homes. Specific strategies included:
 - A more standardized set of codes and regulations for urban development
 - Land assembly strategies
 - The creation of public-private partnerships to drive investment in “in-fill” or “smart-growth” development.
 - Tax reform (in particular of Proposition 13) that would allow cities to keep more property tax revenue rather than hand it over to the state. (However, some participants were wary of this approach, fearing it might cost elderly residents their homes.)
 - Changing or eliminating specific code restrictions, such as:
 - Height limits
 - Density restrictions and zoning that limit residential development
 - Parking requirements
 - Countywide infrastructure improvements, in particular in the areas of transportation and water.
 - Broad-based community input into design processes.

Participants realized immediately that any concerted effort to increase density along the corridor would require a regional vision and regional cooperation. They knew that without the establishment of some mechanism for regional planning and oversight, it was unlikely that the first goal would move very far.

2) Define and implement a regional approach

Participants turned to the question of how to define the role of the regional body and how it should coordinate with local governments, other boards and special districts. Rather than trying to create a plan on the spot, they focused on how to begin a process that would answer those questions over time, with the ultimate goal of creating a body that would balance authority and financial leverage with local autonomy and citizen participation.

Participants outlined a number of overarching goals and responsibilities for the regional body:

- Create an explicit regional mandate (approved by the cities) to oversee aspects of land use, open space, housing and transit in order to make coordinated decisions that benefit the region as a whole.
- Examine models and best practices throughout the state and nation.
- Institute a formal arena for sharing information, reviewing projects and local development decisions and their effects on other parts of the county.
- Develop a clear definition of and regional plan for open space.
- Identify and advocate for funding to support the body's mandate and provide financial incentives for cities to build residential units.

While almost every group chose to work on this goal, they did not resolve the morning's key questions concerning *authority*, *accountability* and *participation*. Instead, they all agreed that over next two to three years cities and the county would need to work with citizen representatives to address these questions and define the mandate and the authority of the regional body. Participants also anticipated a great deal of resistance to such a body, and saw that an intense process of engagement and education would be essential for citizens and stakeholders alike.

3) Engage and educate citizens, decision leaders and stakeholders from all sectors

Any conversation about housing policy in San Mateo (or anywhere else in California) will encounter the roadblocks of NIMBY-ism, turf battles, resistance to change and political squabbling. To combat this, participants were adamant that the process of dialogue expand to include many more county residents, leaders and decision-makers. They agreed that any engagement activity designed to achieve the previously listed goals must bring together residents from disparate parts of the county and different interest groups and sectors. Some groups went so far as to suggest that the current process for public comment and public engagement (presentations, town hall meetings, public comment sessions) be revised to allow for greater interaction and dialogue.

Such engagement would force San Mateans to work as a community to confront some of the same tradeoffs that participants had dealt with in both phases of these dialogues. Participants in the stakeholder dialogues believed that it is critical to bring the public to the table – and not just the self-appointed (and often ideologically entrenched and inflexible) representatives of the public who currently attend meetings, serve on planning committees and weigh in regularly. Participants agreed that they would need to access the broader

One of my biggest concerns is that people think they can freeze our communities in the mold of years gone by. I think this is actually one of the most profound obstacles we face in making change. [Citizen]

I think there is a growing sense among the political leadership of the community about the need to invest and invest more in existing communities, but I think that the current electorate doesn't necessarily share that vision. [City manager]

public: first through better education campaigns and then through active engagement activities.

In addition to an entirely new approach to engaging the citizens of San Mateo County on these issues, participants saw a need to include several other key sectors in an ongoing dialogue, including:

- Business and Civic Leaders
- Policy Makers
- Elected officials
- Advocacy groups

Participants saw potential in better use of media platforms, coordinated efforts of existing housing related organizations and possibly professional assistance to develop engagement and education strategies. Typically, engagement efforts around development and land use issues bring together people from the most impacted community or interest group to react to a specific project, which in turn leads to increased NIMBY-ism. Without other perspectives in the room, the only voices raised are raised in opposition, and without a sense of how the projects affects the community as a whole. The process of engaging citizens to develop a broadened perspective that takes into account the larger community would need to be more pro-active and regional in scope. Citizens and decision-makers would be involved in shaping the vision and initiating projects, rather than reacting to what others propose.

D. Surprise at common ground and desire to continue the dialogue

Participants were surprised and pleased when asked to reflect on the day's dialogue and the work they had accomplished. Citizens and stakeholders alike felt very encouraged by their success in developing a shared vision and by the fact that people from so many different sectors were prepared to take steps to move San Mateo County towards that vision. Citizens and civic leaders were impressed at the commitment of local leaders and somewhat surprised by their willingness to engage with the public and other sectors on these issues of governance and planning.

