

Who Can Afford to Live in Sonoma County?

A Tale of Two Cities

SUMMARY

Sonoma County, renowned for its picturesque landscapes and vibrant culture, is increasingly becoming a challenging place for many of its essential residents to call home. Service workers, agricultural laborers, teachers, and young families—the very backbone of the community—are finding it increasingly difficult to afford housing in a region where the median sales price of a home reached a staggering \$900,000 in April 2025. This price tag is simply out of reach for most homebuyers.

The pressing question becomes: how can Sonoma County make housing more affordable for these vital populations?

To address this issue, it is crucial to define what we mean by "affordable housing." The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines affordable housing as housing that costs no more than 30% of a household's gross income, encompassing both rental options and homeownership.

A report from the 2021-22 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury, titled "Affordable Housing: Past, Present, and Future¹", provided a thorough examination of the affordable housing landscape in the county. The report revealed a significant shortfall in affordable housing, a situation exacerbated by rising construction costs, intricate financing challenges, and a scarcity of available land.

Unfortunately, the situation has not improved over the past two years. The California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) has mandated that Sonoma County construct 14,562 new housing units between 2023 and 2031² through the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) process. While this figure may seem substantial, organizations like the non-profit Generation Housing argue that it falls short of meeting the County's future housing needs.

The importance of fostering a diverse mix of housing options cannot be overstated. A stable community benefits everyone. It is essential for families and workers to be able to afford to stay in the area. According to the October 2024 report "State of Housing in Sonoma County"³ from Generation Housing, 31.4% of Sonoma County's workforce commutes from outside the region, a trend that strains the local economy, exacerbates traffic congestion, increases the carbon footprint, and adversely affects the health and educational outcomes of those workers and their families.

This report aims to shed light on the complexities of developing affordable housing and to showcase the strategies employed by two particular cities to promote such development. It discusses the contrasting approaches of two communities: Healdsburg, an affluent town celebrated for its tourism, historic plaza, and wine estates, and Rohnert Park, a more modest community known for its family-friendly atmosphere, Sonoma State University, and the Graton Rancheria. Both cities have received the Prohousing Designation from the State of California and are on track to meet their expanded RHNA goals, offering a glimpse of hope in the ongoing struggle for affordable housing in Sonoma County.

This analysis examines the multifaceted strategies employed by these two municipalities to foster the development of affordable housing. It focuses on four critical elements: Growth Management and Land Acquisition, Entitlement Process, Financing Mechanisms, and Leadership and Community Involvement.

¹ <https://sonoma.courts.ca.gov/system/files/affordable-housing-past-present-future.pdf>

² <https://permitsonoma.org/housingelement>

³ <https://generationhousing.org/resources/>

Through a comparative case study approach, this report sets out the policies, programs, and collaborative efforts undertaken by these cities, highlighting successful interventions and persistent challenges in addressing regional housing affordability crises.

GLOSSARY

- **ABAG:** Association of Bay Area Governments
- **Affordable Housing:** As defined by HUD, housing that costs no more than 30 percent of a household's gross income
- **Deed Restricted:** A mechanism to ensure that homes or rental units remain affordable for low-income residents for a set period, typically 55 years
- **Inclusionary Housing:** A program that requires developers to build a percentage of new residential units which will be rented or sold at affordable prices based on income
- **Prevailing Wage:** The minimum hourly rate of wages and benefits that contractors must pay workers on public works projects, set by the California Department of Industrial Relations
- **Prohousing Designation:** California Department of Housing and Community Development acknowledges a jurisdiction that has gone beyond the state law to help accelerate housing production
- **RHNA:** Regional Housing Needs Allocation – State-mandated process that determines the number of housing units each city and county need
- **Surplus Property:** Per the Surplus Property Act, land owned by a local public agency that is no longer necessary for the agency's use and that has been formally declared surplus by the agency. This land is then made available for affordable housing development under certain conditions

BACKGROUND

Sonoma County is grappling with a critical shortage of affordable housing, a situation worsened by rising construction costs, intricate financing challenges, and a scarcity of available land. In 2022, the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury released a report titled “Affordable Housing: Past, Present, and Future,” which provided an in-depth analysis of the affordable housing landscape in Sonoma County. This report examined historical policies, current obstacles, and future strategies to tackle the region's housing crisis, including a discussion of the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) process.

