



Balancing Act: One Tool Offers Multiple Solutions for Housing

How Three Municipalities Use Balancing Act's Simulate for Housing to Engage Residents for Education and Constructive Decision-Making

“...Balancing Act is an **awesome tool.**

David Driskell
Principal, Baird + Driskell Community Planning

OVERVIEW. Ensuring housing availability and affordability is one of local governments' most pressing issues, affecting municipalities around the world. In the United States, there is no state or county where a renter working full-time at minimum wage can afford a two-bedroom apartment. According to Harvard University's *State of the Nation's Housing 2020* report, in 2019, 30.2 percent of all households (37.1 million households) were “housing cost burdened,” spending 30 percent or more of their income on housing. One in 7 households — 17.6 million in total — were “severely cost burdened,” spending half or more of their income on housing. And the U.S. is short 5.24 million homes, an increase of 1.4 million from 2019.

The lack of affordable and available housing significantly burdens low-income residents and has a disproportionate impact on senior citizens, young families, people with disabilities, and communities of color. The housing crisis also has a direct impact on the environment and, subsequently, climate change. Legislation is increasingly a tool to combat the crisis. In California, the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) is a state mandate to address the need for and planning of housing affordability levels across the state.

THE SOLUTION. Increasingly, experts and government leaders are reaching the conclusion that a critical piece of the solution is increasing the supply of housing through zoning changes and approval of new projects.

THE OBSTACLE. Current systems of public input (such as in-person meetings) enable small numbers of (often angry) people to veto plans to increase the housing supply in their



neighborhoods. This can have the effect of limiting density in the short run, but can sacrifice the needs of the larger community as it grows.

Simulate For Housing Changes the Conversation

FROM 'NO' TO 'HOW?' Balancing Act's Simulate for Housing requires participants narrowly focused on a single issue or area to become problem-solvers whose task is to plan for and accommodate targeted levels of housing in their communities.

HEAR EVERY VOICE. Anyone with a phone, tablet or computer and 10 minutes can use the Balancing Act Simulate for Housing tool to participate in public engagement and have their voices count in the community discussion. This is particularly important for soliciting feedback from lower-income and traditionally less-engaged residents.

SHARE THE WORK/SHOW THE WORK. Simulate for Housing offers a facilitation tool for local elected and appointed officials to have a fact-based, goal-oriented conversation with residents about how to attain housing targets for the entire community.

DECIDING ON DENSITY IN LAFAYETTE, CALIFORNIA

Located in the hills between Oakland and Walnut Creek, Lafayette is a largely residential town of around 25,000 with a lovely reservoir that's popular for outdoor recreation. Lafayette has used Balancing Act's Simulate for Housing to engage residents in choosing which areas in the city should be selected for increased density. During this planning cycle, the city must change zoning to accommodate an additional 2,114 housing units.

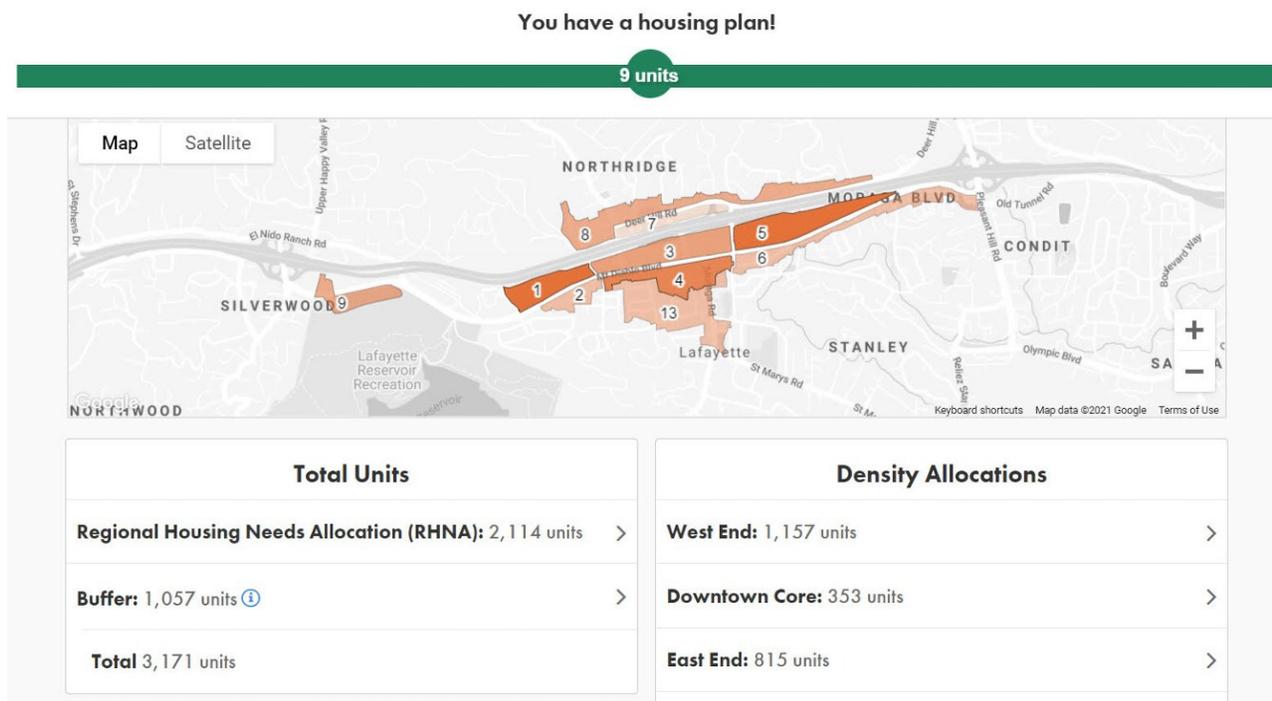
“We don't need everybody to become experts in housing development and planning and land use decision-making. **But we do want to create a framework within which they can operate and have informed conversations.** Balancing Act was amazing working with us on that.

