



Accelerating Housing Production:

Bridging the Gap Between Pro-Housing State Legislation and Local Housing Supply

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Executive Summary

Across the country, state legislatures are passing ambitious packages of pro-housing legislation aiming to increase the housing supply and ease the housing crisis. The impact of these laws depends on whether more housing is actually built. Yet cities and towns are achieving varying results as they work to comply with legislation — often working in isolation and with limited resources.

What are the existing barriers to housing production at the local level, and what levers directly affect those barriers? What potential strategies and innovation opportunities exist for states to help local governments build more housing, faster?

The Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab (GPL) explored these questions in interviews with dozens of government leaders, advocates, and researchers. Interviewees identified four key barriers to faster housing production:

1. **Permitting:** Slow, inefficient permitting and development approval systems.
2. **Zoning:** Challenging zoning and land use reform processes.
3. **Markets:** Under-resourced and disengaged local development communities.
4. **Data:** Lack of real-time measurement of housing production and evaluation of new programs and policies.

Our interviews also surfaced insights into how **leaders believe states can serve as the driving force to solve problems** across these four barriers. Specifically, states can provide local housing leaders with:

1. Access to direct technical assistance.
2. Scalable tools and peer-to-peer learning opportunities.
3. Monitoring and accountability support.
4. Feedback opportunities to inform future statewide policy priorities.

Within states, peer cities and towns operate in the same regulatory environment, offering an opportunity for scalability and broad adoption of field-tested solutions. State governments have significant control over regulations, both through legislative reform and agency-level policy. Some states are already testing forms of active state engagement in local implementation, which may allow them to drive scaled uptake of impactful practices at the local level, rather than the existing, fragmented, ‘every-city-for-itself’ approach.

The findings captured in this report inform the GPL’s strategy in designing and executing a State Housing Production Accelerator, which focuses on producing innovative, scalable solutions to facilitate local housing production that can ultimately be spread across additional states and the country.

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Introduction

Persistent shortages of affordable rental and for-sale units have driven housing costs to historic heights. The median home price has increased by over 60% since 2019, and the percentage of cost-burdened renter households has risen to a record 50%.ⁱ This supply shortfall has left millions of households, especially low- and moderate-income families, struggling to find adequate housing they can afford.ⁱⁱ Record numbers of renters now spend more than half their income on rent, and homeownership has slipped to its lowest level in years. Nationwide, limited inventory and slowed construction constrain access to stable housing, exacerbate affordability challenges, and contribute to rising rates of housing insecurity.

Advocates, researchers, and government leaders are sounding the alarm that meeting this crisis will require building substantially more housing. This concern also spotlights the regulatory, economic, and process constraints that developers operate under to design, propose, and ultimately build that housing. In response to this pressing need, state legislatures are passing ambitious packages of pro-housing legislation intended to remove barriers to development and incentivize faster housing production. The Mercatus Center at George Mason University found that between July 2024 and July 2025, state legislatures passed 124 pro-housing bills.ⁱⁱⁱ These housing production reforms, often passed with bipartisan support, legalized new forms of housing, created new development pathways for affordable housing, and mandated or incentivized the removal of burdensome local regulations.^{iv}

Amid this landmark legislative progress, a key question lingers: How can housing leaders ensure that pro-housing reforms are implemented effectively and result in more housing production?

The Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab (GPL) interviewed 65 state and local government leaders, advocates, practitioners, and researchers to understand the state and local barriers that impede housing development and to identify opportunities where state and local governments could accelerate and streamline housing production systems.^v The interviews revealed that unlocking the full impact of state legislation on housing production systems depends on local governments being able to translate state goals into brick-and-mortar housing. As planning leaders in Boise told us, “The passage of policy is the wedding, implementation is the marriage.”

This report captures insights from state and local leaders regarding the barriers and opportunities they are encountering as they implement recently passed state-level housing reforms.

1. **What are the existing barriers to housing production? What levers directly impact those barriers?** Interviewees raised four categories of barriers that impede the impact of ambitious legislative reforms on housing production: inefficient local review **processes**, complex milestones like **zoning** reform, challenging **market** conditions for developers, and the difficulty of monitoring real-time **data** on housing production. Each of these areas is most directly influenced by city-level policy and strategy, but progress could be made faster with the benefit of field-tested templates or tools and disseminated learnings from successful case studies.
2. **What opportunities exist for state agencies to expedite housing production and fully implement legislative reforms? What forms of support do local governments need?** Local leaders told us they feel like they are working in silos to translate state policy and revamp their housing production systems. However, they believe statewide housing policy implementation should be a collective, iterative effort that enables cities to learn from and build on other communities' successes. Given that cities in any given state are working to implement and comply with the same laws and regulations, state executives and housing agencies are uniquely positioned to provide centralized support to improve local systems and accelerate housing production. While some states have developed robust technical assistance functions and local support platforms to seize this opportunity, most have not, thus missing significant opportunities to strengthen reform implementation.

Barriers to Housing Production

Regulatory and Process Burdens Drive up Costs

Developers and local housing leaders were blunt about what drives housing production: costs. While “hard” costs like materials, labor, insurance, and design are at an all-time high, developers also worry about transactional costs resulting from what one planner called a “labyrinth” of fees, requirements, and delays.

Beyond the impact and application fees that make one Atlanta-area developer feel “raked over the coals just to build a duplex,” more than a dozen local officials said securing approvals and permits often takes at least a year, assuming no delays, rejections, or resubmissions. It is very common for proposals to experience those setbacks, meaning that timelines are not just long; they are also unpredictable. Developers often do not know how many revisions their architectural staff may need to make or how long they might need to retain lawyers or expeditors. Many developers described processes that stretch pre-development to two or three years. This raises staff costs and legal fees and threatens already-narrow margins — especially for tax-credit-financed affordable housing, where delays can often lead to loss of funding and kill projects.

The tools available to local and state governments to address hard costs related to materials and labor are generally either very expensive (e.g., direct subsidies, tax breaks/credits) or require undesirable and politically risky trade-offs (e.g., relaxing labor or workforce regulations, lowering minimum wages). Additionally, any direct investment governments make in lowering hard costs by subsidizing development can be limited by the complex bureaucratic systems that such developments must move through.

Governments have more direct and low-cost opportunities to reduce indirect costs that result from lengthy review and approval processes with uncertain timelines. A San Francisco Bay Area housing leader with extensive connections to the development community summed up the two fundamental needs: “Certainty [of outcome] and predictability [of timeline].”

Where to Focus: Local Implementation of State Legislation

In the last five to 10 years, statewide legislative efforts have focused on three broad reform categories:

1. **Deregulation.** Such bills mandate the reduction or removal of requirements that increase the cost of housing production like density caps or parking minimums.

- **Example:** California’s SB 79 transit-oriented development bill, which requires higher-density housing to be permitted near transit.
- 2. **Incentives.** These bills make state funds available to localities that pursue pro-development strategies. Bills might also offer accelerated processes and exceptions to certain fees or requirements for specific forms of housing development or developments in targeted areas.
 - **Example:** Colorado’s Innovative Housing Incentive Program (IHIP), which provides funding for construction of modular housing.
- 3. **Monitoring.** Such bills require jurisdictions to evaluate their housing supply gaps, identify specific income levels or geographic areas that are underserved by existing supply, and set measurable goals via housing plans to implement specific accelerating policies and construct more housing. (Most states have some form of a housing plan or a housing element within a consolidated plan as well as some state legislation.)
 - **Example:** Arizona’s Permit Freedom Act requires close monitoring of approval times and compliance with “shot clocks” to process applications.

A commonality across these statewide legislative levers is that all require robust local implementation to impact housing processes. When states require that denser housing be permitted near transit, many cities need to revise their zoning and building codes to facilitate that. When states incentivize specific types of development like Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) or construction on state land, local governments need to allow and facilitate those development processes. And when states impose new planning requirements or shot clocks, cities need to collect high-quality data, synthesize it, and design systems to monitor progress.

