



ALBERTA  
REAL ESTATE  
FOUNDATION

# Enabling Housing Choice Project

## Guidebook Module 2

### The Importance of Housing Diversity

September 2024



## LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Enabling Housing Choice (EHC) team wants to acknowledge our connection with the ancestral peoples who have been on this land for millennia.

RDN's physical office is located on lands traditionally known as amiskwachiwaskahikan (A Miss Gwa Che Wuss Sky Gun) - aka Beaver Hills House, or Edmonton, the historical land of Treaty 6 Territory, which is also within the Metis Nation District 9.

We acknowledge and confirm our commitment and responsibility to foster better relationships with Indigenous peoples, and to improve our own understanding of the unique and diverse cultures of local First Nations, Inuit and Metis people. We make this acknowledgement as an act of reconciliation and gratitude to those whose territory we gather on.

RDN is committed to connecting our programming to the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Report, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as benchmarks for our reconciliation journey.

It is our sincere hope that the information provided in this guide will help communities address their own unique and diverse housing needs, and provide greater housing security and inclusion for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, both in the community and the surrounding area.





## PROJECT ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, the Enabling Housing Choice (EHC) team wants to thank the Alberta Real Estate Foundation (AREF) for their funding and support in this research project.

We also want to acknowledge the 6 Alberta communities that participated in this research: (alphabetically) City of Airdrie, Town of Bow Island, Town of Claresholm, Town of Mayerthorpe, Town of Pincher Creek and Town of Trochu. These communities embraced the EHC team's mandate and research process, enabling them to collect practical and compelling information about current housing issues, barriers and opportunities in their community.

Finally, we want to express our gratitude to the housing stakeholders who participated in the various community engagement exercises that were conducted for this project. We appreciate the time and effort you dedicated to sharing your insights, identifying challenges, highlighting opportunities, and suggesting ways to improve housing diversity in your community. Your contributions have played a vital role in shaping the understanding of the current housing landscape and guiding the research towards meaningful solutions. Your generosity and willingness to collaborate have been instrumental in our goal to facilitate a more inclusive and diverse housing environment, both in your community and across Alberta.

# WHAT THIS MODULE EXPLORES

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# MODULE 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF HOUSING DIVERSITY

MODULE 2 OF 8

## INTRODUCTION

Housing diversity is critical for fostering vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable communities. By offering a range of housing options that cater to diverse needs, preferences, and income levels, municipalities can enhance social equity, economic resilience, and quality of life for residents. From affordable apartments to single-family homes, mixed-use developments to senior living facilities, housing diversity promotes neighborhood stability, supports workforce retention, and ultimately helps create strong and vibrant communities.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this module is to provide municipalities and organisations with an overview of the importance of developing diverse housing in their communities. It explores the numerous benefits that developing diverse housing types can provide to municipalities, while examining various housing types that can contribute to a diverse housing stock.



## 1.1 WHAT DOES HOUSING DIVERSITY MEAN?

Housing diversity refers to the range of housing types and forms in a community. A diverse community includes various different dwelling types and sizes – which may be achieved by flexible zoning that promotes a variety of built housing forms. By providing greater housing choice, communities can meet the housing needs of increasingly diverse residents and household types – such as young families, professionals, retirees, people with disabilities.

Throughout the **Enabling Housing Choice Project**, it was important to understand the various perspectives of housing stakeholders in the partner communities towards housing diversity, and importantly, what the term ‘housing diversity’ meant to them. As each community’s housing needs differed from one to the other, it was critical to understand resident’s perceptions of what housing diversity could look like in their neighbourhoods.

After numerous discussions with various community members, municipal staff, and local housing industry professionals, the EHC team compiled the following short-list of definitions for housing diversity:

### WHAT WE HEARD: DEFINING HOUSING DIVERSITY

*“ . . . anything from low income, or multi-unit housing all the way up to acreage homes.”*

*“ . . . having different types of units or places for people to live.”*

*“ . . . having housing that is suitable for a wide array of demographics. . . ”*

*“A balanced market where everyone can afford to rent or purchase.”*

*“A variety of property types of various prices that cover all age groups, lifestyles and needs.”*

*“ . . . [housing that is] safe, comfortable, affordable, and appropriate.”*

In short, depending on the perspective of the housing stakeholder – developer, resident, housing agency, property manager, tenant, local business, municipality, housing advocate, and anyone else involved in housing – housing diversity meant something different to each one of them.

## 1.2 WHY IS HOUSING DIVERSITY IMPORTANT?

The importance of housing diversity for any community can have significant and various positive impacts, both for the residents and for the municipality as a whole. This section explores the array of benefits that diverse housing development can have for communities: social and economic diversity, population growth and retention, attracting skilled workers, to name a few.

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### 1.2.1 ECONOMIC DIVERSITY

By offering a range of housing types, sizes, and price points, communities can attract and accommodate residents from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Economically, diverse housing options support workforce diversity by providing housing options that are affordable to individuals across different income levels. This, in turn, contributes to a more resilient local economy by ensuring that essential workers, such as teachers, healthcare professionals, and service industry workers, can afford to live in the communities they serve.

