

A2 Public Participation

This section documents the efforts Merced County made to engage the public and gather input to inform development of this Housing Element update. There were several public engagement efforts conducted at a regional level, including a community survey and stakeholder interviews. These efforts are described in Chapter 1 of the Regional Housing Element, *Introduction and Regional Collaboration*.

A2.1 Pop-Up Events

At the Merced County Fair between June 7th and June 11, 2023, County staff distributed flyers with links to project website and survey to increase community awareness of the Housing Element process and encourage participation.

A2.2 Community Workshops

Flyers advertising the workshops were distributed by Merced County in advance of the workshop series to encourage public attendance and participation. Bilingual (Spanish and English) flyers provided meeting details (dates, times, locations, Zoom links), the Housing Element Update website and email list.

A workshop was hosted in Merced County on September 28, 2023. The workshop consisted of an informative PowerPoint presentation on housing sites, a questionnaire about the proposed sites, and a Q&A and public discussion period. The workshop activities invited participants to share their opinions on what makes their neighborhood great, their experiences finding housing, and reasons it is difficult to find housing in their communities. Participants took part in a sticker activity to rank the most effective housing programs. Participants were also asked to weigh in on the selected housing opportunity sites. The PowerPoint presentation was available in Spanish and live Spanish translation was available upon request.

Approximately eight participants attended the workshop. Participants in Merced County are concerned about housing affordability, access to resources, overcrowding, and lack of inventory. Key findings from the workshops are as follows:

- Special needs groups, especially seniors, have a more difficult time finding housing. There is a need for inclusive housing policies.
- Housing is unaffordable for many residents.
- Housing near agricultural areas exposes residents to pollution and chemicals, particularly in low-income housing plans.
- Affordable housing should be strategically planned near or incorporate green spaces.
- Most renters struggle to transition to homeownership due to high costs and financial burdens.
- High demand allows landlords to discriminate and demand excessively high rents.
- Rent caps, particularly a five percent annual increase limit, should be applied to mobile homes.
- Overcrowding, homelessness, and traffic issues are additional challenges highlighted in the community feedback, emphasizing the need for comprehensive and inclusive solutions to improve housing accessibility and affordability.

A2.3 Survey

The County conducted a community survey to inform the 6th Cycle Housing Element update. The survey was made available from March 27 through December 22, 2023. The survey was also made available during various community outreach events. The survey consisted of 16 questions and used different formats for questions: checkbox, ranking, and open-ended questions. A total of 172 people responded to the survey. Of these, 59 respondents either live, work, attend school, or own a business or property in unincorporated Merced County.

The input provided by the respondents included the following major themes:

- Affordability and quality and size of housing are the most important aspects when looking for new housing, followed by close to resources such as commercial, medical facilities, and work and school. Safe neighborhoods were also noted as important when searching for housing. Respondents want housing near public transit stops, employment, and shopping centers.
- The largest barriers to affordable desirable housing are the cost of quality housing and the limited supply of particularly affordable housing. Respondents also noted the lack of good-paying jobs to be able to afford housing.
- In addition to affordability and availability of housing, respondents noted that homelessness and housing quality were also urgent issues in the Merced region.
- Respondents would like to see programs related to housing vouchers, homebuyer loan counseling services, housing assistance for residents with special needs, and home rehabilitation assistance.
- Housing with three or more bedrooms, housing with one or two bedrooms, and accessory dwelling units are the most needed housing in the region.
- Participants suggested new housing development in Planada, Bear Creek, near Castle Air Force Base, and unincorporated parts of the county near services, near hospitals, and on the outskirts of cities.

Full survey results can be found in Appendix 1 to the Regional Housing Element, Community Survey Results.

A2.4 Stakeholder Interviews

The County also participated in a series of stakeholder interviews with service providers, residents, and housing developers held between August 8, 2023, and August 23, 2023. A complete summary of the stakeholder interviews can be found in Chapter 1, *Introduction*, to the Regional Housing Element. Key findings included:

- Service providers stated there is a need for affordable housing throughout the county with access to resources.
- Residents expressed that rental units need maintenance and repair.
- Additional housing services are needed throughout communities in the county include transitional housing, rental assistance, first-time homebuyer assistance, and education on tenants' rights.
- Residents expressed concern over the high cost of housing, particularly for renters.

- Residents identified a need for more community engagement efforts that allow residents to participate in a meaningful way, including workshops and translation services during outreach events.

A2.5 Response to Community Input

During community outreach, community members identified the following overarching themes regarding housing in Merced County. Each one is discussed with how it is addressed in the Housing Element.