As the GPL spoke with state legislators responsible for crafting many of these innovative legislative approaches, leaders from Montana, Washington, California, Texas, and Arizona all agreed: it’s not enough for state legislatures to identify promising solutions and impose them legislatively. **States need to be persistent and strategic about ensuring local governments understand the expectations and goals articulated in statewide strategy.** Those local governments also need resources, knowledge, and information to successfully make local reforms that comply with new laws and meaningfully advance housing plans. As one Oregon housing leader told us, “State legislation is never that prescriptive, so when it comes down to it, local implementation has a huge effect on whether it is effective or not.”

Through our conversations with state and local housing leaders, researchers, advocates, and developers, we heard four key areas where local housing production and state housing strategy could be better aligned:

1. **Permitting:** Local government housing production systems (particularly proposal review and permitting systems) need to be streamlined and optimized.
2. **Zoning:** Local governments need to overcome complex “third rail” milestones often mandated by state legislative reforms like revising outdated zoning and land use rules.
3. **Markets:** Local governments need to support and steer developers by providing transparency, feedback, and guidance throughout proposal review and permitting processes.
4. **Data:** Local governments need to monitor housing production indicators in real time and evaluate the effectiveness of changes to their housing systems.

Barrier 1: Permitting

The Need to Improve Regulatory Systems

In many communities, the steepest barriers to housing production come from overly lengthy, duplicative, and bureaucratic processes for developing, reviewing, and approving proposals for new housing. Across the GPL’s interviews, planners, economic development staff, mayoral staffers, advocates, and researchers universally agreed that the slow speed of local government reviewing proposals and issuing permits often grinds development to a halt. Even legislators responsible for advancing statewide housing reforms see it too. In one state, a senior legislative leader noted that permitting takes way too long, is too bureaucratic, and contains way too many layers. Leaders in Austin, Texas, have successfully stabilized rents and built new housing, but we heard that “improving the permitting process through comprehensive land development code updates has remained a ‘third rail.’” Permitting is an enduring pain point that one housing leader said threatens to slow down the city’s impressive rate of new development as rising material and labor costs narrow margins. New home starts are down 15% in 2025, while they have stayed steady or increased in peer cities like Dallas, San Antonio, and Houston.^{vi} In a changing economic landscape, a housing system leader who led reform efforts in Austin said that the city may “need to coax developers back — and if building is going to require a two-year rezoning process, you’ll need stronger incentives.”

Insight: Processes slow down before proposals are even submitted.

The first point at which developers are running into roadblocks is the “pre-development” stage. (This is the period before a formal proposal is submitted, which generally includes site selection, market analysis, architectural design, financing strategy, and project planning — some of the costliest and most time-intensive activities for developers.) Housing staff in Anaheim, California, shared that, “Land use is actually the least complicated part for us ... the challenge is really in the financing plan during pre-development.” It is in this pre-development stage that developers first identify *what* they want to build and where they want to build it.

Interviews with staff in cities like Charleston, South Carolina, and Fort Wayne, Indiana, corroborate the idea that simply crafting their initial concept can be a months-long, expensive process for developers, and in many cases still does not lead to a successful application. To create a submittable proposal, developers need to design a plan that financially pencils out, correctly interpret entitlement and land-use rules for their proposed lot, anticipate city and community reaction to the proposed development, and pay for expensive environmental surveys and testing to ensure their site is construction ready.

For smaller firms and developers new to the process (consider, for example, a resident exploring construction of an ADU or housing on a lot adjacent to their home), the amount of work that must happen before an initial concept is even submitted to city planners can be overwhelming. Process improvement staff in Boise, Idaho, noted that when lines for application review are long, developers are incentivized to “submit a bad application really fast” to secure their place in line, knowing they’ll have an opportunity to revise their application later. The result is that rejection and resubmission become institutionalized parts of the proposal review process, rather than rare setbacks to be avoided. Leaders in Boise solved this challenge by building in feedback loops for applicants in a more iterative proposal review workflow.

Insight: Once proposals are in city hands, approval processes are opaque, siloed, and contradictory.

“There is no one person in the city who understands the entire user journey of someone trying to build housing.” We heard this from one senior city leader whose job is to work across departments and teams to map housing processes and develop innovative workflows. Staff in another city agreed that “not one person at city hall could tell you the process from start to finish.” Initial proposals typically must pass through planning, environmental, fire, transit, and public works departments for individual review and approval before receiving the requisite entitlement to even begin applying for permits. After initial review, developers find themselves returning to each of these departments for plan review and eventual permitting. During this process, housing leaders in Boise described how developers may get different answers on their proposal from different departments, with developers complaining that “planning said ‘no,’ but fire said ‘yes.’” Developers can leave confused about how to reconcile differing, potentially contradictory points of feedback because, as one Boston housing leader said: “the city doesn’t always speak with one voice.” In Boise, planning leaders say that while “the vast majority of feedback is aligned across departments, it can sometimes be contradictory.” The result is that proposals take months of review, re-submission, and re-review to incorporate points of feedback delivered individually by each stakeholder department, often imposing unexpected and costly updates to initial designs and plans.

Streamlining these processes, eliminating redundancies, and helping the city speak with one voice on proposed developments would require “everyone in one meeting, in one room,” said a leader who supported reform efforts in Austin. Yet in many cities, the only person able to compel departmental leadership into such a meeting, with a mandate to review the process comprehensively and identify areas to reduce requirements or accelerate reviews, would be the mayor themselves. One Michigan development official who works with smaller

towns and cities noted that “it’s difficult to improve local housing systems because it’s no one’s actual job — just an add-on to whatever responsibilities people have in other roles. It’s so challenging to make it happen without adequate resources.”

Many cities have established “housing czars,” “Chief Housing Officers,” or similar roles to facilitate these inter-departmental process improvement initiatives. These roles often have limited statutory power and can only compel departmental action when supported by mayoral authority. One developer advocacy leader said these roles only work if they have “a budget and the power to knock heads.” Staff leading one such effort for a major city said it was “losing momentum” after a year of process mapping without clear, actionable goals and “vision” from senior leadership. Many city leaders expressed interest in understanding what the optimal internal structure for reviewing and simplifying complex interdepartmental processes might be — underlining a lack of consistent definitions for these roles and of replicable strategies for bringing departmental leaders to the table.

Insight: City departments’ risk aversion intensifies slowdowns.

Many key city departments (e.g., fire, public safety, or transportation) have direct mandates that can run contrary to the objective of building housing quickly. This is a major reason that department-level reviews through the entitlement and permitting processes can drag on for months or produce contradictory results. A fire department, for example, wants to protect residents from fire danger, and has no mission-related incentive to quickly process housing plans, particularly when those housing plans might require deviation from fire codes. (Although leaders in several cities and national researchers told us such codes are often decades out of date and overly restrictive compared to similar codes used by European cities.) A Honolulu, Hawaii, planner said, “There’s a level of perfectionism that makes it hard to say ‘good enough’ in these departments, given the fear that if you’re not certain and something goes wrong, you’ll be liable.” Planning staff in Madison, Wisconsin, noted that reforms to speed up housing review also need to mitigate the perception that faster processes could lead to less safe housing. They said, “No one should be exempted from a plan review process, because we care deeply about the quality of housing.” Yet when each city department independently tries to minimize risk and enforce rules, developers may end up facing handfuls of department-specific regulatory systems, each with their own rigid approval criteria.

Insight: City departmental capacity is stretched thin.

The second challenge Madison housing leaders raised was “workflow and capacity.” This is especially true when engineering divisions need to be involved in assessing plans. They said, “The combination of limited staff capacity, the complexity of reviews, and the number of

components the engineering division is responsible for, have all led to lead times that are sometimes in the months just to get plans prepared,” before developers even contend with final approval and permitting stages. One housing leader in rural Michigan told us that “most communities don’t have planning or development departments.” A Michigan state development official said lack of local capacity was among the “foremost barriers” to getting new housing built. Limited staff capacity also slows down change management efforts. A Bay Area housing leader shared that “departments often only have capacity to dedicate staff to one or two new policy initiatives, on top of regular work.” This requires that cities thoughtfully prioritize their improvement efforts, based on the potential impact of streamlining known pain points.