The California State Legislature mandates that all cities, towns, and counties proactively plan for the housing needs of their residents. This planning is executed through a Housing Element and the RHNA process. The California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) determines the total number of new homes each region must construct, and the affordability levels required to meet the diverse housing needs of its population. Once these figures are established, regional authorities, such as the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) for Sonoma County, allocate housing responsibilities among municipalities. Each municipality then updates its Housing Element to demonstrate its capacity to zone sufficient land for the construction of the required housing units based on its RHNA allocation.

Housing Element plans operate on an eight-year cycle. The current sixth cycle (2023-2031) has set a RHNA goal of 14,562 new housing units for the county, a significant increase from the fifth cycle's goal

of 8,444 units. These targets encompass a range of housing types, from very low-income to market-rate units. It is important to note that the RHNA goals do not fully capture the total housing need within each county; rather, they represent the number of units for which the county is accountable. Municipalities may not directly construct all these units but can collaborate with and/or incentivize private or non-profit developers to meet these goals.

This report focuses on two distinct communities: Healdsburg, an affluent area renowned for its wineries and tourism, and Rohnert Park, a family-oriented planned community. Both cities are on track to meet their expanded RHNA goals for 2023-2031 and have achieved a Prohousing Designation. The 2019-2020 Budget Act introduced a range of support, incentives, and accountability measures aimed at fulfilling California's housing objectives, including the establishment of the Prohousing Designation Program. This program recognizes and supports jurisdictions that exceed state housing laws to expedite housing production. Jurisdictions with a Prohousing Designation may benefit from priority processing or additional funding points when applying for various funding programs, including Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities (AHSC).⁴ Furthermore, this designation allows jurisdictions to apply for the Prohousing Incentive Program (PIP),⁵ which rewards local governments with extra funding to accelerate the production and preservation of affordable housing.

Healdsburg

Healdsburg has a long and rich history, beginning as the home of the Indigenous Pomo people. In the 19th century, the region came under Mexican control following a military campaign led by General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. In 1841, 50,000 acres were granted to Henry Delano Fitch, who introduced cattle ranching to the area. Following Fitch's death, his widow sold portions of the land to the Anglo government. Harmon Heald, who had been homesteading in the area, purchased 100 acres and formally incorporated the City of Healdsburg in 1867.

Healdsburg quickly grew into a commercial hub, supported by agriculture, timber, and mineral extraction—industries made more accessible by the Northwest Pacific Railway line. Over time, the region's agricultural base expanded to include orchards and vineyards. By the 1970s, Healdsburg began to establish itself as a premier wine-producing region, drawing estate wineries to Dry Creek and Alexander Valleys and ushering in a growing tourism industry.

During the past 40 years, the City of Healdsburg has transformed from a small town serving the surrounding northern Sonoma County agriculture and other resource-based industries into a vibrant community-center of the county's wine industry, as well as an attraction for destination-based tourism. Healdsburg growth has been influenced by the county's wine industry, and the city's central plaza where award-winning restaurants, destination-oriented retail, and wine tasting shops now dominate retail space. The plaza's pleasant surrounding residential neighborhoods, protected by planning policies and ballot-based growth restrictions, have all contributed to this transformation.

Healdsburg's fiscal and economic policies have been highly successful—the expanded retail uses, restaurants and lodging have created a stable and growing tax base for the city which supports high levels of municipal services to its residents. Increasing home values have led to substantial reinvestment and improvement of the existing housing stock, new development, including higher density housing and lodging, and revitalization of existing commercial buildings.