Additionally, diverse housing options will stimulate economic development by attracting investment, supporting local businesses, and creating opportunities for entrepreneurship and innovation.

This broad range of residents will foster a more diverse community, with a varied social culture, and will result in a greater array of business opportunities. In the end, more diverse residents means a broader customer base to support local businesses.

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## 1.2.2 POPULATION GROWTH & RETENTION

Offering a diverse range of housing options can attract new residents to communities and encourage existing residents to stay. Young professionals, families, retirees, and individuals with different housing needs can all find suitable accommodations, which helps sustain and/or increase the local population.

Providing diverse housing options enables young professionals, families, and retirees to affordably reside in the community, encouraging population growth and diversity. Furthermore, diverse housing options accommodate changing demographics and lifestyle preferences, allowing residents to remain within the community as their needs evolve over time. This, in turn, fosters a sense of belonging and attachment to the community, promoting long-term residency and reducing outmigration.

A community that offers diverse housing options will not only be able to attract new residents, it will also enable existing residents to stay.

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## 1.2.3 SKILLED WORKFORCE ATTRACTION

In order to attract skilled workers to the community, they not only need a place to work, they need a place to live. Housing development to support worker housing needs can be incentivized through local policy that encourages housing construction. Furthermore, through collaboration and input among the various local housing stakeholders - developers, home builders, property / land / home owners, community members and local administration - housing development policies can be written to align with local priorities and workers needs. For example, in order build the diverse housing that is suitable for the workforce that local businesses wish to attract, policy incentives must not only be locally relevant, they must also be enticing enough to convince developers to build the housing that is needed.





## 1.2.4 AGING POPULATION AND ACCESSIBILITY

As populations age, the need for accessible and age-friendly housing becomes more important. Providing diverse housing types in a community can help address the unique needs of older adults and individuals with disabilities.

Diverse housing options that include forms such as smaller, single-level homes, accessible apartments, and assisted living facilities ensure that people can age in place comfortably and safely. This also helps to reduce the risk of social isolation for seniors because it allows them to remain within the community, close to family, friends, and essential services.

Additionally, accessible housing designs will also accommodate mobility challenges, so that quality of life and independence may be enhanced for residents. Accessible housing options, such as homes with wider doorways, ramps, lower countertops, and adapted bathrooms, allow individuals with physical disabilities to live independently and comfortably. Furthermore, diverse housing can include supportive environments with services such as on-site care, transportation assistance, and community resources that enhance daily living and overall quality of life for residents with disabilities.

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### Relevant Resources:

- [Sustainable Housing Initiative, \*Housing and the Economy\* \(2022\)](#)
- [Sustainable Housing Initiative, \*Housing and Equity\* \(2022\)](#)



## **A COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP: BOW ISLAND'S WEST VIEW LANDS**

The Town of Bow Island's West View Lands is a vacant parcel that presents a significant opportunity for the Town to develop. Through the **Enabling Housing Choice Project**, the Town and the EHC team conducted a Land Use Study for the site. The Town's objective was to develop the site to include recreational park space, a future age-care facility, and also explore the potential to build diverse housing that would meet the needs of the Town's growing population.

As a component of the EHC research, a community survey and open house session were employed to collect Bow Island residents' thoughts about how the site should be developed. The results showed support for townhouse and low-rise apartment development on the site, with respondents indicating that these housing types would provide more affordable rental opportunities for Bow Island's skilled workforce, including prospective employees of the long-term care facility.

Since many of Bow Island's local workforce commutes nearly 40 minutes from the neighboring City of Medicine Hat, due to a lack of housing in the Town, the development of affordable rental housing will greatly enhance the 'live-ability' of the Town. It's a win-win situation: more housing means more opportunity to attract and retain residents, which translates to more taxes for the Town; it also means workers will be able to live locally and eliminate commuting costs. With increased housing options for rental and ownership, the Town will be able to better cater to the diverse housing needs of its workforce, and ensure workers can both work and live in the Bow Island community.

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### **Relevant Resources**

- [Sustainable Housing Initiative, Bow Island Land Use Study \(2023\).](#)
- [Sustainable Housing Initiative, Bow Island What We Heard Report \(2022\).](#)

### 1.3 CONSIDER 'MISSING MIDDLE HOUSING' TO ADD HOUSING DIVERSITY TO THE RURAL HOUSING MIX

There is a diverse array of housing types that are available for use in the housing environment. Unfortunately, many of these housing types have not been well represented in rural communities, and especially smaller rural communities. Typically, a small rural community's housing mix comprises about 80 to 90% single family detached housing, with a few duplexes, triplexes and fourplexes thrown in for a bit of variety; some rural communities might also have a couple 3- or 4-storey apartments or even a bit of row housing. Quite a few rural communities can also support a seniors' residence - either for assisted or independent-living - typically in the form of low-rise apartment-type units. True 'housing diversity', as discussed in this module, is not part of the rural community mindset, simply because the general thinking is that what everyone should want is to live in a single family detached dwelling; any other housing type is just not as good.

First and foremost, in order to support the ability for rural communities to support the construction of more housing options, these more diverse housing forms need to become accepted and available as suitable dwellings, especially for a family.