Innovation Examples: How Governments Can Approve Housing Faster

Comprehensive Process Reform: One of the strongest examples of citywide housing process reform is the journey of Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Kalamazoo developed a quick-moving housing development pipeline with accelerated, predictable timelines. Planning leadership told us this initiative started with a strategic master plan in 2015: departmental leadership was assembled into a work group responsible for advancing infill development. Planners told us, “When you want to do infill development, you automatically start streamlining.”

Leaders worked through practical projects in partnership with nonprofit developers, which helped them identify inefficiencies and slowdowns throughout the process, like excessive fees for water hookups or lengthy engineering reviews. Learning from this experience, Kalamazoo designed new development administration positions responsible for shepherding proposals through the process. Leaders also streamlined review stages, instituted a weekly “projects meeting” with departmental leadership, and ultimately created a public-facing “lean” process guide to navigate proposal review and permitting on city websites, turning process optimization work into a communication tool to attract future development and ensure developers know what to expect from the process.

Role clarity and ownership were key to the comprehensive reform process. A Kalamazoo leader said, “You have to have a person who ‘owns’ the resources and can make connections” both to streamline processes and ultimately to guide and monitor proposals as they move between departments.

Cross-Departmental Improvement Teams: Organizing city government is key to managing change in embedded, long-institutionalized processes. One way to do this is through “housing czars.” Other communities are launching performance-focused teams responsible for convening stakeholders across departments and comprehensively updating

processes. In Boise, an “Organizational Effectiveness Team” serves this role, tackling entitlement and permitting processes in partnership with departmental leadership. This Organizational Effectiveness Team provides a project management function for initiatives that in other cities might be thought of as “no one’s job.” These tasks include creating central dashboards to track review timelines, facilitating annual reviews of departmental processes and zoning codes, and mapping and streamlining internal review workflows.

Pre-Proposal Alignment: Planners in Charleston designed a new pre-review structure for the city’s key approving departments, like planning, fire, stormwater, and transportation. This up-front alignment helped avoid contradictory feedback and department-level delays in later entitlement and permitting review processes. These stakeholders meet in “sketch plan” meetings on a weekly basis, review developers’ proposals as high-level concepts, and clearly identify elements that could produce later delays. They then provide specific recommendations on how to revise proposals to avoid those roadblocks. This structure allowed the city to “break free of the silos,” helping to ensure that city departments are giving feedback on proposals in a singular, consolidated way, and contradictory issues across departments are surfaced and reconciled live.

Barrier 2: Zoning

The Need to Update Codes and Ordinances

Zoning and land use codes are the primary enabling conditions for new housing development, and thus the focus of many statewide legislative reforms. Recent legislative packages in California, Massachusetts, Montana, Texas, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington require that city governments amend zoning codes to allow greater housing density in several ways. Examples include eliminating parking minimums, legalizing density in proximity to state-funded transit, or allowing ADUs.

In many of these states, localities have been slow to adopt local revisions to their zoning codes in compliance with new state laws, and many local governments have been the subject of lawsuits or state funding restrictions as a result of noncompliance. Some cities may not comply with state laws because of local politics or resistance toward greater density. Other cities may choose “malicious compliance,” in which they impose technically compliant rules that further restrict development. However, Colorado state housing leaders told us that “some local planners are overwhelmed with absorbing all these new changes.”

The capacity and knowledge needed to revise zoning codes often doesn’t exist within city planning departments because in many cases these codes haven’t been reviewed or amended for decades. A state-level leader in Oregon working to implement new legislation said, “We’ve talked to jurisdictions that didn’t realize they were in conflict with state law.” This realization encouraged the state to shift toward a technical assistance, education, and upskilling approach to implementation. A local knowledge and capacity gap is a serious problem because planners are the most important stakeholders to help bring about systemic housing production change, and often the initiators behind updates to code or statute. Welcoming Neighbors Network is a group whose member organizations lead municipal advocacy efforts around the country. From their experience advancing pro-housing reform in dozens of communities, one representative told us, “we can generally push a policy at the municipal level exactly as far as the most senior member of planning staff is willing to go, and no further.”

Insight: Local planners often lack knowledge and capacity to revise complex codes, as required to implement statewide housing reforms.

We often heard that planners are used to operating in transactional ways: reviewing proposals relative to the established code, mitigating risk, and identifying areas of noncompliance. Revising code requires these staff to think in entirely new ways. They need to be policy thinkers, considering local housing deficits and needs. They need to be legal

thinkers, evaluating the requirements of statewide legislation. They need to be public communicators, articulating to local political leadership and communities the need to revise code.

One Kalamazoo planning leader told us that, “Planners want to work in what is known, they don’t want to spend their capacity on something that is new and unknown and has to be figured out.” A state-level housing leader in Oregon said, “We hear about the need for training all the time, because people feel like they don’t have an understanding of constantly changing legal and policy landscape around housing law.”

Several jurisdictions told us that when planners are not regularly reviewing code with a mindset of process improvement, they are deprived of important experience that would make them better planners. In Boise, planning leadership said, “We can describe the issues in the code, but additional support would be helpful to identify the adjustments needed to actually make improvements, particularly weighing the trade-offs around what to prioritize for improvement and when.”

In Kalamazoo, we heard that before the city embarked on a multi-year improvement project, decades without regular code review and revision processes led to a situation where “planners often [didn’t] know the code very well,” and thus had difficulty quickly assessing whether proposals were compliant. The planning staff we talked to across several cities consistently agreed that the best way to develop deep content knowledge in city planning systems was to consistently review and identify inefficiencies in the code that shapes those systems. This helped staff shift their mindset from one focused on monitoring compliance to one focused on continual improvement.

Insight: Cities often lack ongoing, iterative structures to reform local zoning and policy over time.

When local governments crack open decades-old zoning codes for reform, there can be a temptation to try and overhaul the entire system at once. Several local housing leaders emphasized that instead, cities need to think strategically over multiple years to maintain momentum and recognize that they may not get it right the first time. Staff in Boise said, “Zoning is not a policy you change and then immediately see results on.” To understand both the impact of recent revisions and inform “clean-up” amendments to address unintended consequences or iterate on language, “you need to let the code breathe.”

Zoning changes require multi-year monitoring strategies that feed into subsequent rounds of reform. This prevents cities from finding themselves locked into new zoning codes that fail to attract developer interest or end up as complicated and inaccessible as the ones they replaced. Planners in Madison described a “constant, iterative process” driven by the city’s

comprehensive plan, which requires planners to “identify a pattern” in development that emerges in response to zoning changes. In an environment where planners and political leaders are under intense pressure to demonstrate that action is being taken to bring down housing costs, a “wait and see” approach can leave cities struggling to catch up to changing markets. Code review requires the capacity to identify and monitor leading metrics that can predict the impact of reforms on a city’s housing supply well before new units formally come online.

Through these multi-year processes, jurisdictions must be responsive to shifting needs and reflective about how they iterate, but also comprehensive and forward looking — building toward a clear set of priorities. In Austin, we heard that, “there have been so many small changes to the land development code that it’s like an archaeological dig of old priorities.” Planners need to be able to proactively anticipate their community’s needs and communicate a strategy to developers and the public.

Insight: Regional planning support networks are needed but rarely well-established.

Some states have defined development regions and developed Regional Housing Plans, yet in one state, planning staff told us those regional bodies “function inconsistently across the state. There are a lot of expectations on them, and no guarantee they’re going to continue to be supported [so] people don’t take them seriously.” Staff responsible for providing those regional supports told us that the focus of regional development is often too broad to generate housing-specific solutions. They said, “We need a regional group that would focus 100% on housing.” In one mid-sized city that has implemented local reform of housing processes, planners said they did not even know the state-created development regions existed until two years ago. In Fort Wayne, some staff expressed frustration that existing regional support offerings from the state felt high-level and disconnected from the practical project management, analytical, and communication skills planners need to rapidly advance projects. They described primarily “workshop and talk events” without follow-up or sustained supports. Fort Wayne planners suggested that regional support could be more narrowly focused and topic specific, helping multiple communities gain competencies and experience as they implement the same practices at once: “In Fort Wayne, some builders are willing to innovate and try new things — that said, the market impact would be more significant and delivered more quickly if resource and policy support was organized at a regional level. That level of leadership and focus by the state and regional organizations is limited.”