⁴ <http://www.hcd.ca.gov/grants-and-funding/programs-active/affordable-housing-and-sustainable-communities>

⁵ <https://www.hcd.ca.gov/grants-and-funding/programs-active/prohousing-incentive-program>

However, this success has created a housing market that has become unaffordable to long-term residents and families with young children. The city's teachers, agricultural, and hospitality workers are increasingly displaced by rising land prices driven by a supply-constrained market. With a continuing decrease in working families and full-time residents, a variety of demographic effects have set in, including an overall aging of the population, a reduction in school-age population and attendance in local public schools, and a decrease in the percentage of Hispanic households, which have, over the recent decades, become the foundation of the local workforce serving agriculture, construction, retail, and lodging industries and which still comprise over 30 percent of the City's population.

Rohnert Park

Rohnert Park, originally agricultural land tied to the Rohnert family and seed farming in the early 20th century, was developed as one of the first planned communities in the United States in the 1950s and officially incorporated in 1962. The intent was to develop a family-oriented community with cohesive neighborhoods, where no child would have to walk more than one-third of a mile to school. At the time, each neighborhood would have 200 to 250 homes around local schools and parks.

At incorporation, Rohnert Park was 2.1 square miles with a population of 2,775. Growth exploded in the 1970s and 80s, when two-thirds of the current housing units were built. By 1999, the city occupied 6.9 square miles, nearly half of which was dedicated to residential use for its population of approximately 41,000. Since the year 2000, the city has continued to grow in size and add population. As of January 1, 2020, the city had a population of 44,330 and land area of approximately 7.7 square miles. Rohnert Park is the third largest city in Sonoma County and has the highest population density in the county at over 6,000 residents per square mile.

Housing Goals for Healdsburg and Rohnert Park

Below are charts which describe the Regional Housing Needs Assessment Goals for both communities, detailing the number of units by income category.

Healdsburg

In the fifth cycle (2014-2022), Healdsburg's RHNA goal was to build 157 housing units. The city built 342 units, exceeding its goal in all income categories. For the sixth cycle, Healdsburg's goal is 476 units. The city anticipates building 977 units, again exceeding goals in all income categories. Table 1 was provided to the Grand Jury by Healdsburg Housing staff.

Table 1: Healdsburg Housing Progress (2023-31 RHNA)

Metric	Extremely Low Income	Very Low Income	Low Income	Moderate Income	Above Moderate Income	Totals
RHNA Target	83	107	109	49	128	476
Total, Credits	54	174	161	75	513	977

See Appendix A for income range chart.

Rohnert Park

For the fifth cycle, Rohnert Park's RHNA goal was 899 new houses. It actually built 1,978, although the majority were above moderate income. Rohnert Park's sixth cycle RHNA goal is 1,580 units. Table 2, provided to the Grand Jury by Rohnert Park Housing staff, shows the city plans to build 2,834 units, again exceeding their RHNA goal.

Table 2: Rohnert Park Housing Progress (2023-31 RHNA)

Metric	Very Low Income	Low Income	Moderate Income	Above Moderate Income	Total
RHNA Target	399	230	265	686	1,580
Total Units (Credits + Sites)	375	208	128	2,123	2,834

This report will discuss the unique aspects of each city and the strategies each employed to build community will and secure the essential land and financing to make it a reality.

METHODOLOGY

The 2024-2025 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury conducted its investigation into affordable housing issues in the cities of Rohnert Park and Healdsburg. This inquiry was prompted by ongoing community concerns regarding the adequacy, availability, and planning of affordable housing in compliance with state mandates, particularly those related to the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA).

