



Toward More Affordable Housing – Toolkit



Topos Partnership

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Section 1: [Using the Toolkit](#)

Section 2: [The Current Landscape and Needed Shifts in Perspective](#)

Section 3: [Recommendations: Elements of a New Narrative](#)

Section 4: [Putting It All Together: A Tested Message](#)

Section 5: [Examples of Brief Language](#)

Section 6: [Sample Responses to Tough Questions](#)

Section 7: [Checklist for Communicators](#)

Section 8: [Do's and Don'ts](#)

Section 9: [Before and After: Transforming Common Messages](#)

Section 10: [Sample Op-Ed Using ForwardDallas plan](#)

Appendix: [Research Approach, Findings & Methodology](#)

Acknowledgements

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

Housing affordability is an urgent, top-of-mind issue for people in the City of Dallas, but local, cultural assumptions and ways of thinking about causes and solutions are often out of sync with what advocates would like to see. This toolkit is part of an effort to bring experts, public officials, advocates and members of the public onto the same page. At United Way of Metropolitan Dallas, we work to improve housing stability and prevent homelessness across North Texas. Stable housing is foundational to our focus areas of education, income and health—the building blocks of opportunity that allow every North Texan to thrive. We recognize that an important part of this work involves changing the narratives that exist around affordable housing to encourage greater support and development of lower-cost housing options.

As a partner of United Way of Metropolitan Dallas, Topos was tasked with mapping the current cultural landscape—the shared or divergent patterns of thinking—relating to housing affordability in the City of Dallas, and then experiment with and evaluate some of the most promising approaches and messages that emerge.

Over 200 residents of Dallas participated in this research effort: representing 46 ethnographic conversations, 8 Table Sessions with 28 participants, 116 TalkBack Testing surveys, and 27 TalkBack Chain participants. Topos' experienced analytical team of linguists, anthropologists and communication professionals then used this input to craft a plan for changing and improving how this city talks and thinks about how to see to it that everyone has access to safe, habitable, and affordable housing.

USING THE TOOLKIT

The materials here are intended to help communicators understand and use the research insights to create a new shared narrative about housing reform across the City of Dallas that will move the conversation on affordable, accessible housing solutions forward. While recognizing the diversity of audiences and demographics in the region, the recommended messages are crafted to reach the broadest possible audience.

None of the material in the Toolkit is intended as verbatim language that should always be repeated. Instead, it is a set of strategic ideas and considerations communicators should keep in mind, and sample language suggesting ways of conveying key ideas compellingly. Importantly, no messaging can convince everyone. There are no silver bullets to make all objections go away. Instead, this research-based guidance is about increasing the odds of an engaged, constructive dialog with a wider range of audiences.



Most Dallas residents know (and deeply feel) that local housing affordability is a problem, but there are patterns of thinking that stand in the way of moving the conversation on affordable, accessible housing solutions forward.

- **Focus on Demand:** Whether it's the story of newcomers driving up prices or the struggles of those (often "others") who can't afford what the local market provides, the current narrative is stuck on the DEMAND side of the equation, overemphasizing the role of the individuals looking for housing. This makes it hard to focus on causes and solutions that have to do with the supply of housing, for example.
- **Business-Centric:** There is a broadly shared sense that Dallas does and always will prioritize business development over communities, which leads to fatalism about the possibility of change and potential solutions.
- **"Others":** People often default to associating "affordable housing" with "others" (especially when this term is used to introduce the topic or the starting point is public policy), making associations that produce and reinforce harmful racist and classist stereotypes. This individual-focused view also shifts attention away from systemic solutions and distances people from the issue.
- **Skepticism about government:** While people acknowledge that government makes efforts to help both the wealthiest and the poorest of the city, they are not used to looking to the government to solve the problems that affect people like themselves.

The Work Ahead: Needed Shifts in Perspective

To create a meaningful shift in the current conversation around housing affordability in Dallas, we need to keep in mind three overarching aims: We have to move the conversation solidly onto the city's SUPPLY of housing. We have to convince people that we have practical, acceptable SOLUTIONS to do something about it. And we must show audiences that these solutions are INCLUSIVE of the many different kinds of people who make up the city. The narrative recommendations in the next section are built on these needed shifts in perspective:

- **SUPPLY:** Instead of a focus on who's looking for housing, what they can or can't afford, etc., we need to define the SUPPLY (the housing people actually need) as the nature of the problem. This lays the foundation for discussion of systemic solutions and what we can DO about it.
- **SOLUTIONS:** Most people already understand the hardships associated with housing unaffordability, but they have a much more difficult time picturing what (if anything) can be done about it. Dallasites are listening for clear, realistic solutions.
- **INCLUSION:** We have to demonstrate that prioritizing housing affordability is for (and good for) everyone in Dallas: renters, homeowners, people of all income levels and stages of life, people across race and class, etc.). Broadening the conversation not only helps inoculate against potential stigma and avoids othering, it pulls the audience into a story that's relatable.



RECOMMENDATIONS: ELEMENTS OF A NEW NARRATIVE

How do we accomplish these essential shifts in perspective? A core story and critical supporting points work together to engage a broad audience constructively on the topic of housing affordability in Dallas.

