

## G2 Public Participation

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This section documents the efforts the City of Merced 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, *Introduction and Regional Collaboration*.

### G2.1 Pop-Up Events

At the City's Spring Fair between May 3 and May 7, 2023, City staff distributed flyers with links to project website and survey to increase community awareness of the Housing Element process and encourage participation.

### G2.2 Community Workshops

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

Two workshops on the Housing Element were hosted in Merced on August 22 and August 26, 2023. The workshops 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 and their experience finding housing, take part in a sticker activity to rank the most effective housing programs, and reasons it is difficult to find housing in their communities. Participants were also asked to weigh in on the selected housing opportunity sites. The PowerPoint presentation was available in Spanish via written translation. Live Spanish translation was available upon request.

Eleven participants attended the workshop on August 22, and 16 participants attended the workshop on August 26. In general, the key findings from the workshop are as follows:

- Seniors on Supplemental Security Income face severe cost burdens, and evictions disproportionately impact seniors.
- Affordability challenges affect all residents, including the younger population.
- El Capitan and hospital areas are identified as suitable for multifamily housing and North Merced needs both multifamily and affordable housing options.
- Homebuyers from outside the community are buying homes due to the comparatively low real estate costs in the city. This raises concerns about housing accessibility for local residents.
- Community members value sustainability and climate-conscious housing.
- Walkability is crucial and public transit needs expansion.
- Increased housing development that expands into North Merced contributes to inequality. Housing discrimination issues persist.
- Affordable housing programs need fewer constraints.
- Better resources are needed to address homelessness challenges.

Participants were asked to provide their opinions on areas of Merced that would benefit from additional housing development. Participants noted that parts of northeast Merced near the University, as well as in the south and west of Merced. In particular, participants stated that South Merced would benefit from mixed-use development, senior housing, low-income housing above ground-floor commercial, and ADU incentives.

Participants were also asked how their experience has been in finding housing and what makes a neighborhood great. Residents expressed concerns about the lack of available and affordable housing, with affordable options often situated in proximity to polluted or industrial areas. The concentration of industrial land uses and pollution, such as excessive smog and traffic congestion, particularly in South Merced near schools, raises environmental and health issues. Affordability was a common theme, affecting young single residents seeking independence and low-income households in need of habitable and safe housing. Issues such as high security deposits, expensive rent applications, and discrimination were also noted, along with a lack of accessible housing for people with disabilities. Additionally, residents raised concerns about predatory behavior from landlords or management companies.

Participants voted on the reasons it is difficult to find housing. “Rent affordability or increases” and “difficult to buy a home” were voted as the two largest barriers to accessing housing in Merced with eight votes each. “Discrimination based on protected characteristics” and “lack of housing with supportive services” were voted as the next most significant housing barriers each with five votes. “Community opposition to new housing” was voted as the least significant barrier to accessing housing with one vote.

Participants noted that green infrastructure, such as streets lined with trees and safe parks, is considered crucial, especially in South Merced, providing both recreational spaces for children and contributing to overall safety. Residents value sustainable housing and renewable energy, including net zero homes and prefabricated options, aiming to reduce car dependency. Social housing is desired to prevent communities from being priced out. Access to essential resources, including grocery stores, parks, green spaces, and health clinics, as well as reliable infrastructure, is seen as vital for a thriving neighborhood.

Homelessness prevention and housing was the most voted program for effectively addressing housing needs in Merced with nine votes. This was closely followed by housing for special needs populations with eight votes. Rent-restricted affordable housing development and fair housing services both received seven votes. Housing rehabilitation, variety of new housing development, and development of rental housing for large households all received four votes.

Additionally, general comment cards were provided during the workshops to offer attendees an opportunity to submit any comments to the planning staff. A summary of the received comments is provided below.

- A survey is not adequate community engagement for the fair housing needs assessment. Jurisdictions and consultants should speak with community members (in contexts beyond the few workshops) to get a sense for the community’s fair housing needs.
- Merced needs more deed-restricted affordable units for the City’s lowest-income residents in high resource neighborhoods, rent control, right to counsel for tenants facing eviction or other landlord issues, more general tenant protection, long-term rental assistance programs, and first-time homebuyer programs.
- The City should eliminate barriers to accessing housing by eliminating rental application fees for tenants applying to rent.