To understand the scope and nuances of affordable housing efforts in these two cities, the Grand Jury undertook the following activities:

- **Interviews:** The Grand Jury conducted confidential interviews with city officials and staff from the affordable housing departments of both Rohnert Park and Healdsburg. Members of the respective city councils were also interviewed to gain insight into local housing policy priorities and political considerations.
- **Media Review:** The Grand Jury reviewed reports and articles from local and regional mass media sources.
- **Housing Advocate Input:** Conversations were held with unaffiliated housing advocates and nonprofit representatives working within Sonoma County. These advocates provided perspectives on systemic barriers, funding limitations, and the lived experiences of residents impacted by the lack of affordable housing.
- **Document and Data Analysis:** The Grand Jury reviewed housing element updates submitted by each city, planning commission meeting records, and RHNA allocation data as provided by the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD). Additional online sources were used to verify state laws and regulatory frameworks governing local housing obligations, per the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG).

DISCUSSION

The following discussion focuses on the key components each city is utilizing to reach its goals. The strategies of the cities differ but ultimately result in exceeding their housing targets. The salient ingredients of each city's success are the depth of understanding of necessary resources and development of community will. The catalyst in both cases is a knowledgeable, dedicated staff.

The following sections of the discussion will focus on the individual facets of each city's comprehensive strategy to accomplish their goals. Examples from each city are shown.

1. Introduction: Key Components for Affordable Housing Development

The creation and preservation of affordable housing in urban and suburban environments necessitate a multi-pronged approach addressing systemic barriers and leveraging local assets. This section investigates how two Sonoma County cities, Healdsburg and Rohnert Park, have addressed four pivotal elements influencing affordable housing provision:

1. Growth Management and Land Acquisition
2. Entitlement Process
3. Financing
4. Leadership and Community Involvement

1.1 Growth Management and Land Acquisition Strategies

Effective urban planning requires cities to balance growth pressures with the imperative to acquire land suitable for affordable housing development in a cost-efficient manner. Both Healdsburg and Rohnert Park have instituted growth management strategies to regulate residential expansion.

Growth Management Ordinances and General Plans

Healdsburg's Measure M⁶, enacted in 2000, established limits on residential building permits within the City's urban growth boundary. Subsequent modifications via Measure P (2018)⁷ and Measure H (2020)⁸ aimed to increase affordable housing opportunities by adjusting these permit allocations. Conversely, Rohnert Park utilizes its General Plan, specific plan areas, and zoning ordinances as primary instruments for growth management, thereby facilitating orderly development aligned with regional housing needs assessments. The City monitors demographic trends, employment data, and commute patterns to inform development strategies and address workforce housing requirements.

Healdsburg: Adaptive Growth Management

Healdsburg's 2000 Growth Management Ordinance (GMO)⁹ restricted the City to an average issuance of 30 residential building permits annually (maximum 90 per triennium), a measure intended to preserve the City's perceived small-town character. In response to escalating housing affordability concerns, Measure P (2018) authorized an additional average of 50 annual permits for multi-family rental units, restricted to households earning up to 160% of the Area Median Income (AMI). Measure H (2020) subsequently expanded this allowance to include for-sale units. An attempt in 2024 to further modify the GMO, Measure O, proposed allowing multi-family housing along designated Healdsburg Avenue corridors to stimulate middle-income and workforce housing. This measure was not adopted by voters. Data from the Grand Jury's interviews suggests that voter concerns centered on potential dilution of downtown character and insufficient safeguards for community interests within the proposed legislation. Nevertheless, the legislative intent underlying Measure O remains a significant consideration for Healdsburg's housing leadership.

Rohnert Park: Urban Growth Boundaries and Exemptions

Rohnert Park adopted its Urban Growth Boundaries Act (Measure N¹⁰) in 2000 to demarcate areas for development and mitigate urban sprawl. The City's Growth Management Ordinance (#667)¹¹,

⁶<https://healdsburg.gov/AgendaCenter/ViewFile/Item/3147?fileID=24038>

⁷[https://ballotpedia.org/Healdsburg,_California,_Measure_P,_Additional_Housing_Permits_for_Rental_Units_\(November_2018\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Healdsburg,_California,_Measure_P,_Additional_Housing_Permits_for_Rental_Units_(November_2018))