Need more affordable housing for both renters and buyers.

The County will accommodate at least 2,979 units affordable to very low-, low-, and moderate-income households. The County will accommodate these units on sites that are currently vacant or underutilized in the Census Designated Places of Dehli, Franklin/Beachwood, Hilmar, Le Grand, Planada, Sana Nella, and Winton. Of these sites, four in Dehli, three in Hilmar, five in Le Grand, and eight in Planada will be rezoned to allow higher residential densities.

At least 13 percent of moderate and above-moderate housing units will be on sites that support multi-family or mixed-use housing, encouraging the development of townhomes and condominiums for more affordable homeownership opportunities.

Housing Program 5 includes actions to encourage the development of at least 16 accessory dwelling units (ADUs) in Unincorporated County during the planning period by creating standard plans and streamlining the permit process. ADUs often provide relatively affordable rental options.

Through Housing Program 8, the County looks to expand multi-family development by contacting non-profit and private developers to facilitate the production of affordable housing as well as pursue funding opportunities available at the local, regional, state, and federal levels.

The County has 204 housing units that are deed restricted as affordable housing for lower-income households. Although these are not at risk of conversion, under Program 8, the County will work to preserve these units as affordable housing and will proactively monitor all other units to encourage continued affordability beyond existing covenants and work proactively with owners of affordable units to assist in rehabilitation needs.

Support for transit-oriented development and increasing density in areas with existing services.

Housing opportunity sites were prioritized by location, including proximity to transit, job centers, and community services. Site selection focused heavily on infill development of vacant and nonvacant sites along strategic corridors and in neighborhoods with existing services.

Housing Program 1 directs the County to collaborate with other jurisdictions on housing efforts, including funding opportunities, best practices, and other efforts to address housing, transit, economic development, and homeless issues in Merced County. This Program includes participation in the Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) to manage and implement regional transit services, including an annual community workshop to identify transportation needs for residents of the unincorporated county.

Housing Program 12 directs the County to create a well-maintained infrastructure to provide a safe and accessible urban environment. The County will work with MCAG on a multi-jurisdictional Active

Transportation Plan and Local Road Safety Plan and will incorporate connected street and pedestrian/bicycle networks through Capital Improvement Projects (CIPs) for existing urban communities and proposed new communities.

Need for rental assistance for low-income families and rent-restricted housing.

Housing Program 11 directs the County to assist in the development of housing to meet the needs of extremely low, very low- and low-income households and special needs households. By continuing to work with Housing Authority of the County of Merced, housing choice vouchers (HCV), public housing, and project-based voucher program will be provided. Starting in 2025 the County will annually conduct an outreach event for landlords on the HCV program, with a goal of seven events during the planning period.

Need to increase the variety of available rental and for sale housing types, including apartments and townhomes, and more options for three-bedroom units.

In order to facilitate a variety of housing types, especially housing for lower-income households and those with special needs, the County will remove constraints to housing development by amending the Zoning Code (Program 6). This would include zoning amendments that would remove constraints in the areas of development standards, density bonus, ADUs, single-room occupancy, emergency shelters, residential care facilities, farmworker housing, and supportive housing.

To facilitate multi-family development, the County will revise the General Plan to accommodate higher densities and rezone more areas to densities of at least 30 dwelling units per acre to accommodate more forms of affordable income housing through Housing Program 7.

Through Housing Program 8, the County will expand multi-family development by contacting non-profit and private developers to facilitate the production of affordable housing as well as pursuing funding opportunities available at the local, regional, state and federal levels. More multi-family housing of varied densities and scale will increase the variety of available rental and for-sale housing types.

Need for housing rehabilitation services homeowners with aging housing stock and those with flood damage.

Housing Program 10 directs the County to utilize various programs and community partnerships to encourage the rehabilitation of housing units, as well as maintaining the supply of affordable housing. The County will work with non-profits in their community to assist with rehabilitation, annually research funding opportunities, with a goal to assist with five units annually through the Weatherization Program.

Need increased education on housing rights and legal resources for tenants and landlords.

Under Housing Program 15, the County works with the Merced County Housing Authority to provide fair housing information and resources to residents and housing providers. The County will coordinate with Central California Legal Services (CCLS) and other fair housing non-profit organizations to provide fair housing and tenant/landlord services. By January 2025, the County will

update its website to include fair housing rights and responsibilities for landlords and lenders and continue to offer information online, the County's newsletter, County government buildings and local media.

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