Insight: Overcoming resistance to development requires continuous community engagement.

In recent years, the idea of building more housing and developing more flexible zoning laws has generated bipartisan appeal. However, the question of how to amend those zoning laws still provokes heated public debate. Public hearings on proposed variances or changes to code often leave planners exposed to political pressures when they are simply trying to make decisions informed by data and evidence. One Austin housing leader told us that the city’s rezoning success was won through neighborhood-by-neighborhood “horse trading” negotiations between planners, developers, and communities to create incentives and carve-outs in a zoning code from the 1980s. Planners in Madison described holding a dozen public meetings for the city’s Transit-Oriented Development zoning overlay.

While some communities have limited the extent of public hearings for certain development types, Boise planners have found that some strongly opposed community members will still find ways to signal their disapproval of proposed projects or policies. Community members can seek out other, unrelated public meetings in the project life cycle, like design review meetings, and sometimes obstruct those proceedings with concerns about the development. For governments embarking on complex rezoning or code reform processes, public engagement is essential to avoid protracted political conflict: over a dozen governments expressed the desire to learn more about successful public engagement strategies and case studies from peer jurisdictions.

Innovation Examples: How Governments Can Reform Zoning Code

Multi-year Code Reform Strategies: In Madison, leaders worked on their zoning code guided by a multi-year comprehensive plan. Planning leaders described this process as “matching zoning to what the plan recommended,” treating the city’s housing plan as a target, identifying the gap between that target and the development currently allowed under existing zoning, and crafting specific, targeted amendments to close those gaps. Achieving political consensus and alignment on the comprehensive plan first effectively paved the road for waves of code reform that might otherwise have provoked individual political conflicts and lengthy debates. Now, guided by the comprehensive plan, the city has an institutional structure for planners and city councilors who hold final say over amendments to meet regularly and identify “wish lists” for future amendments that directly further the city’s housing goals. Longer-term strategies also help cities maintain focus and tackle bite-sized pieces of code.

In South Bend, Indiana, updates to the zoning code came “chapter by chapter,” specifically identifying an initial round of revisions focused on cutting red tape and bureaucracy that

“people from all political views would agree with” before moving on to more hot-button issues like density, off-street parking requirements, and accessory dwelling units. That strategy gradually built up the city council’s familiarity and comfort with revising the code, and focused public discussion on one narrow set of questions at a time, rather than inviting debate across all possible code revisions at once.

Regular, Institutionalized Code Review: In Boise, the city has developed an annual zoning code review cycle: one code amendment each year, and one smaller, secondary sweep for “technical amendments” to clean up typos and contradictory language. As planners operationalize recent code amendments, they make note of typos, confusing or contradictory language, and other “clean-up” items that can be incorporated into a standard annual code review process instead of requiring individual amendments.

Barrier 3: Markets

The Need to Engage and Support Developers

Even when restrictive local zoning rules are relaxed, and new forms of housing are enabled, the question of whether developers want to build newly legalized forms of housing remains. South Bend planning leadership described how just amending code was not enough for the city to reap the benefits of a development boom — improved processes and developer supports were key as well: “The zoning ordinance lays the foundation for new development, but we passed an award-winning ordinance, and the immediate effect was very little.” South Bend reformers realized, like many of their peers, that “you have [zoning] in place to set yourself up for the future. Once you have land and the right regulation, what’s next?” That answer varies drastically across communities, but the answer often lies with developers, the people making daily assessments about what is financially and technically viable to build.

Insight: Developers’ success in navigating proposal and permitting reviews is largely determined by their knowledge of city systems.

The impact of department-specific processes is that developers need significant knowledge of internal city workflows and organizational charts to secure approvals and permits. In Boise, for example, “there are eight or nine teams you’re working with — and you have to know where to go.” In this siloed environment, the developers who understand internal politics and department-specific goals and expectations are the ones who will succeed. Those who do not have that knowledge typically need to hire navigators or expeditors. These are consultants who specialize in advancing proposals, securing permits, and translating technical government responses or pieces of feedback into improved proposals or applications. Often these knowledge and relational needs manifest not in planning departments, which are “usually on board” according to a developer in Portland, Oregon, but with permitting departments like utilities, transportation, stormwater, or tree preservation. This further confirms cities’ internal insight that the siloing of approval processes across departments creates unpredictable choke points. Honolulu planners explained that institutionalizing knowledge about planning systems and providing appropriate training to prospective developers is key — they have seen delays come from “a sense that everyone is always learning the process for the first time, every time.”

On top of navigating internal processes, developers also need to be shrewd public communicators to successfully navigate local, neighborhood politics. One developer told us he sees this as “building a coalition” of planners, community leaders, and local

politicians aligned behind a development in order to avoid political setbacks. He described how the result is a two-tiered system, where those with experience and relationships, or those who are willing to pay, see quicker processing times and have more confidence in the success of their development proposals. When developers' success in the process depends on their connections or insider knowledge more than the quality of their proposals and their ability to quickly provide the housing that communities need, it is understandable that smaller firms and community members could raise flags about favoritism or unfairness in the process.

Insight: Inconsistent, opaque processes erode trust and create entry barriers in the market.

Developers entering these complex proposal review and permitting processes “want to know what to expect and that they will be held to the same standards as any other project.” This is especially true for early decisions about site selection. “Developers want to know,” we heard from Austin’s planning staff, “If I’m looking at ten sites, which ones will be easier [to secure entitlements] and which ones might have issues.”

The result, some developers told us, is often a decision to withdraw from pursuing forms of development that are not either heavily subsidized or subject to an accelerated, streamlined parallel review process. An Atlanta-area developer shared that his firm now “won’t touch” for-profit projects at all because of the uncertainty of the timelines and the risk that delays place on already-narrow margins.

City planners and departments need to provide clear timelines and expectations for proposal review to build public trust and confidence in the ability of government to guarantee prompt, fair, and equitable processing for all projects in the pipeline.

Insight: Planners’ engagement with developers is often surface level and unsupportive.

For developers trying to build knowledge and understanding of how to navigate complex city regulations and processes, planning staff who steward those systems are a key resource. But planners often do not have the capacity, skills, or comfort to serve as de facto educators and trainers for overwhelmed developers.

Boise housing leaders described the traditional planning role as “transactional, meaning they look at the code and see how [a development] fits.” Boise, like many cities, wants planners to expand their role beyond monitoring compliance, to actively communicate with developers and “be advocates for the kind of development we’re looking for,” sharing information about new development opportunities and working to align proposals with city

strategy on priorities like missing middle or infill housing. This shift is particularly necessary because the new housing development opportunities created by state legislation, like triplexes, duplexes, and ADUs, often require developers to design and build in ways they are not used to. Developers are often entering unknown territory, both in terms of what they are building and where they are building it (in recently rezoned communities). We heard experienced planners say that building productive relationships requires a city to demonstrate that whatever challenges may arise through the development process, they will provide institutional backing, technical knowledge, and planning support to help developers overcome those challenges. This means being available to answer questions about requirements and specifications, providing clear, actionable feedback, and facilitating communication with the public — shifting city agencies from a passive, transactional posture to an active source of support and development guidance.

Insight: Developers are an untapped resource to inform reform strategy.

Kalamazoo planners responsible for overhauling their city’s code and permitting process told us, “You have to get staff and small developers (the people who you think are going to be building these houses) in a room together,” to understand overlapping goals and give city planners the opportunity to directly ask their “customers” about needs. The Incremental Development Alliance, a leading advocacy and technical assistance organization representing housing developers, emphasized the need for city planners to be able to see themselves in the role of developers. They have started “developer for a day” exercises with local housing leaders that let policymakers simulate the process of building housing in their communities.

