

Location: San Mateo County

Issue: San Mateo County's "Future of Housing in San Mateo"

Methodology: Viewpoint Learning – ChoiceWork Dialogues (San Mateo county citizens) and Stakeholder Dialogues (civic and business leaders, elected officials and experts)

Link to more: <http://www.viewpointlearning.com/publications/reports.shtml>

The housing prices in San Mateo County have drastically risen causing many residents, including individuals employed in the area, to relocate to cities with more affordable housing. The housing crisis in San Mateo County has resulted in businesses, hospitals and schools having difficulty recruiting professional workers, as well as increasing traffic since many employees must commute long distances to their jobs.

In 2001 the housing situation in San Mateo County had become so pronounced that a group of civic leaders from a variety of perspectives, formed a group, which came to be known as the "Housing Nachos." They gathered to discuss ways to improve the situation. The Housing Nachos agenda consisted of: 1) to develop an environment that encourages housing at all income levels and 2) to create a new method of addressing the complex regional challenges of meeting this goal in San Mateo County, in addition to engaging and informing the community regarding San Mateo County housing crisis. The Housing Nachos desired to facilitate dialogue among city managers, county residents, elected officials, employers, the faith community and philanthropic leaders. They brought in Viewpoint Learning, an organization that specializes in dialogues, education, facilitation, and public engagement.

The Housing Nachos and Viewpoint Learning facilitated four daylong ChoiceWork Dialogues with citizens representing diverse members of San Mateo's community. After the four day-long ChoiceWork Dialogues, there were two additional "Stakeholder Dialogues" that expanded the housing crisis dialogue to incorporate civic and business leaders, elected officials, and housing and environment advocates. In the spring and summer of 2003 randomly selected citizens across San Mateo County participated in another set of four eight-hour long "ChoiceWork Dialogues" sessions, in which they discussed the pros and cons of four scenarios to ameliorate the housing crisis. The four scenarios consisted of the following directions: continue on our current path, rely on the market, invest in existing communities, and improve governance in the county. The citizens decided they wanted to maintain specific policy considerations, such as: preserve open space, density over sprawl, re-development, levying taxes with conditions (meaning taxes get spent on capital improvements, while possessing accountability), and regional solutions require regional engagement.

In the winter of 2004 Viewpoint Learning with funding from Peninsula Community Foundation conducted two Stakeholder Dialogue sessions with advocates for housing and the environment, civic and business leaders (elected and official), and county residents. The Stakeholder Dialogues were similar to the ChoiceWork Dialogues since they were highly structured and based on dialogue, rather than debate. These conversations produced two outcomes: 1) a desire to further a citizens' vision for the future of their county and how to address the housing shortage 2) agree on a small number of high priority, high leverage goals that if achieved would move the county closer to this shared vision.

In the morning session, the Stakeholder Dialogues focused on finding common ground between the citizens' scenario and their own perspectives, then evolve that thinking into a shared vision. The participants spent the afternoon identifying and fleshing out a number of high-leverage goals to achieve that vision. After much discussion the participants of the Stakeholders Dialogue decided that three specific goals to improve the housing crisis in San Mateo County were to redefine zoning regulations to increase development along transit corridor; define and implement a regional approach; and engage and educate county residents, citizens and stakeholders alike on the urgency of the situation, potential solutions, tradeoffs and roadblocks.

The ChoiceWork and Stakeholder Dialogues were very successful in reaching a community consensus on how to solve the housing crisis in San Mateo. The ChoiceWork and Stakeholder Dialogues were composed of diverse members of the community with various perspectives, which resulted in each participant bringing valuable information and uniting the group together to reach specific goals to improve San Mateo County's housing crisis. The ChoiceWork and Stakeholder Dialogues were very important in addressing the desires of individuals within the private and public sectors, and employees. The citizen participants informed the business, civic and expert leaders, as well as vice versa.