

**SOURCES OF LAND  
FOR  
AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROJECTS  
SERVING 80 TO 100 % MEDIAN INCOME AND ABOVE**

To help address the difficulty many working families have in finding homes they can afford in the communities where they work, municipalities have two good factors working for them. First is that the population they are trying to serve have the financial capability themselves to buy a reasonably priced home. The second is that the affordability problem is usually not one of construction costs, since those are relatively the same regardless of location. The problem instead is one of land costs.

To develop successful programs, cities trying to solve their affordability issue must focus on the source of the problem, the availability of land at a reasonable cost. Many have tried to develop programs focused on the end product, the housing, and have had little or no success. That is because the problem then becomes one of needing a great deal of money to subsidize housing on already existing lots or on conventionally priced land affordable only in the private development arena.

When they address the issue by solving the land problem first they then have a chance of producing successful projects funded by the working family's own ability to acquire conventional mortgages. Putting raw land acquisition first, a municipality can then make use of a non-profit developer partner such as their local CDC, or possibly a private sector developer partner to help produce the needed infrastructure and housing.

What are sources of affordable land in communities with land prices far beyond an affordable budget? Let's begin to answer the question by first recognizing that affordable, or as some term it, "workforce" housing, has to come in many varieties. To successfully address the need, a good program should produce as many variants as fit local land availability and housing needs.

For instance, downtown workers, single or single parents or young couples, might have their housing needs met by condominium buildings built over downtown parking lots. In this case, if these are municipally owned, and if the final design preserves existing parking as well as produces some new parking for residents, this is a good example of available low cost or no cost land. With no land and little infrastructure costs, such projects can easily meet affordability standards for the people they are meant to serve.

Removal of height restrictions is another example of “low-hanging fruit” where the cost to add one or more stories, excepting again some minor additional structural costs and infrastructure costs, result in housing for construction costs only. These ideas apply a more urban solution than is sometimes seen in small and moderate size communities. Often the success of such projects will be tied to parking availability. In large cities with developed, and used, public transit, this is not so crucial. In smaller communities, adequate parking is very important. Often including underground parking in the design will be essential.

Other sources of low cost or no cost land can be generated by partnering with local major employers. School districts often have excess lands on or off their school sites, and they often need housing for their young teachers or other employees. Universities, hospitals, and other institutional employers have a vested interest in being able to hire good people who in turn will be able to afford housing in the community. Private employers have similar interests. Depending on the employer, their land resources, and the needs of their employees, such major employers are often good partners to solve, piece by piece, the housing needs of a community.

The pilot program we are discussing in the DLCD work group is that whereby a city would identify potential properties that could be brought into an UGB, negotiate with owners of same, offering them the chance to be annexed much sooner than otherwise might happen and in exchange be deeded a large portion of the raw land in return. This could supply low cost or no cost land for a more conventional housing product, also very affordable to young families.

These are just a few of the resources available in most communities. Other opportunities unique to a specific locale can be found once the orientation of finding and solving the land problem at the raw resource, predevelopment stage is adopted. Use of non-profit development partners, land trusts, and consultant resources from the State level can facilitate program development.

Key to the success of any of these programs would be a competent needs assessment. Such an assessment should measure unmet needs of a community’s daytime population. Program development would include an overall goal, the years the city will practically need to meet this goal and multiple strategies to meet yearly quotas. To have any chance of success, a city will need to commit resources to staff the effort. That being said, a good program will always be that which assumes that acquisition of low cost no cost raw land is the key to success and the only way a community can afford to proceed.