Through the discussions with the EHC partner communities, a clearer understanding about rural housing needs, challenges, barriers and opportunities in rural communities was developed. It became very apparent that the need for a larger variety of housing types was needed. Furthermore, results from the community engagement process showed that residents felt strongly that diverse housing was needed in their communities. Their responses showed support for smaller, more affordable housing with fewer bedrooms; they recognized that this housing need could be satisfied through housing forms such as duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, row houses, townhouses and low-rise apartments - 'Missing Middle Housing' types.

Therefore, in the discussions with the EHC partner communities, some of the solutions included making changes and updates to local bylaws and policy in order to facilitate 'Missing Middle Housing' as a housing type that will assist rural communities in meeting their current housing needs.

For additional information about 'Missing Middle Housing', we encourage you to review the book: ***"Missing Middle Housing: Thinking Big and Building Small to Respond to Today's Housing Crisis"***, David Parolek (2020). In addition, the next section provides a brief description of the types of housing that are recommended in as missing middle housing.

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### 1.3.1. MISSING MIDDLE HOUSING - AN OVERVIEW

The term “*Missing Middle*” refers to the scarcity of housing types between single-family homes and large-scale apartment buildings. The housing types in this description include forms such as duplexes, triplexes, townhouses, and small-scale multi-family developments. One of the keys is that the scale of these housing forms must be designed to fit within the single-family detached scale.

These housing types not only promote affordability and diversity within neighborhoods, they also help foster a sense of community and promote sustainability.



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For further reading on diverse and missing middle housing types, we encourage you take a look at Daniel Parolek’s book:

***Missing Middle Housing: Thinking Big and Building Small to Respond to Today’s Housing Crisis (2020)***

Below is a description of the various housing types that fall within the “Missing Middle” category:

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### 1.3.2 MISSING MIDDLE HOUSING TYPES

**ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS:** A second housing unit, typically referred to as secondary suites, located on the same lot as the primary residence; also referred to as: garage suites, garden suites, basement suites, granny suites, and more. Accessory dwelling units provide additional housing options on single-family detached properties.

**DUPLEXES:** These structures are divided into two separate residential units, each with its own entrance. They are typically built side-by-side or stacked vertically,, providing housing for two households within the same structure.

**TRIPLEXES:** Similar to duplexes, triplexes consist of three separate residential units within one building. Triplexes can offer a variety of configurations, including side-by-side units or stacked layouts, accommodating three households in close proximity.

**FOURPLEXES:** Also known as quadplexes or four-unit dwellings, fourplexes contain four individual residential units within a single structure, each with its own entrance. These dwellings are often designed to maximize land use efficiency in urban and suburban settings.

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#### Examples of Accessory Dwelling Units



*Over the Garage*



*Garage Conversion*



*Stand-Alone Unit*



*Basement or Attic Conversion*

Source: <https://roseman.law/accessory-dwelling-units-what-boards-need-to-know/>

**COURTYARD BUILDING:** Clustered housing units arranged around a shared courtyard or green space, fostering a sense of community and providing residents with access to outdoor amenities.

**COTTAGE COURTS:** Small detached or semi-detached dwellings, arranged around a communal courtyard or garden. These dwellings provide affordable housing options while promoting social interaction and neighborhood connectivity.

**TOWNHOUSES:** Townhouses are 2 or 3-storey attached dwellings, arranged in rows or clusters, each unit with its own entrance and may share walls with neighboring units. Townhouses offer a balance between the privacy of single-family homes and the density of apartment buildings

**LOW-RISE APARTMENT BUILDINGS (≤ 3 STOREYS) :** Multi-unit residential buildings with three or fewer floors, containing a limited number of apartments per building. Low-rise apartments provide a middle-density housing option that is more compact than single-family homes but less imposing than high-rise developments, catering to a range of household sizes and preferences.

**MID-RISE APARTMENT BUILDINGS (4-6 STOREYS) :** Multi-story residential buildings typically ranging from four to six storeys in height, offering a higher level of density while still maintaining a human scale and connection to the street. Mid-rise apartments provide a transition between low-rise residential neighborhoods and higher-density urban centers, offering a mix of rental and ownership options.

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## Moving Forward

Is your municipality or organization eager to better identify and understand your community's diverse housing needs?

At the Rural Development Network, our Sustainable Housing Initiative (SHI) team specializes in conducting research that will help your municipality understand these needs.

Whether you're grappling with affordability issues, accessibility, or the need for more diverse housing options, our team is excited to start the conversation and explore tailored approaches that will respond uniquely to your housing aspirations.

Furthermore, at RDN, we believe in the power of collaboration and innovation to drive meaningful change. Our Sustainable Housing Initiative is designed to assist your community in enabling housing diversity and choice through comprehensive assessments, strategic planning, and actionable recommendations.

We also offer expertise in policy development, regulatory adjustments, and identifying funding opportunities, ensuring that your community can achieve its housing goals. Let us help you build a stronger, more inclusive community where everyone has a place to call home. Contact us today to learn how we can partner with you to create lasting, positive impacts in your community.





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