A side effect of the transactional orientation of planners and agencies toward developers is that many cities are not thinking comprehensively about how developers could help them more effectively calibrate incentives and redesign processes. These models demonstrate that developer engagement can be designed in a way that gives all firms equal access to feedback opportunities that shape policy in clear ways. These feedback opportunities can happen in transparent venues where findings are publicly shared, accountability is clear, and the resulting policy changes promote healthy market competition. Equitably engaging developers on their pain points can generate valuable knowledge and reduce the potential perception that the city only listens to certain wealthy or well-connected developers.

Innovation Examples: How Governments Can Activate Developers

Designing Earlier Feedback Opportunities: Boise is encouraging developers to submit initial proposals at earlier stages of development (on the level of “I want to build a 100-unit building at this site”) through a pre-application stage, which lets them get quick, detailed

feedback from planners on how to further shape their concept into a formal application. Pre-applications also help the city anticipate, and appropriately resource, upcoming needs to review eventual applications and issue permits, flattening the workload of processing development proposals.

Facilitating Developer-Planner Relationships: Many cities are creating systems to formalize the traditionally informal, relationship-based networks that historically have given more established developers a leg up. Charleston has started “sketch plan” meetings, where site design and land use requirements are reviewed, and local developers get direct face time with city department leaders who have review and approval responsibilities for moving their proposals forward. This relationship-building model creates direct connections between these departments and their customers. As a result, Charleston planning leaders told us, “developers and their professionals who have built in the city, know who in the city, from the standpoint of engineers and architects, can get them through the process because they know what can be approved and what won’t be approved.” Charleston has paired these new meetings with a Housing Development Coordinator role, responsible for walking developers through the complex entitlement process.

In Kalamazoo, planners created a “phone tree” resource that developers can use to identify a direct phone number for each stakeholder in the process, allowing quick answers to questions that surface during the proposal design phase. Kalamazoo also created a new role called a “Development Administrator,” who serves as a project manager for each individual development proposal moving through city systems. This administrator ensures that developers consistently have a single point of contact to get reliable, current information about the status of their applications and next steps.

Development-Ready Lot Programs: In Fort Wayne, the city’s “Lot to Love” program identifies infill lots that have not attracted independent developer interest and provides a series of pre-development supports to make them as appealing as possible to the market. The city reviews and confirms entitlement and conducts ground-penetrating radar and soil surveys for each of these lots, then provides this information to prospective developers to offer a clear, transparent look at the anticipated costs of development. Fort Wayne planners see this program as a key example of the city taking clear, practical steps to reduce the amount of work developers must do up front to get a proposal off the ground. These supports may “feel minor, but we’re hoping they add up to encouraging folks who are just getting into the industry to do that and have success.” The city also hopes the supports create repeat customers, who have consistently positive experiences working with the city and then put their progressively growing knowledge and experience to work to expand their investment in housing across the city: “We don’t want it to be the first and last house they build.” In nearby

South Bend, the city is exploring a similar initiative that would see city infrastructure teams offering to connect sewer and water pipes to new developments pro bono, to offset the costs of this specialized work.

Model Developments: Leaders from half a dozen cities spoke about the importance of city agencies getting involved in running “model” developments. These projects demonstrate how developers could successfully build the type of housing that state and city leaders are strategically prioritizing (e.g., missing-middle housing) in communities with the most acute needs. In Madison, the city often acts as “lead developer” for housing renewal or rebuild projects, contracting other developers through the process — an approach that demonstrates the viability of these projects while creating subcontracting opportunities for developers to build the skills and knowledge they would need to replicate these city-led projects.

Pre-Approved Plan Libraries: Expanding on the principle of modeling development for the private sector, many jurisdictions have either implemented or are currently designing “pre-approved” plan libraries for certain forms of development (most commonly ADUs). Cities publish complete architectural plans that can be directly incorporated into proposals, often with guidance on site selection and a series of acceptable variations and modifications. Leaders in South Bend, which has won national recognition for its pre-approved plan library and zoning code, said developers have found the plans helpful to quickly make design decisions and improve clarity of communication with city planners. Previously, planners found that “while we were speaking the same language” with developers, “the drawings in our heads were different.” Pre-approved plan review has kept city and developer staff on the same page from day one, on top of saving significant time by bypassing traditional architectural reviews. Planners also found that the process of designing and publishing these plans was “a great opportunity to look at all the different departments that play a role ... and figure out where the process problems are.” The implementation process has led to a series of grant incentives and process improvements that further lower barriers for developers. Since 2023, over 90 pre-approved plans have been permitted or constructed, saving developers up to an estimated \$10,000 per development.

Barrier 4: Data

The Need to Measure and Evaluate Impact

Cities need real-time data on housing production to steer and focus their work. This data allows leaders to implement the significant volume of state-level housing policy changes coming down to them and to pursue their own locally focused actions to accelerate production.

Nearly every city leader our team spoke with affirmed the difficulty of creating incentive programs, updating code, and supporting development without having accurate information on where housing is being built, how long it takes, and when new units will come online. Leaders also spoke about the importance of real-time data in communicating impact to the public, particularly after the adoption of zoning or city strategy that enables greater density and meets local opposition. When changes to local regulations do not yield visible results, city leaders risk a loss of political capital, and it may become more difficult to pass future code changes or pro-housing initiatives.

City planners and executives need to generate two types of data: actionable, accurate data on what new housing is being built and where (the outcomes of housing systems); and process data that indicates progress toward key implementation milestones (e.g., reduced permitting timelines) to ensure new policies, procedures, and tools are operating as designed.

Insight: Data systems that track housing construction often are not operationally useful.

National research organizations that analyze the state of housing supply, gaps, and needs shared with the GPL team that the long-standing data systems that often guide this work, particularly the Census Building Permits Survey, have fundamental flaws that limit their usefulness in driving local policy decisions. Permitting surveys may overstate actual housing development, as not everything that is permitted by a city will ultimately be built. Postal service address data, which is often used to track new units that are online for residency, is a lagging indicator that only reflects new construction at the final stages of the process. As a result, policymakers do not have accurate, real-time information on what is being built across neighborhoods, cities, or regions, and thus cannot assess whether existing incentives and zoning are sufficient to close gaps in local housing supply without waiting years to evaluate the impact.

Insight: Cities often work within compliance-heavy state monitoring systems that produce limited insights.

To supplement low-quality national datasets and create accountability for meeting local housing needs, a majority of state governments require that cities complete a housing plan or housing element within a consolidated plan, often every five to ten years. While these efforts provide alternative, potentially more accurate information to shape state housing policy goals, local planners and executive staff report that these “accountability exercises” often consume hundreds of hours of staff time while still not producing accurate and useful data. Many existing state and city models for monitoring local progress on housing goals impose heavy resource costs, requiring staff to balance reporting requirements with the demands of day-to-day operations. In Oregon, state housing staff hear from local governments about “competing priorities for capacity, including the trade-off between doing a report versus reviewing a permit,” particularly for smaller communities where “the city manager is also their chief planner.” In California, a housing policy leader who regularly reviews housing plans that cities pour years of work into admitted he holds serious doubts about the accuracy of the data on new housing starts, permits, and units constructed, given the low technical capacity of many local government systems. State planning leaders have found that local planning staff in rural communities (who often serve double duty with other regulatory and administrative roles) lack the skills, tools, and infrastructure to collect the data that state housing plans ask of them. Many of these cities do not know what their housing needs are because they lack regular market assessments. This complicates the state’s efforts to effectively target resources to close local housing gaps.

On the other side of the balancing act between operational capacity and monitoring compliance, many states have elected not to require extensive regular reporting from localities. This comes at the risk that state policy and supports designed to accelerate local housing production may be operating without systems to measure results.

Insight: Permitting systems are intrinsically difficult to monitor.

