

Mahoning Valley Regional Housing Strategy

PRINCIPLES FOR DEVELOPMENT

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Guiding Principles that Inform the Housing Strategy

These principles reflect existing conditions in the Mahoning Valley, input from local stakeholders, results of data analysis and national and state best practices. Together they form the guiding principles used to develop recommendations for the Mahoning Valley Regional Housing Strategy.

Population Projections Suggest Ambitious Greenfield Development will be Difficult to Support in the Long Run and the Priority Should be Developing on Vacant Land within Developed Areas.

Mahoning and Trumbull Counties are projected to lose around 20% of their populations by 2050. Locally, there are more optimistic projections forecasted for new job growth that could help bend this curve. However, even with the new jobs factored in, there is not enough new population projected to keep infrastructure costs (e.g. taxes and fees) where they are currently. Additionally, there are large amounts of vacant parcels within developed areas that should be priority sites for new development. New development on sites without existing infrastructure will become very expensive for all ratepayers over time. Greenfield development should only be done for highly strategic purposes.

Championing Small Projects and Developers is a Winning Strategy for the Mahoning Valley; aka Singles are as Valuable as Home Runs.

Local leaders should embrace a vision of success in the Mahoning Valley that celebrates small scale new construction and renovation projects. Smaller projects (ex. 1 to 15 units at a time), aka “singles,” that fill in existing vacant lots or develop parcels that are already on the utility grid will throw off outsized benefits to their neighbors and promote revitalization and neighborhood stability more widely than projects sited alone or disconnected from other development.

These types of development will stabilize the neighborhoods they are in by improving housing stock, attracting new residents, and raising property values. In addition to filling in uninhabited parcels, small scale projects are needed to establish proof of concept for smaller housing options, like cottage homes or accessory dwelling units (ADUs), that better meet the demonstrated need of the existing and projected populations but currently aren't common in the Mahoning Valley. These types of projects can also include multifamily projects, like duplexes, quads, and six-plexes.

Hitting singles also means a focus on the renovation and retrofitting of existing properties, which is more affordable for the end customer than new construction and will lead to higher property values and neighborhood stabilization.

Small scale projects also offer an opportunity for local residents to become the general contractors or developers building the projects, rather than regional builders. Helping to grow an eco-system of small, local developers and builders developing small projects will help address many of the most pressing housing challenges the region faces and keep project revenue local in the Mahoning Valley.

Conventional patterns of development in a large, subdivision format on the urban fringe of a growing area, may be considered “home runs” but are not ideally suited for most of Mahoning Valley’s development profile. For example, the National Association of Home Builders reports that the average-sized project in 2024 is 25 acres and 50 units. This type of development typically requires greenfields and new utilities; resources that Mahoning Valley jurisdictions have limited supplies of and should closely protect. Some large-scale subdivision projects could happen in the Mahoning Valley, but most projects won’t be at that scale.

As such, leaders and residents should celebrate the projects that fill existing lots and contribute to existing neighborhoods.

Stabilizing Places Where People Already Live and Improving the Quality of Life for Existing Residents Should be at the Heart of the Region’s Approach to Housing.

Efforts to shore up existing neighborhoods with home repair programs, downpayment assistance, new construction on small lots, infrastructure repair, and code enforcement efforts should be prioritized because they will lead to a better quality of life for existing residents, higher property values, and increased demand for housing. Efforts like these within existing neighborhoods can spin off benefits to neighboring properties in a way that a subdivision that lacks connections to neighboring areas cannot. These efforts will make existing neighborhoods ripe for future development, while also improving the quality of life for existing residents. In the long-run, investing in vibrant, stable neighborhoods will help also help in attracting new residents, who are looking for quality neighborhoods, services, and schools.

Renovating, Repairing, and Retrofitting Existing Units Should Continue to be a Top Priority.

Due to the high cost of new construction and the number of units in the Mahoning Valley in need of repair, home repair programs should be employed to improve the safety and marketability of the existing stock. Programs to retrofit existing larger homes to make them better suited to smaller households should be considered to meet a demonstrated market need. This could include dividing a large existing home into two units, adding a rental apartment to an existing home, adding mother-in-law suites so older parents can move in with their children, etc. Renovation programs should continue apace and be expanded where possible. These improve the quality of life for residents and help stabilize neighborhoods and property values. Zoning updates will be needed for some of this.

New Construction Should Mostly Prioritize Smaller Homes and Apartments in Locations Close to Amenities and with Existing Infrastructure.

Locating housing production and housing rehab programs in center cities and other areas near jobs and services can lessen transportation costs associated with housing and improve overall affordability. It can also lessen financial strain on municipal and county budgets by utilizing existing infrastructure instead of incurring the cost of extending new utility lines or roadways. Small households need small houses to move into, especially seniors throughout the Mahoning Valley looking to downsize.

Zoning Modernization and Consistency will Lower Development Risk and Allow New Housing Types to be Built.

Zoning codes that curtail what housing developers can build and make small vacant lots non-conforming need to change to help unleash new development. These changes will need to happen at the local jurisdictional level but can also be augmented and supported regionally so that distinct zoning codes are similar and well-coordinated.

Wages Have Not Kept Pace with Housing and Leaders in the Mahoning Valley Should Explore Ways to Close the Gap.

A sizeable share of residents cannot afford to buy a home at current incomes. Efforts to increase their wage potential and/or to help offset the initial expense of homeownership will increase homeownership rates. More resident homeowners will in turn help stabilize neighborhoods. On the whole, the affordability of housing for all residents of the Mahoning Valley would improve if wages increased. Programs to upskill residents and assist with down payments will help improve the purchasing power of local residents and increase homeownership rates.

Improved Cooperation and Regional Coordination can Help Address Shared Challenges.

There are many housing issues, like land assembly, zoning updates, attracting LIHTC projects, and service delivery, that can be addressed across jurisdictions in a way that aligns and coordinates efforts so that solutions are greater and felt more widely than when tackled individually.