A NEW CORE STORY:

While it can be expressed in different ways and adapted by advocates to increase support for a range of housing policies and initiatives, there is a core story around which we must build communications, and it's what's most missing from the current discourse.

By building smaller and smarter, creating more variety in the housing supply, Dallas can make rents and mortgages more attainable for more of us.

Emphasis on a variety of housing sizes keeps the focus on the housing people actually need (SUPPLY) and demonstrates that these options are for all of us (INCLUSION).

The idea of building smaller for more variety feels intuitively true as a mechanism for the creation of more reasonably priced housing (SOLUTION).

KEEP IN MIND:

- Emphasize building smarter, including (some) smaller, over simply building more.
 - Dallasites see more building happening every day, all around them. And they don't believe that "more" translates to affordable.
 - The idea of building some smaller places pushes the conversation forward in two ways. First, it makes sense to people as a mechanism for the creation of more reasonably priced housing. Second, it keeps the focus on supply as the solution.
 - But it's important to ensure that smaller does not drift into the territory of cramped. When we express it right, people understand that smaller means "smaller than the mega mansions we see all around us," as opposed to "cramped like a New York City apartment."
 - And it's not that every place should be smaller (since what people want are more and better options).



- Place variety front and center.
 - Different images like renovations of existing buildings, Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), etc., get people thinking about the variety that's missing.
 - Emphasizing variety also allows us to build on existing research showing that housing supply on smaller footprints (such as ADUs, taller residential buildings, etc.) is better for the environment than sprawl.

- Keep it inclusive.
 - Emphasizing that these options are for “more of us,” “all of us,” or “many different kinds of people in the city” expands the idea of who benefits from more manageable housing costs and helps avoid othering (including racist othering).



While the core story connects with the Cultural Common Sense (it seems logical to people), there are still ways that conversations can be derailed if not handled properly—e.g. by triggering the assumption that the conversation is about raising taxes. To avoid these and engage support, the supporting points below are critical for fleshing out the core story to make it compelling and persuasive.

SUPPORTING POINTS:

- **To create the Dallas we all want and need...** (*Tap into aspiration*)

Tapping into the current shared sense that Dallas isn't the place it could be or should be (because it's becoming unaffordable) provides an aspirational frame that sets the stage for a solution orientation, adds a source of optimism, and defines a common (inclusive) purpose. It also makes room for a constructive role for policy.

- **We have a plan...** (*Promote clear, specific, and realistic actions*)

Providing an easy-to-understand roadmap and concrete actions—for example, updating zoning laws to allow owners to build duplexes and triplexes in parts of the city that currently don't allow them or giving incentives to build smaller places and allowing in-law units in more neighborhoods—inspires optimism, engagement and a sense of momentum. (Note that the examples listed here are easily understood, and helpful with broad audiences—though there will always be some who object to any particular proposal. Suggestions throughout the rest of the Toolkit can help communicators navigate or respond to pushback about changes to neighborhoods.)

- **The city is already KICKSTARTING meaningful efforts...** (*Give government a positive role*)

The idea of government “kickstarting” initiatives helps avoid counterproductive attitudes associated with the city’s role (for example, that well-intentioned government efforts are temporary and ill-conceived, and thus doomed to fail) and provides reassurance that sustainability is a focus and priority.

** If applicable, insert relevant examples from past city efforts.*

A note on adapting to context

It is important to tell a coherent and consistent story across all of our various audiences. But different audiences may need different parts of the story highlighted or introduced based on what they know and where they are coming from. Core themes must be consistent and compatible across all communications, but communications can vary in some other ways, such as:

- **Additional numbers and facts:** For some audiences, such as policymakers, communicators will need additional material “in their back pocket”—such as various numbers (about costs, populations, timeframes, etc.). This doesn't mean the core themes are different, however.

- **Local/timely details:** The recommended strategy lays out core points and themes, but these can apply to many different situations, relevant to particular times and places.
- **Adjusting various “dials”:** Using emotionally charged language can tap into an audience’s anger about their shrinking options, while using a more neutral “practical” tone can reassure a different audience about the soundness of a policy idea. Communicators should be able to adapt and deploy the core ideas as needed across contexts.
- **Different emphases:** Aspects of inclusion might be emphasized to an audience concerned with racial or economic equity, while leading with solutions could be key for a skeptical general public. Yet all versions draw on and reinforce the common, overarching narrative.
- **Additional supporting arguments:** For example, with audiences where economic concerns are top of mind, it can be useful to offer the case that not having ample and affordable housing stock creates an economic drag, and that addressing the problem of housing affordability makes sense for the overall business and economic environment. For most other audiences, however, this argument too often distracts them from the SUPPLY story, shifting their focus to employers and wages, which is why we don’t include it in our core recommendation.



PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: A TESTED MESSAGE

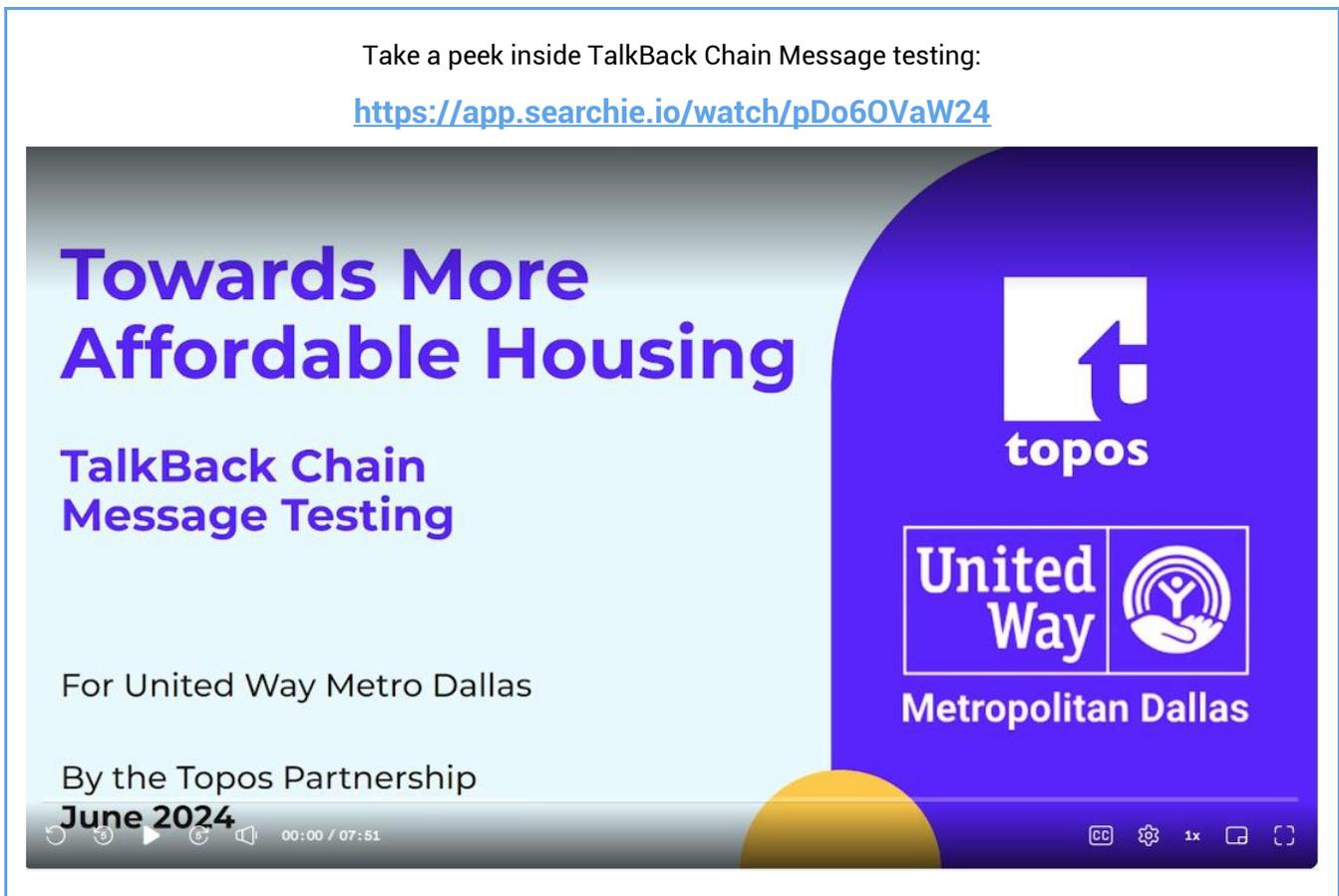
The following message puts into practice many of the recommendations above and was successful in a rigorous form of message testing called Talkback Chains, which assesses the viral quality of an idea (see the video below for a demonstration of how this testing works).

For Dallas to be the city it wants to be, we must take steps so that rents and mortgages aren't so out of reach for so many of us. Mainly, we have too many big houses and big lots.

We need a better variety of smaller houses and apartments, and there are practical actions we can take as a city right now, like giving incentives to build smaller places and allowing in-law units in more neighborhoods.

Take a peek inside TalkBack Chain Message testing:

<https://app.searchie.io/watch/pDo60VaW24>



A NOTE ON DENSITY

Recent affordable housing debates in metro areas have included rhetoric around issues of **density**. Some want to explicitly advocate for density as a way to address housing affordability challenges, while others rail against the concept because of negative associations (traffic, strain on public goods, noise, crime, etc.).

In this project, very few participants used the term “density” to express their concerns with housing affordability initiatives, though some did discuss crowding or traffic as possible outcomes of these initiatives. It’s possible that at the point of data collection, density was not a commonly used concept to discuss the issue, or it may only be used by a vocal minority.

Still, the research did uncover some of the concerns commonly accompanying a discussion of density. Many participants revealed that they held unhelpful stereotypes about public housing and/or about people with low incomes. And some expressed concern about building more housing, when it already seems there is a lot of building going on and it’s not helping with affordability.

The strength of this toolkit’s recommendations lies in their ability to bypass the unproductive aspects of the density debate. Testing showed that the recommended message approach strikes most people—across demographics—as compelling common sense, i.e. did not tend to trigger pushback related to density. By centering the need for a change toward affordability and emphasizing that there is a plan, communicators can address concerns about unchecked growth and strained resources. And keeping messaging inclusive means that audiences can see themselves and those they care about in the solutions, avoiding triggering the “othering” and stereotypes that lead to NIMBY-ism.