- The City must include policies, programs, and actions that will address the historical and current concentration of polluting land uses in South Merced and areas that are predominantly communities of color.
  - This includes rezoning areas of South Merced away from industrial and to green space, residential, or commercial.
- The City should consider starting remediation programs to address lasting pollution from the past, and stopping new pollution by not siting new warehouses, distribution centers, or pollution causing projects near residential areas.
- The City must address the service needs of South Merced residents within the City's sphere of influence. These include water and sewer, stormwater drainage, fire protection services, as well as sidewalks and street lighting.
- Merced development is not sustainable.
- Residents brought up the need for the following policies/programs:
  - Right to counsel
  - Rent control ordinance
  - Affordable housing in high resourced areas
  - Inclusionary housing
  - More tenant protections
  - Permanent rental assistance program
  - First time home buyer program
  - Water/sewer service to unincorporated South Merced
  - Addressing inequitable land use planning
- In-lieu fee (City council resolution) as currently proposed does not fully fund the need for affordable housing, or properly ensure that developers build affordable housing in the same place as market-rate housing.
- The Housing Element must go beyond what it is currently doing to address its long history of discrimination which means taking meaningful actions that overcome pattern of segregation and foster inclusive communities free from barriers that restrict access to opportunities.

In addition, a member of Merced Lao Family Community, Inc. provided the consulting team with a survey that they conducted to better understand the housing preferences specific to this community. The survey asked individuals to indicate which home sizes are most needed in Merced County. The survey reports that three-bedroom homes are the most needed, followed by one-bedroom, four-bedroom, and two-bedroom homes.

## G2.3 Study Sessions

A presentation to the City Council was held on August 7, 2023, to provide an overview of the 6<sup>th</sup> Cycle Housing Element Update as an informational only session. No comments were received.

## G2.4 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, 131 respondents either live, work, attend school, or own a business or property in the City of Merced.

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 housing, 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, landlord/tenant mediation services, 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.
- In the City of Merced, participants suggested housing development throughout northern and southern parts of the city, in downtown, near East Childs Avenue, near Dan Ward Road and Beachwood Drive, near State Route 59, near State Route 99, near Mission Avenue, near the University of California, Merced, and on vacant and underutilized lots.

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

## G2.5 Stakeholder Interviews

The City 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.

## G2.6 Response to Community Input

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

### **Need more affordable housing for both renters and buyers.**

The City will accommodate at least 6,123 units affordable to very low-, low-, and moderate-income households. The City will accommodate these units on sites that are currently vacant or underutilized, including sites that will be rezoned to allow higher residential densities.

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

Through Housing Program 7, the City looks to expand multifamily housing stock through 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. Multifamily housing provide affordable housing options to add into the city's housing stock.

The City has 1,472 housing units that are deed restricted as affordable housing for lower-income households, and 233 units are at risk of conversion to market rate by 2033. Under Program 8, the City 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 City 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 MCAG to manage and implement regional transit services, including an annual community workshop to identify transportation needs for Merced residents.

Housing Program 13 directs the City to create a well-maintained city infrastructure to provide a safe and accessible urban environment. The City will implement an Active Transportation Plan and seek funding for and include pedestrian and bicycle improvements in Capital Improvement Planning, as feasible. This Plan will foster street connections and pedestrian/bicycle networks.

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

Housing Program 12 directs the City to assist in the development of housing to meet the needs of extremely low, very low- and low-income households and special needs households. The City will continue to work with Housing Authority of the County of Merced to provide housing choice vouchers (HCV), public housing, project-based voucher program, and migrant housing. Starting in 2025 the City 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 City will remove constraints on housing development by amending the Zoning Code through Housing Program 6. This would include zoning amendments to remove constraints associated with development standards, density bonus, ADUs, single-room occupancy, emergency shelters, residential care facilities, farmworker housing, and supportive housing.

Through Housing Program 7, the City looks to expand multifamily housing stock through 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. Multifamily housing 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 9 directs the City to utilize various programs and community partnerships to encourage the rehabilitation of housing units, as well as maintaining the supply of affordable housing. The City will work with non-profits in their community to assist with rehabilitation, annually research funding opportunities, with a goal to partner with Self-Help Enterprises for 10 owner-occupied rehabilitations, five manufactured home rehabs, and five ADU/JADU rehabs. The City will also partner with Habitat for Humanity for six rehab projects, and 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 14, the City will continue to work with the Merced County Housing Authority to provide fair housing information and resources to residents and housing providers. Educational flyers and factsheets will be distributed and shared on the City's website, and annual staff trainings will start in 2025 on how to refer residents for fair housing complaints.