I was very impressed by the caliber of elected officials in our group who actually had a lot of policy information, knew a lot of what's happening and were very creative thinkers and always in terms of what we can do in "our cities" and what we can do in "our regional groups."
(Environmental advocate)

I can see a lot of these guys showing up to a dinner at the Sharon Heights County Club but who's going to actually make it on a Saturday afternoon? Then I walk in and there's my city councilperson and there's my superintendent of schools, so I'm very surprised and happy.
(Citizen)

What really surprised me was that you had elected officials sitting and talking about regional approaches to things. We've come a long way in that area. They are all elected by their constituents and they think about that, so it's a big step to have these officials from the cities talk about giving up control or power over their job. (Labor union executive)

It wasn't just elected officials who made a good impression. Participants become far more aware of the challenges others in the group faced, and the complexities inherent in each sector's role in the development of housing. In particular, many citizens began the day with a fairly negative view of developers. In the first round of dialogues, citizens soundly rejected the scenario that would have made more land available to developers and eased restrictions and regulations that made it more difficult for developers to build housing. They did not trust developers to be good stewards of the natural beauty of the county, and felt that they were motivated purely by profit. Having developers directly involved in the stakeholder dialogues (with no particular project at stake) and finding strong common ground with those developers made a powerful impression on citizens and other stakeholders alike.

I'm coming out of this with a greater appreciation for the complexity of what the developers have to go through to build here in the county. (Citizen)

I came here with a very anti-development attitude, and I am coming out with a modified one. I'm beginning to feel that developers are part of the solution, not part of the problem, and that's a 180° degree change for me. (Citizen)

Many participants, even those who were "experts" in housing and governance issues, also learned a great deal over the course of the session from other participants.

I came in with a little bit of a smug attitude, thinking that its more of a defined growth/no-growth issue and I'm finding that the issues we talked about today in all three groups were extremely complicated but there is potential light at the end of the tunnel; there are resolutions. (Business leader)

I came here with my coast bias focused on the importance of affordable housing on the coast and I have been persuaded about the need for the corridor and having housing so much closer to transportation. (Labor union executive and housing advocate)

Last time I was here we were dreamers and now we're working with the doers of the county and the doers of the county seem to think the same way I do as far as the open space and the working together. (Citizen)

Most participants shared a sense of excitement and hope that cooperative effort could lead to truly innovative solutions. This feeling of accomplishment translated, for many, into a willingness to continue the effort in whatever way they could. Some agreed to make presentations, attend meetings, and a number of participants volunteered to serve on any task forces or committees that emerged from the results of these dialogues.

Finally, many of the participants commented on the unexpected openness and civility of the dialogue, and saw the day as an important and unusual learning process.

I'm leaving the process with a lot more optimism and hope than when I came in. And what I can do to help is to work to broaden and deepen the dialogue to go beyond the surface positions and issues that get raised when you start talking about many of the issues that we talked about here. (City manager)

I think the thing I was most pleased with was the civility of our collective group. I think that everyone came into this with different perspectives and we were all able to discuss and mutually respect our positions. (Developer)

One of the things I got out of today is just how important this kind of process is, where you bring in people with different ideas, different backgrounds and let them express what's important to them so that you share that information and benefit from all those ideas. (City council member)

V. Conclusion

Participants in the ChoiceWork and Stakeholder dialogues were an extremely diverse group, coming from a wide variety of perspectives and bringing to the table a tremendous amount of experience and expertise in the interconnected issues tied into the development of housing. Yet no individual claimed to have the answer. Everyone who participated contributed something to the answer; each had a valuable piece of the puzzle, and the groups clearly recognized that there was enormous strength in working from common ground, especially when there was so much of it to go around. Citizens who participated in both the ChoiceWork and the Stakeholder sessions played a critical role, and ensured that the conversation was not co-opted by the regular players.

These sessions offer strong evidence that dialogue can play an extremely important role both in engaging citizens on difficult policy questions and in developing common ground on those issues among citizens, decision makers, leaders and advocates. For issues such as housing, where public support and shared solutions are essential for the development and implementation of sustainable reform, dialogue is not only useful, it is essential. This form of discourse will continue to serve as the underpinning of the important work that will grow from the results of these powerful and productive sessions.

*I think the most important thing that happened today was how everybody so completely adhered to the request to leave our labels behind...and express our point of view as individuals, and I think that was so important and so productive...the common ground is so wide. And what I want to do to move us into the kind of San Mateo we want is to continue to sacrifice, to give up a Saturday, to give up maybe a little bit of local control – or a lot of local control – maybe a little bit of my home equity – whatever it takes to contribute to the greater good, to the community we are all a part of.
(Staff Member for State Assemblyman)*