Many city planning staff said that permit processing time is a key metric used to assess agency performance and understand whether changes to regulation are impacting development timelines. Leadership on Boise’s Organizational Effectiveness team, which is tracking this data, noted that because “permitting systems are set up to be transactional,” it can be difficult to monitor timeliness across 10+ permitting applications that can be happening on overlapping or simultaneous timelines. While city leaders can relatively easily track process times for individual permits, tracking many different permits across the entire development process is a challenge. This decentralized data environment requires staff to

manually track turnaround time for each individual application. Boise, like many other cities, did not have a central platform where the permit status of a development could be centrally viewed to understand which applications are still outstanding and which may be stalled. While Boise has since developed more effective systems for tracking application progress, the complexity of these tech silos has meant that the city does not have a quality baseline against which to monitor its progress toward faster processing times. A California housing policy leader described a similar concern about annual reporting on permitting cycles collected from cities by the state. While central dashboards exist that allow policymakers to “in two minutes, see for any given city how long it takes from entitlement, to building permit request, to actual building — the data is only as good as the inputs.”

Innovation Examples: How Governments Can Track Real-Time Data

Benchmarking Development Process Stages: Innovation and technology staff at Boston’s Office of Housing created baseline benchmarks for how long each individual review or application typically takes. They then used that data to produce a developer-facing guide that provides clear timing expectations for the development process. These benchmarks both help track improvements in timing from ongoing process streamlining work and, as data improves, will help the city maintain accountability on shorter turnaround times and offer more certainty to developers engaging in the process.

Centralizing Application Tracking: To improve monitoring and accountability for the eight to 10 city departments responsible for issuing permits and reviewing plans across a standard development cycle, the city of Boise’s Organizational Effectiveness Team reviewed the siloed permitting systems used by each of those departments and created a single, shared project ID system to track proposals across each of those systems. The single project ID allows planners to centrally view application progress for each relevant permit and facilitates reporting on the overall timeline of the application across multiple departments.

Summary

Unlocking States' Potential

Across the four barriers surfaced through interviews with 44 city and state government leaders, a clear picture emerges:

- City governments, ultimately responsible for maintaining and improving the systems that initiate and approve new housing, are under significant economic and political pressure to deliver more housing faster.
- State initiatives designed to unlock the full, accelerated potential of housing production will ultimately be only as successful as they are enabled by streamlined and strategic local housing systems.

Importantly, communities across the country have made significant strides over the last decade to develop and test innovative strategies and programs to build more housing — creating an opportunity to scale and learn from demonstration cases by using replicable templates and tools. Seizing those opportunities will require infrastructure and platforms that can provide direct support to capacity-constrained local governments, including by creating venues where governments can talk to and learn from each other.

Statewide Implementation Opportunities

State Agencies Can Actively Support Local Housing Production

State legislative reforms create enabling conditions for development, but insights from our interview process suggest that local leaders need support in realizing the promising ambitions emerging from state governments. Centralized statewide and regional support for local system improvements may be able to accelerate housing production by achieving implementation at scale, instead of through a fragmented, hyper-localized process. Cities within the same state operate under the same regulatory environment, creating a prime opportunity to scale field-tested implementation strategies.

State legislators who have championed pro-housing policies see that reforms are not always accompanied by meaningful implementation. As a state legislative housing advisor in California told us, “You write these bills, and they go off into the wild, and you kind of lose track.” State housing agency staff in Colorado described being approached by eager legislative leaders asking, “What are the popular strategies [to increase production] in what contexts? What does the state need to press on?” Without direct, measurable support for local government, the policymakers driving pro-housing reforms often told us they felt unclear on where to focus next or how to strengthen existing programs. To fully capture the momentum of the national movement around housing supply, states need to be able to answer those questions. They need to understand what works locally and connect those effective practices to statewide strategy.

State agencies with responsibility for advancing statewide housing strategies (inclusive of housing, local affairs, and community/economic development agencies) are uniquely positioned to build stronger relationships with local governments that facilitate implementation of legislative reforms and executive housing strategy. Some states, like Oregon, Maine, and Michigan, have already invested agency capacity in providing more direct support to local housing systems via policy translation/interpretation support, technical assistance, training and skill-building, or grants and financial assistance. These programs provide both blueprints for impactful supports that can be adapted and replicated by peer states across the country, and opportunities to learn from strategies or programs that have been less impactful.

In our conversations with 44 state and local leaders, as well as legislators, organization leaders, and researchers, we found five key areas where state agencies seem well positioned to serve, all of which have potential to support local housing systems, shape future statewide housing policy strategy, and ultimately increase the speed of housing development:

- **Direct support for cities** in testing solutions that streamline processes, achieve major housing reform milestones (e.g., code updates), engage developers, and measure impact.
- **Tools and templates** that uplift the effective practices behind successes and that state agencies can share with other cities through their platforms.
- **Peer learning and coaching** offerings for local governments that help replicate impactful housing production strategies and facilitate quick access to subject matter experts in planning, zoning, and building.
- **Measurement and accountability** systems that center relevant metrics and targets to track how implementation is unfolding across the state.
- **Insights to improve statewide policy**, including future regulatory reform priorities and resourcing decisions.

Opportunity 1: Direct Support

Supporting and Scaling Catalytic Demonstrations

All of the city and state planning and housing leaders the GPL interviewed agreed that local capacity has been stretched to the breaking point. Staff in key departments are triaging their time between the daily tasks of advancing development proposals, reporting and compliance activities, and fielding questions from developers, community members, and local political leaders.

On top of these responsibilities, working on process improvements, rewriting zoning code, managing developer-facing support programs, or improving data tracking and monitoring systems requires investments of time and cognitive bandwidth that may not be reasonable for many of the staff who ultimately need to be engaged. These are tasks that local staff and leaders can complete, but they often need facilitation support and training to understand where to start. As one planning leader framed it: cities have the right muscles to improve local systems and rewrite code, but those muscles are not always developed.

State agencies are well positioned to help cities identify their specific needs and curate the right strategies to respond. States can do this by drawing on expertise and promising practices developed by housing sector leaders and communities across the country. When state agencies directly engage city leaders, it can often widen the scope of political possibilities in zoning reform, state housing leaders in Oregon told us. They noted that “there’s often a very mixed perspective between city planners and city elected officials,” where city planners want to advance reforms that elected officials might consider politically risky. In these scenarios, planners told Oregon state housing agency staff, “We need the political backing of the state to do this.”

Leaders in Colorado, which has committed to working directly with localities to implement new state mandates, noted that “some local planners are overwhelmed by these changes,” and filling these gaps requires “establishing new functions that didn’t exist at the state, as well as setting up new processes.” In their communities, that investment seems to pay off. One local Colorado leader said the state’s ability to provide technical assistance and offer support has been “huge” because it demonstrates that state leaders are listening to the needs of localities. Leaders also emphasized the importance of city departments having direct, topic-specific points of contact with staff at the Colorado Department of Local Affairs throughout the process of implementing new density requirements and eliminating parking minimums.

Many states with rising housing crises are at the earliest stages of building this capacity. A Montana State Representative said there's a need for guidance or "better explanations for how legislation should be interpreted." In Kalamazoo, staff said they would appreciate direct implementation supports that help localities "take a state housing plan and turn it into a policy plan." Maine housing agency staff who are working to stand up direct support programs for local planners told us that many of their early conversations have focused on helping municipal staff and volunteers interpret legislation and understand their role in making local adaptations. For example, "This is what the law says about ADUs, here's where you do have some discretion." Often, these conversations with local staff can smooth over local resistance to state mandates and dispel misconceptions or fears about the impact of allowing more housing to be built.

A Montana legislator described a similar conversation with a city councilmember who called him after his state passed a landmark package of zoning legislation. The councilmember said he was opposed to the bill, because he believed it prevented cities from changing zoning. But in fact, the bill did just the opposite. In most states today, city leaders with similar concerns do not have a clear way to access reliable information about new policy beyond their elected officials. State agencies could fill this role by centralizing information and ensuring cities receive consistent and clear guidance on implementation.

Opportunity 2: Tools and Templates

Rapidly Scaling What Works

Housing leaders across several cities stated variations on a core point: city staff do not have the project management tools to take on huge, year-long code reform projects, but state agencies can provide a library of validated tools and resources to support those complex projects and close gaps in knowledge. In our conversations with local leaders and housing policy advocates, they mentioned potentially scalable resources such as procurement language, model code, pre-approved plans, and application review workflows.