⁸[https://ballotpedia.org/Healdsburg,_California,_Measure_H,_Income-Restricted_Housing_for_Rent_or_Sale_Ordinance_\(March_2020\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Healdsburg,_California,_Measure_H,_Income-Restricted_Housing_for_Rent_or_Sale_Ordinance_(March_2020))

⁹<http://www.ci.healdsburg.ca.us/DocumentCenter/View/766/Growth-Management-Ordinance-Policies-and-Procedures-PDF>

¹⁰<https://www.northbaybiz.com/2008/02/29/preserving-rohnert-parks-potential/>

¹¹https://rpcity.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=4&clip_id=358&meta_id=33318

established in 2001, aimed to align new housing development with infrastructure and public service capacities, stipulating a 1% annual population growth cap (approximately 225 new housing units per annum). Notably, this ordinance exempts specific housing categories, including affordable units for low- and very low-income households, accessory dwelling units (ADUs), model homes, mobile home park conversions, residential infill projects, and conversions of non-residential properties to residential use. Such legislative provisions indicate a pro-housing orientation within the electorate.

1.2 Land Acquisition Mechanisms

Municipalities employ diverse strategies for acquiring land suitable for affordable housing. These include the disposition of surplus lands, partnerships with community land trusts, and the formation of public-private partnerships. Along with direct land acquisition, cities develop incentive programs designed to encourage developers to integrate affordable units into larger, mixed-use projects. Within Sonoma County, prevalent strategies include the use of surplus land, land banking, and navigating the land entitlement process.

Surplus Land Utilization

Cities may sell or lease publicly owned land for affordable housing development, subject to compliance with California's Surplus Land Act (SLA)¹². The SLA was updated in August 2024 to further incentivize affordable housing through streamlined disposition processes. Key SLA provisions mandate:

- Formal declaration of land as surplus by local agencies at regular public meetings.
- Submission of annual surplus property inventory reports to HCD.
- Maintenance by HCD of a list of interested affordable housing developers known as "sponsors".

If land is not sold or leased to a sponsor, the public entity must record an Affordable Housing Covenant mandating at least 15% affordable units in any future project comprising 10 or more units.

Healdsburg Example: In 2003, Healdsburg's former Redevelopment Agency acquired a property at 155 Dry Creek Road for \$1.8 million that was designated for low to moderate-income housing. Following the surplus land process and securing an exemption, the city transferred the property to Burbank Housing¹³, a non-profit housing development corporation, for the nominal sum of \$1. An additional \$1.7 million in grants has been secured for construction, with Burbank Housing actively pursuing \$9.7 million in farmworker housing grants and tax credits.

Rohnert Park Example: Over a decade ago, Rohnert Park purchased a 30-acre parcel for \$12.5 million for a proposed downtown mixed-use development. The city, in collaboration with HCD, designated this parcel as surplus, formulated a detailed development plan incorporating 150,000 sq. ft. of retail space and 400 residential units (25% designated affordable). It subsequently selected a developer via a competitive bidding process.

Land Banking

Land banking involves the acquisition and holding of land by public or private entities for future development, often prioritized for affordable housing or community revitalization. This strategy may encompass undeveloped, vacant, or blighted properties.

Healdsburg Example: The city is currently exploring the establishment of a Housing Trust Fund to support land banking for future affordable housing initiatives. This fund may evolve into a Housing

¹² <http://www.hcd.ca.gov/planning-and-community-development/public-lands-affordable-housing-development>

¹³ <https://burbankhousing.org/>

Land Trust, with the primary objective of securing land for long-term affordability, operating independently but in alignment with city housing goals.

Rohnert Park Example: The aforementioned acquisition of the 30-acre downtown parcel for \$12.5 million, using city funds, also exemplifies land banking for future mixed-use development.

2. The Entitlement Process

A significant portion of Sonoma County's undeveloped land requires regulatory entitlements prior to residential or other forms of development. This process entails adherence to zoning regulations, land use policies, environmental review (California Environmental Quality Act), and public input, culminating in the issuance of necessary permits and approvals.