EXAMPLES OF BRIEF LANGUAGE

The following are illustrations of brief language consistent with the research—for use in social media posts, headers, etc.

- ✓ Dallas needs more varieties of housing, and we can make it happen.
- ✓ Here's how to make Dallas a place with room for everyone from workers, business owners, retirees, and young people just starting out.
- ✓ Our rents and mortgages are out of reach for too many, but there are steps we can take such as....
- ✓ Dallas has lots of big houses on big lots, but those homes aren't the right fit for all households.
- ✓ A variety of housing with a smaller footprint is better for the environment (and an investment in our collective future).
- ✓ We can be the city we want to be, with housing options for everyone, by taking a few simple steps.
- ✓ Dallas is growing/changing, which is why the city needs to kickstart solutions by....
- ✓ Communities are stronger when there's housing for people of all different ages and incomes.
- ✓ Dallas can be the city we all want and need if we take steps to make sure that there are reasonable housing options, for all of us, regardless of race or income level.
- ✓ Rents and mortgages that are out of reach affect all communities in Dallas. The problem often hits Black and Brown residents hardest, but addressing it will provide breathing room for ALL of us.
- ✓ Both workers and employers know our city needs places of different sizes and at different price points.

A question to ask candidates for local office

Dallas has thousands of individuals—from downsizing seniors to young people just starting out in the working world, to families on a budget—who don't need a big house on a big lot, but can't find good, reasonably priced alternatives. What's your plan for making sure the city has options for the wide range of folks who call Dallas home, but are afraid they might have to leave?

- ✓ Just by allowing in-law units/ADUs in more neighborhoods, we could make Dallas a place where more people can afford to live near their jobs and families.

SAMPLE RESPONSES TO TOUGH QUESTIONS

The following are examples of possible responses to questions—from the public/media about the issue, or from allies about the narrative strategy.

Public/Media

- Q Sounds like you're talking about the city spending money on new housing. Where is that money supposed to come from? Aren't taxes already enough of a burden on Dallas businesses and families?
 - A Redirecting some tax dollars to making a basic need like housing more affordable isn't a bad idea, but we can make lots of progress without spending an extra dollar of city money, for example by XXX [related to changing rules, etc.]. With so many of us facing stress and hardship to keep a roof over our heads, we should also be willing to prioritize putting some public money towards helpful solutions like XXX.
- Q It takes too long for these kinds of plans to make a difference when we need the help right now.
 - A If we want to solve this problem we do need immediate solutions, but we also need to be working to increase and improve the options people have for housing they can afford long term. There are a number of practical steps we can take, such as . . .
- Q How will you make sure new resources for housing people can afford will go to people in the city who need it most?
 - A Frankly, rents and house prices are becoming a problem for more and more people in Dallas, and anything we can do to increase variety and make some options more affordable will benefit everyone. We'll make sure whatever solutions we pursue will lead to options at all points on the housing scale.
- Q I'm worried that this money will end up lining the pockets of developers and landlords (or city officials) who are already cashing in.
 - A To have affordable housing, someone has to build it. These ideas are being proposed and pushed by the people of Dallas. Let's make sure we get the results we're looking for—a greater variety of home options, suitable for a wider variety of people and situations.

Q The real problem is too many outsiders moving in and driving up prices—what can be done to stop that?

A People are moving here because it's a great place to live and work. And as long as we have enough housing and enough variety for everyone, newcomers are a benefit, not a problem!

Q How will these policies help those of us who already paid too much for a home and don't plan to move?

A One way it might help is by making it possible for your retired parents, or your adult kids just starting out, to live in the same neighborhood instead of leaving the city. Another is that it could allow you to create an additional unit on your property for some rental income. It depends on the solutions we choose.

Q I worked hard for my home—shouldn't other people be willing to work for it?

A We all have friends or family members who struggle to pay their rent or mortgage, no matter how hard they work. The idea is to make getting decent housing more manageable for everyone. People at all stages of life, at all income levels, need options.

Q Won't low-income housing reduce home values in a neighborhood, or make crime worse?

A This plan isn't about low-income housing, it's about the fact that rents and housing are out of reach for so many of us in this city and taking steps that reduce that burden for the majority of us.

Q Traffic is already a headache for Dallas; building more housing is just going to make things worse.

A A variety of housing—especially on a smaller footprint (as opposed to sprawl)—actually reduces congestion on our roads. It brings people closer to their jobs and to needed amenities, which both reduces costs for workers and community members AND overall pollution for all of us.

Q I don't want the character of my neighborhood to change.

A If change happens, we want to make sure it's a positive change. We think a neighborhood that has room for families and young people, as well as wealthy

professionals or retirees who want to age in place, is a change toward thriving, healthy neighborhoods.