Renata Robles
Associate Planner, City of Lafayette

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GETTING THE WORD OUT. The city's General Plan Advisory Committee (GPAC) publicized the program with a website (PlanLafayette.org), direct mailings to 13,000 households, YouTube videos, social media, and advertisements in the local newsletter, and attendance at more than 60 community meetings.

THE ENGAGEMENT. Four community workshops addressing collaboration, identification of issues, and problem-solving garnered almost 400 attendees.



PUTTING RESIDENTS IN PLANNERS' SHOES IN ELK GROVE, CALIFORNIA

Located just south of Sacramento, Elk Grove has a population of about 175,000 residents. Its affordable housing gap has been years in the making, evidenced by the more than 28,000 lottery entries the city recently received for 96 units at a new affordable development.

“This is a **complex process with a lot of tradeoffs**. We wanted residents to understand that it wasn't just about the site around the corner from their home, but about how all the sites work together to form a system of units that **meet the needs of our community**.”

Christopher Jordan
 Director of Strategic Planning and Innovation, City of Elk Grove

The City used Balancing Act's Simulate for Housing to develop an interactive website, allowing residents to see existing low-income housing sites in the city and review essential sites targeted for low- and very low-income housing. More than 1,500 users used the tool, spending almost 10 minutes per visit. Residents could still oppose a site, but they couldn't use the tool to only say 'no' to a site near them.

Housing Element By Neighborhood



CHOOSING HOUSING TYPES DOWN UNDER IN SUTHERLAND SHIRE, AUSTRALIA

Housing Plan Target = 1,000 homes

You haven't reached your housing target.

Housing Mix

Housing Types

- Single Dwellings: 0 homes >
- Dual Occupancy: 0 homes >
- Villas and Town Houses: 0 homes >
- Apartments (buildings below 6 storeys): 0 homes >
- Apartments (buildings above 6 storeys): 0 homes >
- Total 0 homes

Total Homes

Total number of homes: 1,000 homes >

Submit

Reset all to start over

Save your progress and share with others

Take the time to review your housing mix. If you are happy with your choices, click Submit. You can go back and change any of your selections.

Single family? Duplex? Townhome? Apartments? Those are the types of housing that residents are being asked to consider in order to meet housing goals for Sutherland Shire, in New South Wales, Australia, made using Balancing Act’s Simulate for Housing. A district of almost a quarter-million residents south of central Sydney, Sutherland Shire is largely developed with large, free-standing homes and has one of the highest rates of car ownership in the country. With pristine beaches and four national parks, the Shire has seen an unprecedented price boom for housing.

We had three tools that were used as part of our housing strategy ... **the Balancing Act tool had six times the amount of participation than our other tools.** We rarely had a negative comment ... the result far outweighed any other thing we've done in the past.

Jordan Widenstrom
Senior Strategic Planner, NSW Sutherland Shire



Simulate for Housing is currently being used by more than 30 cities and counties in the San Francisco Bay Area due to a special arrangement with the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG), which covers more than 7 million people.

The housing planning process that Bay Area cities and counties will undergo over the next year will be extremely challenging. **When we saw how the Balancing Act tool put residents in the shoes of policymakers to make the tough trade-offs required to meet housing goals, we decided to offer it broadly to our member jurisdictions. We're all united in wanting more housing, and Simulate for Housing by Balancing Act helps create broadly supported decisions.**

*Heather Peters
RHTA/REAP Project Manager, ABAG*

Why Use Simulate for Housing by Balancing Act?



FRAMES A STRUCTURED, FACT-BASED CONVERSATION BASED ON NECESSARY HOUSING ALLOCATIONS



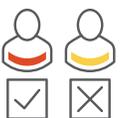
PRESENTS TRADEOFFS AND LETS RESIDENTS SEE OPPORTUNITIES AND IMPACTS



TRANSFORMS PUBLIC INPUT FROM COMPLAINTS TO CONSTRUCTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING



CHANGES FOCUS OF INPUT FROM THE BACKYARD TO THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY



IMPROVES DECISION-MAKING ENVIRONMENT