Both Healdsburg and Rohnert Park have implemented measures to streamline their entitlement processes to meet sixth Cycle Housing Element objectives. These include offering early developer feedback and utilizing Development Agreements (DAs) for large-scale projects. DAs are negotiated contracts specifying terms for land use, public benefits, project timelines, and vesting rights, providing developers with regulatory certainty.

Healdsburg Example: The city provides no-cost pre-application meetings, offers fast-track processing for ADUs and affordable housing projects, and has established formal written pre-application procedures. Furthermore, Healdsburg prepares Program Environmental Impact Reports (EIRs) to reduce environmental review costs and timelines for projects covered under these programmatic assessments. The city actively applies state housing laws.

Rohnert Park Example: The city offers optional pre-application meetings with multidisciplinary staff to provide early project feedback. Upon formal application submission, projects undergo a structured review process, typically involving three-week cycles for staff feedback. Larger multifamily projects generally necessitate Site Plan and Architectural Review, a process taking approximately 90 days from application completeness to approval. While most projects receive administrative approval, Planning Commission review may be required under specific circumstances.

3. Financing Affordable Housing

Financing constitutes a critical, albeit complex, component of new housing development. A comprehensive delineation of the intricate and innovative financing strategies that influence the scope and viability of affordable housing projects is beyond the purview of this report. This section, therefore, offers only a foundational overview. Affordable housing finance typically necessitates a confluence of public funding, private investment, and strategic partnerships.

The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC)¹⁴ program serves as the principal federal instrument supporting affordable rental housing, incentivizing developers through Federal tax credits. Municipalities augment these efforts by offering local incentives such as land donations, impact fee waivers, and density bonuses.

"Inclusionary housing" has emerged as a significant mechanism for affordable housing production in Sonoma County. As housing valuations increase, cities incentivize developers and landowners by allowing higher-value property development contingent upon the inclusion of affordable units. A typical inclusionary housing program might mandate that 10-30% of new residential units be sold or rented to

¹⁴ [http://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RS22389#:~:text=The%20low-income%20housing%20tax%20credit%20\(LIHTC\)%20program%20is,from%2050%25%20to%2025%25](http://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RS22389#:~:text=The%20low-income%20housing%20tax%20credit%20(LIHTC)%20program%20is,from%2050%25%20to%2025%25;);

lower-income households. California state policy empowers municipalities to implement such local inclusionary policies.

Most municipalities require deed restrictions for a minimum of 45 years for for-sale projects and 55 years for rental projects on units approved under inclusionary housing programs that receive city financial assistance or state housing density bonuses. These restrictions ensure long-term affordability for targeted income groups and dictate terms concerning sale, rent controls, and property aesthetics. Cities also employ other financing tools, including fee waivers, density bonuses, public-private partnerships, and state funding allocations.

3.1 City-Specific Financing Examples

Healdsburg: A Multi-Tiered Approach

Healdsburg has advanced its affordable housing initiatives through a combination of inclusionary housing mandates, state funding, and targeted special taxes.

Inclusionary Housing: Healdsburg requires 20% of residential units to be affordable. Through negotiated Development Agreements (DA), the city has secured affordable housing units in significant developments such as the Mill District, North Village, Montage, and Hotel Trio. A notable provision in Healdsburg's DAs requires developers to obtain "certificates of occupancy" for affordable housing units prior to constructing market-rate units.

Project & Unit Allocation:

- Mill District: 42 units (The Randall), 30 Middle Income Units
- Hotel Trio: 37 Unit Citrine Apartments (Low-to-Moderate Income)
- North Village: 53 Very Low-Low Income, 27 Middle Income
- Montage: 110 Affordable Units

State Funding: In August 2024, Healdsburg secured \$21.1 million in state funding via the Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities (AHSC) program for Phase 1 of the Saggio Hills development. This phase, targeting households earning between 16–60% of area median income (AMI), will deliver 48 affordable rental units within a larger 118-unit project. The funds will support the construction of these 48 units, a 3,000-square-foot community building, and essential infrastructure and transportation improvements with broader community benefits. Notably, Saggio Hills achieved the highest score in the Rural Innovation Project Area (RIPA),¹⁵ reflecting strong alignment with state objectives for greenhouse gas emission reduction. The development is projected to reduce 3,880 metric tons of CO₂ equivalent over its lifespan.