- Q My neighbors and I are very concerned about a proposed new development in a neighborhood right next to ours. We worry that having a bunch of multi-family homes is going to bring traffic, parking issues, noise, and crime.
- A We all know that Dallas is short on homes suitable for people who aren't in the market for a big house on a big lot. We have plenty of those, but too few places for a single senior, or a young person just starting out, or a teacher on a modest salary. What you're pointing out is that our plan for meeting this need has to be a smart one. For example, our plan does ask developers about adequate parking, and does include a look at transit options in the area. What else would you like to see as part of the plan?
- Q I've lived in this neighborhood for years, and I live here for a reason, and I'm curious why you think duplexes and in-law units are going to make things better?
- A Honestly, I don't know whether those exact changes are the right solution, but I do think we need some additional options so that, for example, a downsizing senior or a young person moving out and getting started doesn't automatically have to look for a place to live all the way across town. Wouldn't it be a good thing to be able to accommodate them here where they'd like to be? More variety would be helpful for plenty of families.
- Q I now live alone in my 3-bedroom home and I don't see anything wrong with that. I have no interest in putting a bunch of tiny apartments in my neighborhood and ruining its character. Why are neighborhoods like mine suddenly under attack?
- A Remember that we're often talking about people who have lived in our city their whole lives, maybe even in your neighborhood, but recent changes like new companies with employees moving in, mean that these folks are being priced out of their home city. With the right smart, careful plan, we can have a city that offers more options that suit more people in more situations, without losing anything we love about our home.
- Q How does this issue concern me and other renters?
- A Actually, this is about anyone living in or hoping to live in Dallas. We're talking about the variety of home options we have, whether to buy or to rent. If you're feeling like rentals are out of reach, or there's too little variety of the kinds of places that might be available, the idea is that we can do something about that.

Allies

Q Is this perspective meant to be effective with every audience? What about Black/Brown audiences?

A Everyone in Dallas, of whatever background, is aware that housing has gotten more challenging, and everyone is glad to hear there are things that can help. Part of why we believe in this narrative is that it is compelling across all audiences, specifically including Black and Brown residents of our communities.

Q This approach doesn't address the way race and racism shape things here.

A This approach isn't meant to replace our anti-racism work. But when we chip away at housing unaffordability, we chip away at one of the more powerful ways segregation gets maintained in this city.

Q What we really need is for the exclusive, wealthiest neighborhoods to be open for lower income families—what's being done about that?

A We agree. That's why we're supporting policies that will improve housing variety in every part of the city including the wealthiest areas. (Give policy examples)



COMMUNICATORS' CHECKLIST

Have I remembered to ...?

- ✓ Emphasize **supply** by focusing on whether Dallas has all the kinds of housing people actually need (instead of focusing on the people who can't afford housing in the current market)?
- ✓ Keep the spotlight on clear, actionable, realistic **solutions** (for example, updating zoning laws to build more duplexes and triplexes or giving incentives to build smaller places)?
- ✓ Illustrate a **variety** of housing types and sizes (such as duplexes and triplexes, small and bigger apartments and houses, ADUs/mother-in-law apartments, etc.)?
- ✓ Emphasize **building SMALLER/SMARTER** places that people can afford over building MORE of the same expensive, out-of-reach housing?

- ✓ Clarify that these options are for **everyone** (renters/owners, people of different ages, demographics, and backgrounds)?
- ✓ Consider the idea of government **"kickstarting"** solutions, especially when reassurance is necessary that efforts will be sustainable?
- ✓ Tap into **aspiration**, or the shared sense that Dallas isn't currently the place it could be or should be?

DO'S and DON'TS

Don't do this....	Instead, do this....
<p>Don't dwell on the "demand" story of a growing city; e.g. "Fastest growing...."; "so many people moving here..."; and "influx driving up prices."</p>	<p>Pivot to the role of "supply."</p> <p><i>For example: "Dallas' success brings some challenges like the need for more and different housing."</i></p>
<p>Don't dwell on people's inability to afford housing (demand side); e.g. "people's wages can't keep up with the cost of rents and mortgages."</p>	<p>Focus on the costs of housing and how that could be brought down (supply side).</p> <p><i>For example: "The city needs more homes and apartments that match up with what people can afford."</i></p>
Don't do this....	Instead, do this....
<p>Don't reinforce the idea that city leaders only do right by businesses, not regular people.</p>	<p>Name city decision-makers as part of the solution...and say what/who their priorities should be.</p> <p><i>For example: "Community organizations are working with / pushing City Councilwoman X to tackle the issue by. . . ."</i></p>
<p>Don't tell a "deservingness" story about people working hard but having to settle for less than they should.</p>	<p>Treat it as a given and as a shared value.</p> <p><i>For example: "Every person should be able to have access to safe and secure housing—this doesn't have to be earned."</i></p>
<p>Don't engage with fears about crime if a neighborhood gets more housing for low-income people.</p>	<p>Pivot to a story about how neighborhoods with opportunity and room for people from all walks of life make for good, stable, secure places to live.</p> <p><i>For example: "...professionals as well as retail clerks, young families starting out, retirees wanting to upsize or downsize while staying in their own part of town, etc."</i></p>
<p>Don't make the story about only ONE group's needs (seniors, young adults, unhoused folks, etc.)</p>	<p>Offer multiple examples of people that need the city's housing mix to be better/different.</p> <p><i>For example: "From seniors to young families, to</i></p>

	<i>working people who earn wages too low to afford rent....we all have a stake in Dallas' future."</i>
Don't make solutions sound complicated or overly expensive (even if they are)... City needs a "massive" investment to deal with the "tidal wave" of people or "unprecedented backlog."	Deploy the idea of "kickstarting" solutions so that positive effects can begin happening soon. <i>For example: "The city is already kickstarting meaningful efforts through X, Y and Z."</i>
Don't forget to include solutions and don't make developers the focus of the solution.	Get to examples of solutions early and often and make it clear that it's the city/public system that can and should respond (not only by encouraging private actors).