Demand for these tools often came back to local governments' need to quickly understand what state legislation and policy are asking of them, evaluate their options in response to those legislative changes, and translate state requirements into a clear set of actionable local policy changes. State housing leaders in Oregon described local governments asking for tools to “evaluate what the policy trade-offs are going to be” throughout process or code review — modeling the impact of changes to maximum height or density rules, for example.

These scalable tools and templates can pick up when more direct forms of state support taper off. Oregon also employed a “fellow” for one year to help multiple local governments adopt new mass timber codes. This short-term technical support might not achieve wide impact on its own, if that fellow only has capacity to support a handful of governments during the fellowship period. However, this time-limited support could be extended by the creation of training materials, guidance, and model language around mass timber codes that would expand on learnings from the year of implementation support.

One national housing advocate we spoke with pointed to Oregon's statewide implementation work as an example of how replicable, scalable tools and examples can support local best practices, saying, “In Oregon, [they] have meaningful state capacity in land use reform ... they've created model code that cities can adopt.” That model code can significantly shorten timelines for code review and revision processes, particularly when it is supported, vetted, and disseminated by state housing agencies who can verify that the language is compliant with state requirements and field-tested by other communities within the state.

We heard that state agencies are subject matter experts in specific processes, but not always experts on the ever-growing list of best practices and innovations in the field of housing production. Those agencies have an opportunity to build on their deep topic-specific knowledge, share it via templated resources and supports, and at the same time,

draw insights from local implementation that demonstrate which practices are effective and make state agencies active participants in driving forward the knowledge of the field.

Cities and towns often request support in developing procurement language or using templates that would help them more efficiently retain qualified outside consultants and experts to help with evaluations and code reform. A national advocacy organization that supports planners told us that most zoning rewrites now live with consultants. This is the result of planning staff's limited capacity, as well as zoning codes that are often decades old and thousands of pages long. The contracting processes to hire these specialists can drag on for months, costing resource-constrained cities and towns millions of dollars.

Additionally, city procurement staff often struggle to articulate clear needs and goals for rezoning in their requests for proposals, which can lead to consulting contracts that do not meet community needs. When procurement systems are not effective at finding and contracting knowledgeable experts on clearly scoped projects, the result is often new codes full of copy/pasted zoning language from past projects (sometimes complete with geographic references from other states). This means local governments must further amend language without external support. State governments could provide model request for proposals to hire expert consultants with guidance on local adaptation to help cities better describe their needs and structure zoning reform projects.

Opportunity 3: Peer Learning and Coaching

Building Statewide Networks

Every city housing leader we spoke with affirmed the importance of meeting and learning from their counterparts in other communities, particularly through regional partnerships. Cities embarking on housing system reform projects are taking on political risk, and having established models and active testimony from peers to reinforce the effectiveness of proposed policies can mitigate that risk. State leaders in Michigan said, “Municipalities are asking, ‘What are our neighbors doing?’” because when their peer jurisdictions are taking on ambitious reform projects, “it can give them an opportunity to learn.” Even in states like Oregon, which is investing meaningfully in technical assistance and support for local governments, state leaders see opportunities for more collaborative peer networks of city leaders as a resource on top of those supports. One senior state housing staffer told us the state is “missing a forum where local governments can coordinate with each other.”

Peer-to-peer learning can also help governments incorporate technologies and innovations into their housing strategy, particularly in areas where planners’ lack of knowledge might be a limiting factor. Oregon and Portland leaders cited “wildly effective” mass timber technologies that, when incorporated into city codes, can meaningfully decrease material costs. However, they also noted that “most local governments just don’t have the capacity” to learn about these innovations and incorporate them into their building codes without external support, coaching, and knowledge. State agencies can facilitate regional support for peer cities facing similar challenges to capitalize on efficiencies and create standardization across municipal borders. A regional approach prioritizes similarity between demonstration sites and works toward a standard experience for developers.

A northern Michigan housing leader told us it was clear that among the region’s many small cities, “people are trying to duplicate things” like developer-facing guidance or process improvements “when we really could be collaborating.” To facilitate that collaboration, top-down messaging and agenda-setting is key. South Bend housing leaders said that while “it would be great if there was more regional cooperation,” their experience is that city planners and housing staff “lack the political incentive [to organize peer learning] if the state doesn’t incentivize you to do it.” A national organization that works extensively with housing developers across many states said, “We need regional solutions — but there’s no regional governing infrastructure, so this falls on states.” Only state governments have the leverage and influence to bring localities to the table, and the ability to tie participation in peer learning and coaching to other benefits like technical assistance, policy changes, or financial support. Local governments are most likely to participate when that engagement is relatively low cost and presents clear benefits.

Opportunity 4: Measurement and Accountability

Monitoring and Evaluating to Improve Performance

Existing state systems for measurement and accountability largely focus on mandated housing plans or elements. These complex housing needs analyses consume significant local planning staff time. Localities identify their housing gaps and the volume of new development that would be needed to close those gaps, then report that data to state housing or development agencies. Localities also often report a set of planned actions or commitments that would produce the requisite housing over the next five to 10 years. However, local leaders across three states told the GPL that these plans often are not “real.” Cities consistently fall short of housing goals, and their commitments are often vague and lacking clear roadmaps for implementation.

Most states have already stood up a robust infrastructure for reporting, monitoring, and accountability with these statutorily enshrined planning processes. The opportunity here is to focus on building up local data systems and improving data quality, while narrowing state reporting requirements to the metrics that most directly indicate progress toward housing goals. Maine, for example, recently incorporated data on demolitions and certificates of occupancy into reporting, gaining more insight into early-stage housing development opportunities and final “online” units. The goal of incorporating new data types is to better inform how states choose to focus their support, coaching, and investment.

Some states have taken increasing interest in permitting timelines, often in the form of “shot clock” legislation, which generally does not actually collect data on timelines but instead imposes a legally enforceable maximum timeline for review of applications. None of the city or state agency staff we spoke with expressed confidence that “shot clock” laws are effective accelerants of housing production on their own, particularly if their deadlines are not informed by accurate data about permitting process time. These laws may instead incentivize more permit rejection and pre-application systems. States should collect data about permitting timelines as a key way to establish benchmarks and monitor housing system effectiveness. State agency efforts to improve data collection and transparency could improve the design and targeting of “shot clock” regulations, while surfacing additional scalable local best practices to improve the efficiency of permit processing.

Opportunity 5: Improved Statewide Policy

Creating Feedback Loops for Policy Iteration

Many of the insights surfaced through this process about zoning, system monitoring, and housing data collection reinforce the point that in housing production, the impact of policy change can be slow to take effect and difficult to evaluate. At the same time, the housing supply crisis requires urgency and immediate solutions. State and local leaders told us they need strong, real-time feedback loops between them to know what is working, what is not, and how state action could help facilitate local implementation.

In addition to the need for long-term, multi-year reform strategies aligned with strategic plans, state policymakers also underlined the value of iteration. Legislative leaders who have passed housing reforms noted that states need to be prepared to review and revise their legislative reforms as new information emerges from implementation, thinking of reform processes over multiple years and sessions.

Many interviewees emphasized that the core of creating these feedback loops is building a different, more collegial, and more productive relationship between local government staff responsible for facilitating housing production and state agencies. The advantage of better partnerships is equal parts enhancing states' ability to provide direct support to cities (helping to streamline processes, for example) and providing state agencies with direct access to on-the-ground perspectives and data. One Montana representative told us, "If we had a working relationship [between state agencies and cities], and better definitions of policy, it would be a better way to go." Legislators across four states noted that their insights about cities' housing needs — and thus their roadmaps for the next year's legislative priorities — often come in informal, unstructured ways via advocacy or direct conversations with community members. State agencies can more effectively position local needs within broader statewide strategy and provide more actionable, centralized insights for legislative and policy leaders.