Funding Allocation:

- \$15.3 million: Housing development (48 affordable rental units, associated infrastructure).
- \$5.2 million: Public works and transportation (Healdsburg Shuttle expansion with ZEV, multi-use trails, sidewalk enhancements, new bus shelters, CalVans vanpools).
- \$605,750: Community programs (transit passes, legal aid, workforce development, improved internet access).

¹⁵ https://sgc.ca.gov/grant-programs/ahsc/docs/20250325-AHSC_R9_Program_Overview_PDF_ADA.pdf

Special Taxes: The Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT), levied on lodging establishments, was increased by Healdsburg voters via [Measure S¹⁶](https://ballotpedia.org/Healdsburg,_California,_Hotel_Tax_Adjustment_Measure_S_(November_2016)) in 2016. This authorized a 2% increase, raising the maximum rate from 12% to 14%, generating approximately \$1.5 million annually, with all additional revenue restricted to supporting affordable housing services and programs.

Rohnert Park: Diverse Financial Instruments

Rohnert Park has employed inclusionary housing, state funding, density bonuses, and essential housing bond financing to bolster its affordable housing efforts.

Inclusionary Housing: Rohnert Park is undergoing significant residential growth. During the sixth housing cycle, the city anticipates the construction of 2,834 new housing units, of which 587 are projected for very low- and low-income households, and 128 for moderate-income households. Rohnert Park's inclusionary housing policies require that all new developments of 50 units or more include 15% affordable housing units. Generally, the city requires market-rate developers to donate land to non-profit housing developers, who then secure financing (e.g., LIHTCs) for affordable unit construction. These completed projects are typically owned and managed by the non-profit entities. Development agreements may stipulate various arrangements for land dedication and financing, sometimes requiring certificates of occupancy for affordable units before market-rate construction can proceed. For instance, in the Willow Glen subdivision, the developer partnered with Burbank Housing for the construction of 38 low-income rental units, sharing construction and financing responsibilities, and also built affordable duet units sold via the Sonoma Land Trust.

State Funding: In August 2024, Rohnert Park secured \$670,000 through the state's Prohousing Incentive Program (PIP). These funds are designated for predevelopment activities for affordable housing units in downtown Rohnert Park.

Density Bonus: Density bonus programs, mandated by California law, incentivize developers to include affordable units by permitting increased project density beyond standard zoning regulations. While Rohnert Park currently has a density bonus program, the city is conducting a feasibility study for a Supplemental Density Bonus Program. This study will examine provisions such as deeper affordability levels, a higher proportion of affordable units, units for individuals exiting homelessness, and universal design standards. The study is slated for completion by July 2026, with recommendations to be presented to the Planning Commission and City Council by year-end 2026, potentially leading to municipal code adoption within six months thereafter.

Essential Housing Bond Financing: Rohnert Park is a member of the California Statewide Communities Development Authority (CSCDA), a Joint Powers Authority (JPA). CSCDA administers the Workforce Housing Program, issuing tax-exempt governmental purpose bonds to acquire existing market-rate apartment buildings and convert them to rent-restricted housing for lower- and moderate-income households. The city has authorized the JPA to issue approximately \$191,264,100 in bonds. This entails foregoing an estimated \$337,346 in annual property tax revenue and committing staff resources (200 hours for program establishment and 200 hours per acquisition project). This initiative is projected to deliver at least 222 affordable housing units (99 very-low-income, 57 low-income, 66 moderate-income). The city is also committed to a 2027 evaluation of housing production, with provisions for designating additional sites if RHNA obligations are not met.