Don't do this....	Instead, do this....
Don't try to navigate around "affordable housing" with terms like "attainable housing," which can trigger skepticism or confusion.	In a context where people might assume you are talking about public housing projects, use alternate language like, "housing at a range of prices people can afford," but otherwise people understand the topic without specialized language.
Don't lead with the business/economic case (except with business audiences or in response to worries that a policy might harm businesses).	For most audiences this is only a helpful supporting point, not the most effective core argument. Instead go back to the core argument of the need for better/different supply.
Don't make it just about building "more." People see LOTS of building happening already.	Instead it's about building smaller and smarter and changing the mix away from too many luxury apartments or big homes—to make sure everyone benefits from the new building.
Don't make it just about rent or about giant apartment complexes.	Instead, sprinkle in references to homeownership and other kinds of housing like allowing duplexes and triplexes where they aren't currently allowed.

BEFORE/ AFTER: Transforming Typical Messages with this New Strategy

Before	After
Keep Dallas Affordable	<p>"For Dallas to be the City it Wants to be..." "Dallas Can be the City it Wants to be"</p> <p><i>(Slightly reframe so that it's about the future)</i></p>
Dallas is Big Enough for Everyone.	<p>"Dallas is Big Enough for Everyone...so let's make sure everyone has a place to call home—from workers, to retirees, to young people just starting out."</p> <p><i>(This is already strong...add some specifics to it to make it more effective.)</i></p>
Before	After
Ensure our workforce can continue to call Dallas Home. Our workforce can't afford to live here.	<p>"Working people and their contributions make Dallas' economy thrive. It's time to take steps so they can afford to live here."</p> <p><i>(Action-oriented and sets the stage for a solutions plan.)</i></p>
Dallas needs Attainable Housing.	<p>"It's time to bring rents and mortgages within reach."</p> <p><i>(Taps into the feeling many already have that housing is out of reach).</i></p>
Everyone deserves a place to call home.	<p>"Let's make Dallas a city for All of us."</p> <p><i>(Reduces othering and emphasizes inclusion—We are in this together.)</i></p>

SAMPLE OP-ED: FORWARD DALLAS

The following example highlights the central messages that could form the core of an Op-Ed. Adding timely details and examples, as well as your own distinct perspective, are key to creating an effective submission.

To create the Dallas we all want and need, we must take steps so that rents and mortgages aren't so out of reach for so many of us. The new ForwardDallas plan, a comprehensive land use plan, is a roadmap for how we can work together to do just that.

We already know our city has too many big houses and big lots. It's time to focus on variety—making sure we have all the kinds of housing we need to meet our needs. We need a better mix of smaller houses and apartments to go along with our single-family homes. Our city has a shortage of 33,600 affordable housing places and, without action, that number is going to keep growing. The ForwardDallas plan shows us that solutions are possible and there are practical actions we can take as a city right now and over time that can make Dallas affordable for everyone who wants to call this city home.

The ForwardDallas plan would mean....(Insert examples of what ForwardDallas plan would DO).

Rents and mortgages are simply too out of reach for too many in our community. From seniors to young families, to working people who earn wages too low to afford rent, we all have a stake in Dallas' future. We can be the city we want to be, and ForwardDallas is a plan for how we can build smarter so we can get there together.



APPENDIX: RESEARCH APPROACH, FINDINGS & METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

The Topos research approach—building on expertise in the social and cognitive sciences, as well as public opinion and political strategy—focuses on understanding challenges and opportunities at the level of the Cultural Common Sense: the deeply held understandings that are pervasive, unquestioned, and have the power to shape people's views and behavior. This is the level at which we win and lose.

For this effort, we employed a multi-method approach across two phases:

Phase 1: Ethnography: 46 ethnographic interviews across Dallas

Phase 2:

- Media Review ~100 items
- Table Sessions ~ 8 groups, 28 total participants
- TalkBack Survey ~ 4 messaging directions, 116 participants
- Video TalkBack Chains ~ 6 chains, 21 total participants

Summary of Findings

The research revealed and confirmed a set of default perspectives that can stand in the way of engaging people constructively on the topic of housing affordability. It also uncovered existing cultural perspectives that we can build on to promote meaningful and lasting solutions. The recommended messages address both the challenges and opportunities in current default thinking and have been tested across demographics to reach the widest possible audience.

Key Challenges in Current Default Thinking

- **Focus on Demand:** Whether it's the story of newcomers driving up prices or the struggles of those (often "others") who can't afford what the local market provides, the

current narrative is stuck on the DEMAND side of the equation, overemphasizing the role of the individuals looking for housing. This makes it hard to focus on causes and solutions that have to do with the supply of housing, for example.