States that are early in the multi-year process of designing and implementing pro-housing policy and legislation shared that establishing these feedback loops and relationships now is key to designing statewide initiatives that can be quickly and successfully adopted by local government. One state housing leader described how the first stages of their work focused on traveling to small cities and towns, meeting staff and mayors, and touring neighborhoods with acute development needs. These are communities that have not seen significant investment in new housing for decades; places where leaders recognize the need to try new strategies. Though many of the barriers these smaller communities face are macroeconomic or market-related, developing sustainable infrastructure and more

efficient systems will help these local governments respond to future fluctuations in demand. The goal of these conversations is to take stock of need and be explicitly forward looking. Deeply understanding local challenges gives states better information about local gaps and the *reasons* that housing is not being built, to ensure that eventual legislative efforts expend limited political capital to focus on the highest-impact opportunities to accelerate development.

Models of Support

Many state housing agencies are already exploring a range of different ways to better support city governments in their housing production policy journey. These models could be replicated and iterated on by other states and include:

Oregon: A direct, flexible technical assistance model.

Oregon’s statewide housing production implementation strategy was consistently cited by other states’ housing leaders as a national model. A Portland-area developer told us that the success their city has seen in implementing lot-division models that boost density “would not have come about if the state didn’t intervene.”

Oregon formed a Housing Accountability and Production Office that provides technical assistance directly to local governments on issues related to building codes and land use. This office has:

- Supported local rezoning efforts.
- Created direct lines of communication to planners and community development staff.
- Steered implementation of statewide middle housing laws by providing technical assistance, funding, and guidance.

When developers or local housing advocates flag to the state that municipalities are noncompliant with state housing law, Oregon first offers technical assistance and guidance to reach compliance before initiating traditional legal enforcement. Oregon leaders described instances where local governments “did not realize they were in conflict with state law,” and technical assistance allowed for quick course correction. At the same time, this direct engagement creates opportunities for local insights and feedback to shape statewide housing strategy.

Michigan: A regional strategy facing capacity challenges.

In Michigan, where many rural and small jurisdictions do not have staff resources or infrastructure to support faster housing production, the state has created regional bodies to fund positions and provide direct support to local government. These state-supported entities — like Housing North in northern Michigan — create “coalitions of the willing” among local governments in need of additional resources to design development-friendly housing systems. This strategy has focused on producing success stories and demonstration sites by supplementing local planning capacity and reducing reliance on outside consultants in favor of investing in staff skills and knowledge.

Regional leaders told us that “communities who have invested in capacity are more housing ready and the numbers show it.” Those proof points help convince reluctant communities of the effectiveness of tested pro-development interventions and broaden the impact of the state’s investments in local capacity. While this strategy is gaining ground in rural regions like northern Michigan, housing leaders in Detroit shared that regional coordination between urban and suburban areas is still missing — and Detroit is cut off from its suburban collar communities by regional borders that may not reflect how developers plan their business strategy. Michigan’s regional framework demonstrates how continued iteration and feedback loops with local governments can strengthen state investments and improve targeting.

Maine: A newly launched technical assistance team.

The State of Maine is the most recent of these three models to launch a formal team focused on local support with the State Office of Community Affairs’ Housing Opportunity Program in late 2025. This program was initially designed to support implementation of the state’s landmark LD2003, which eliminated single-family zoning restrictions statewide. Maine’s home-rule system means that implementation of LD2003 has required city-by-city work with regional support teams to achieve local implementation through a combination of staffing support for willing communities and financial incentives. This team has found success combining locally customized support with general, statewide tools and guidance.

One Housing Opportunity Program staffer said, “70% of guidance could be general across the state — information about how the law works, access to consultants who can help/provide TA [technical assistance]. There’s 30% that’s always local. You want to start the process at state level and then provide some more localized support.” Thus far, this local implementation effort has focused on implementation of specific state legislative mandates, but the knowledge and technical assistance infrastructure created through this process may be used in the future to standardize permitting, scale effective practices from pilot projects, and form state-level, peer-to-peer support networks.

Strategic Implications

Many cities need support to reform local housing production systems and translate statewide policy reform into brick-and-mortar results. State agencies can support cities' local reforms by offering knowledge, technical assistance, and scalable tools, but there is a gap in the support available to states to establish platforms to guide local implementation. National advocacy and research organizations the GPL spoke with agreed that while significant resources and effort have been devoted to achieving statewide legislative and policy reform victories, “vanishingly little” investment is being made in post-passage implementation of these policies and frameworks. Several organizations described local implementation as a “black box” or a “grey area” from the perspective of state-level advocates, where “malicious compliance” or lack of local capacity can easily impede housing priorities. When this happens, it becomes crucial to identify the correct strategy for each city or town’s specific implementation challenges. The five opportunity areas for state government to advance local housing progress include:

1. Offering direct technical assistance and support.
2. Disseminating tools and templates to spread impactful practices.
3. Facilitating peer-to-peer learning and coaching opportunities.
4. Providing measurement and evaluation frameworks.
5. Incorporating local insights into future housing policy priorities.

The next stage of the national movement for housing production could maximize the impact of the legislative reforms rapidly being embraced across the country by prioritizing direct support for local implementation and the creation of state-level platforms to disseminate knowledge, guidance, and tools to city leaders. State governments are ideally positioned to spread effective practices across communities that operate within the same statewide policy and regulatory frameworks. Planning leaders in Madison told us, “The important thing is that it’s not just us pushing for this — we’re part of a larger community.” **When state and local government agencies work hand in hand, it creates a structure of mutual reinforcement and support that can be a lifeline to capacity-strapped local governments.** A national housing crisis requires a national movement in response: a movement that can suspend our assumptions about the limitations of government and create partnerships across jurisdictions, partisanship, and geography to build the housing that communities need.

ⁱ Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, “The State of the Nation’s Housing 2025,” Harvard.edu, 2025, <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/state-nations-housing-2025>.

ⁱⁱ Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, “The State of the Nation’s Housing 2025,” Harvard.edu, 2025, <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/state-nations-housing-2025>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eli Kahn and Salim Furth, “Framing Futures: Pro-Housing Legislation Goes Vertical in 2025,” *Mercatus Center*, July 31, 2025, <https://www.mercatus.org/research/policy-briefs/framing-futures-pro-housing-legislation-goes-vertical-2025>.

^{iv} Tushar Kansal and Alex Horowitz, “State Legislatures Make Bipartisan Breakthroughs on Policies That Promote Housing,” Pew.org (The Pew Charitable Trusts, September 15, 2025), <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2025/09/15/state-legislatures-make-bipartisan-breakthroughs-on-policies-that-promote-housing>.

^{vi} Justin Sayers and Cody Baird, “A Big Red Flag for Austin’s Future Home Market,” *Austin Business Journal*, August 16, 2025, <https://www.bizjournals.com/austin/news/2025/08/16/austin-housing-lots-development.html>.

Appendix: Methodology

Between October and December 2025, the GPL conducted desk research and interviews with leaders in state and local government, research, advocacy, and housing development. The GPL conducted 65 interviews to investigate the primary areas of need across the field and to identify gaps in support that are not met by existing resources, organizations, and offerings. The GPL interviewed 44 total government leaders across 23 jurisdictions, seven legislative leaders across five states, and representatives from 14 advocacy, research, and policy organizations.

State and City Participants:		Interviewee Titles:
	New York City, NY	
	Oregon	Community Development Manager
Anaheim, CA	Portland, OR	Deputy City Manager
Austin, TX	Somerville, MA	Director of Housing
Birmingham, AL	South Bend, IN	Director of Homeless Services
Boise, ID		Director of Innovation and Technology
Boston, MA	State Legislative Leaders Interviewed From:	Director of Organizational Effectiveness
Charleston, SC	Arizona	Director of Planning
Chicago, IL	California	Director of Public Works
Colorado	Montana	Chief Housing Officer
Detroit, MI	Texas	Housing Solutions Manager
Fort Wayne, IN	Washington	Housing Policy Analyst
Honolulu, HI		Housing Policy Director
Kalamazoo, MI		Planning Manager
Madison, WI		
Massachusetts		
Maine		
Michigan		
Michigan Office of Rural Prosperity		
Minnesota		

The [Government Performance Lab](#), housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their citizens. An important part of this research model involves providing hands-on technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this involvement, we gain insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. By engaging current students and recent graduates in this effort, we are also able to provide experiential learning.

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