- **Business-Centric:** There is a broadly shared sense that Dallas does and always will prioritize business development over communities, which leads to fatalism about the possibility of change and potential solutions.
- **"Others":** People often default to associating "affordable housing" with "others" (especially when this term is used to introduce the topic or the starting point is public policy), making associations that produce and reinforce harmful racist and classist stereotypes. This individual-focused view also shifts attention from systemic solutions and distances people from the issue.
- **Skepticism about government:** While people acknowledge that government makes efforts to help both the wealthiest and the poorest of the city, they are not used to looking to the government to solve the problems that affect people like themselves.

Key Opportunities in Default Thinking

- **The City (already) has a role:** Local residents already have a shared understanding that local government sometimes tries to help with housing affordability, and that this is appropriate and welcome. They don't believe the city has solved the problem, but neither do they tend to see housing as an area the city isn't or shouldn't be involved in.
- **"It shouldn't have to be this hard":** Widespread acknowledgement of the hardships created by the current housing market—living in poor conditions, needing multiple jobs, waiting until one's 40s to buy, etc.—creates the opportunity to frame a constructive role for policy in making housing options more manageable.
- **Affordable housing leads to thriving people and cities:** The idea that housing is the foundation of a city's overall success is one that people already take in a number of constructive directions—for instance, the idea that when housing is affordable, people can spend more money in the local economy. There is room for narratives emphasizing that when the city has a supply of reasonable housing options, overall well-being is boosted in a variety of ways.

Messaging Approaches that Promote Constructive Thinking

- **Everyone already agrees:** “housing is unmanageable and unaffordable,” and this is having negative effects on the city and its people. We do NOT need to convince people of the problem, but we do need to deepen engagement by getting past the stops where people get off the bus (NIMBY, public money...)
- **Smaller, more affordable units make sense:** The idea that Dallas could have more affordable housing by building smaller units was well received and seemed like common sense.
- **“Kickstarting” solutions avoided some mental traps:** People underlined the “kickstart” role of the government in housing solutions, which they took as reassurance that sustainability was a focus and a priority.
- **Economically mixed neighborhoods are “inclusive” and have all ages, income levels:** While no term for economically mixed neighborhoods emerged as a clear winner, some useful interpretations were that these were for people at all different ages and incomes. While Dallasites are currently skeptical that such diversity is realistic in the same neighborhood, they already believe that the city as a whole is (and should stay) diverse in this way.



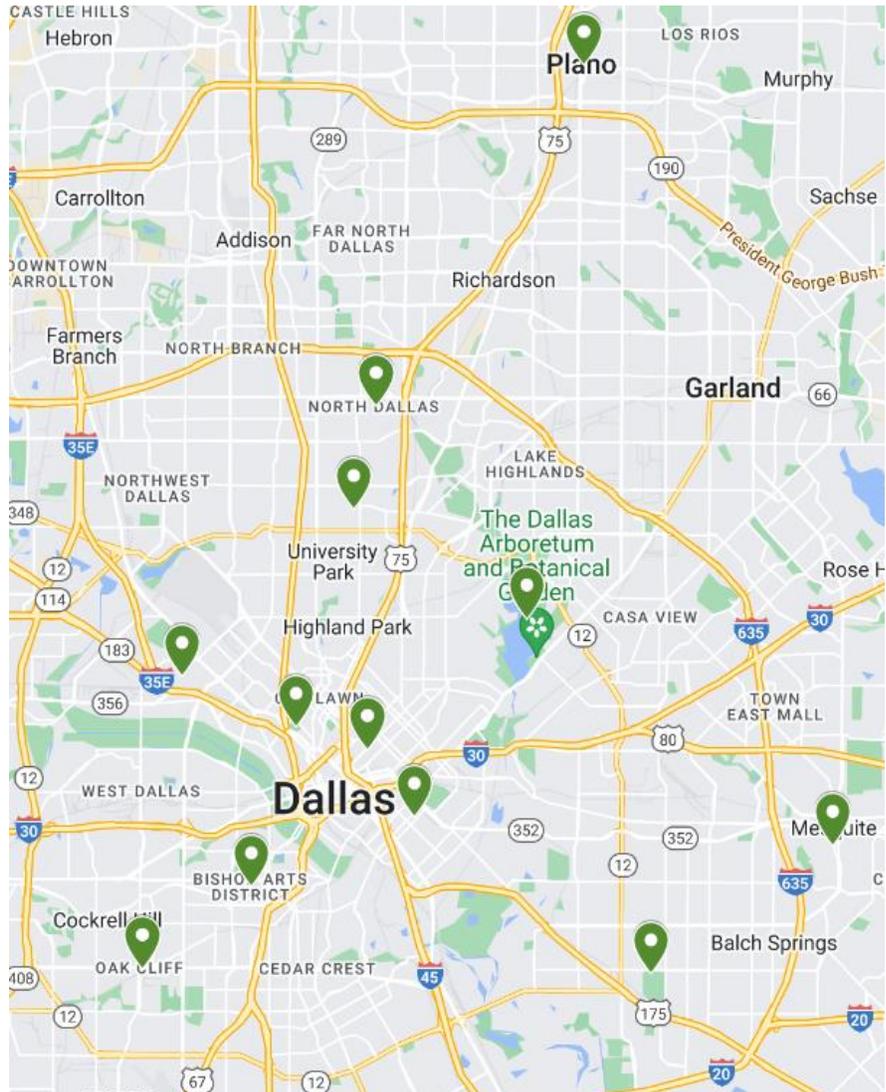
Methodology

Ethnography

Ethnography provides a deeper view into people's experience of the world and is a powerful way to understand common patterns of thinking and shared understandings in the culture.

For this effort, researchers conducted 46 ethnographic interviews, with 36 of these interviews conducted in natural settings in the City of Dallas (public spaces, workplaces, cafes, parks, etc.). The interviews averaged ~20 minutes in length. Five conversations were pre-scheduled, longer (30+ minute) sit-down interviews that allowed for more in-depth exploration of topics. 5 interviews were conducted remotely over Zoom with Dallas residents.

Participants represented a diverse range of demographics, with an intentional overrepresentation of Black and Latine/Hispanic people, including Spanish speakers. Researchers talked with participants in neighborhoods and communities recommended by stakeholders, including: Old East Dallas, Oak Cliff, Preston Hollow, South Dallas, Oak Lawn, Bishop Arts District, Pleasant Grove, White Rock, Arlington Park, and Mesquite.



Media Review

To better understand the public dialog around housing affordability, we conducted an assessment of how media coverage reflects, and potentially influences, broad patterns of thinking. Reviewing and analyzing a diverse set of approximately 100 pieces from media sources (newspapers, blogs, broadcast transcripts, social media posts, etc.) we asked questions such as: How are the key issues framed by both supporters and opposition? Which aspects of the topic are ignored? Which are exaggerated or misrepresented? What are the likely impacts on the Cultural Common Sense? What are the opportunities to introduce more constructive language and storylines?

Key insights include:

- Affordable housing is (often unintentionally) framed as a “burden” that ought to be shared throughout the city.
- Advocates argue that unaffordable housing is bad for the economy, but often leave out the positive flipside (that affordable housing is a boon for the economy).
- Developers are often framed as the main beneficiaries of changes to zoning, efforts to expand affordable housing, and the priorities of city planning in general.
- Despite communities speaking out about issues in their gentrifying communities, there’s a common narrative that the city has not meaningfully invested in or positively influenced underserved neighborhoods like South and West Dallas.
- The media places a strong emphasis on “affordable housing” as rental units in multi-family buildings, which is often met with criticism of a lack of focus on homeownership and single-family homes.
- Among other negative associations with “affordable housing” (often read as “public housing”), the media landscape contains the idea that, through by-right zoning, developers will wield more power than resident homeowners in their own neighborhoods.
- There are some (though not many) references to the city’s history of racial discrimination that led to persistent housing inequity. Note that this story is often focused on homeownership, and not rental units.



Sources include:

- Al Día Dallas (Spanish-Speaking Publication)
- Axios
- Candy's Dirt
- CBS News
- Chronicle-Tribune
- D Magazine
- Dallas Examiner (African American Publication)
- Dallas Express
- Dallas Free Press
- Dallas Innovates
- Dallas News
- Dallas Observer
- Dallas Post Tribune (African American Publication)
- Dallas Weekly (African American Publication)
- KERA News
- North Dallas Gazette (African American Publication)
- NBC DFW
- Novedades News (Spanish-Speaking Publication)
- Texas Tribune
- The Century Foundation
- The Real Deal
- US News
- WFAA

Table Sessions

Table sessions mimic a kitchen-table conversation. We bring a small group of people together (3-4) for an hour-long, online, robust conversation. The format is intimate, so it allows authentic, natural conversations to emerge. It has the benefits of both in-depth interviews in the sense that each person has time and space to fully express their individual views, as well as focus groups, in the sense that dialogue and debate show how ideas hold up in discourse. For this effort, we conducted 8 table sessions.

TalkBack Surveys

TalkBack Surveys allow us to determine which ideas are clear, engaging, easily remembered and able to shift attitudes in constructive directions. In this method, each participant is exposed to a single core idea online and testing focuses first on whether the message that is heard is the one that was intended.

TalkBack Chains

TalkBack Chains add an additional element to assess the viral quality of an idea. Like a game of telephone, we interview respondent #1 (often in a videoconference) and introduce the message to them. Then we add respondent #2 and have respondent #1 convey the idea as exactly as possible to respondent #2. Respondent #1 drops off, and the process is repeated with adding a third respondent.

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About Topos: Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately transform the landscape of public understanding where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is possible to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, real change depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding. Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new communications tools to win support. For more information: www.topospartnership.com.

About United Way of Metropolitan Dallas: United Way of Metropolitan Dallas is a social change organization that unites the community to create access and opportunity for all North Texans to thrive. We bring together passionate change-makers alongside corporate, civic and nonprofit partners to drive lasting change and equity in education, income and health—the building blocks of opportunity. United Way is committed to leading a fully inclusive, multicultural movement right here at home. We invite all North Texans to Live United and be part of this change. To give, advocate or volunteer, visit UnitedWayDallas.org.