¹⁶ [https://ballotpedia.org/Healdsburg,_California,_Hotel_Tax_Adjustment_Measure_S_\(November_2016\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Healdsburg,_California,_Hotel_Tax_Adjustment_Measure_S_(November_2016))

4. Leadership and Community Involvement

Leadership Dynamics: For the purposes of this analysis, leadership encompasses the city councils and dedicated housing staff. A salient finding is the recognition by leadership in both municipalities that sustainable community development is untenable if it displaces the working-class populations—including farmworkers, caregivers, teachers, and service workers—who form the socio-economic bedrock of the region. City councils in both Healdsburg and Rohnert Park have demonstrated a consistent alignment on the concept of affordable housing as a core, nonpartisan community priority, thus creating a political foundation conducive to pursuing ambitious initiatives. This commitment is manifested through strategic planning, funding allocations, and policy reforms, supported by knowledgeable and empowered staff.

The collaboration between housing staff and city councils is instrumental to the success of the affordable housing effort. Their efforts are focused on strategic planning, developing regulatory frameworks, resource allocation, and community engagement.

Healdsburg: Structured Collaboration

Recently, the Healdsburg City Council approved the establishment of a formal Housing Department and authorized a new position dedicated to implementing its housing strategy. Key collaborative activities include:

- Strategic Planning: Housing staff and the City Council collaboratively develop affordable housing targets, considering market conditions, infrastructure capacity, community service needs, and resource availability.
- Policy Development and Implementation: The City Council enacts ordinances such as inclusionary zoning policies, while housing staff ensure effective implementation and monitor ongoing compliance.
- Resource Allocation: The City Council actively engages in generating financial resources and supports viable affordable housing initiatives.
- Public-Private Partnerships: Housing staff engage with developers and non-profit organizations to leverage resources and expertise, with City Council support in negotiating agreements aligned with affordable housing objectives.

Rohnert Park: Integrated Policy-Making

Rohnert Park's collaborative approach involves:

- Collaborative Policy-Making: The City Council and housing staff jointly create and refine policies, such as density bonuses and streamlined approval processes, to facilitate affordable housing development, and continually review policies to reflect evolving needs.
- Project Evaluation and Approval: Housing staff evaluate housing proposals for viability and goal alignment, referring meritorious projects to the City Council for review, amendment, or approval, ensuring conformity with community priorities.
- Incentive Programs: Housing staff design, implement, and manage incentive programs (e.g., reduced fees, infrastructure support), which, upon Council approval, encourage development.
- Regular Reporting and Assessment: Housing staff monitor projects and provide ongoing updates to the City Council on successes and failures, ensuring policies remain current.

- **Public Engagement Initiatives:** Both entities prioritize public involvement through transparent communication and public hearings, fostering a collaborative environment. This close partnership between municipal staff and elected officials is essential for crafting and implementing effective, integrated, and well-supported affordable housing strategies.

5. Community Involvement and the "Community Will"

While legally mandated community review is a component of every proposed housing project, the successful realization of affordable housing objectives usually hinges on a proactive "community will." This implies a recognized and enthusiastically embraced need for housing by community stakeholders, driven by motivations ranging from expanding the tax base to providing housing for essential service workers. The Spanish term "chispa," or "spark," aptly describes a driving force observed in both Healdsburg and Rohnert Park, crucial for fostering a proactive, "yes in my backyard" (YIMBY) stance.

Healdsburg: Catalyzing Engagement

Healdsburg's increasing affluence has exacerbated the problem of housing affordability for long-term residents, families, and service industry workers, a situation compounded by state-mandated housing goals. The "spark" in Healdsburg was significantly fanned by the Housing Element Working Group (HEWG), a diverse nine-person body including representatives from the business community, individuals with lived experience of homelessness, non-profits, renters, the planning commission, faith-based organizations, and the community at large. The HEWG, in conjunction with housing staff, developed the roadmap for the 6th cycle Housing Element. Through their analysis and community surveys, the Growth Management Ordinance (GMO) was identified as the primary governmental constraint on development, while high construction costs (land, materials, labor) were noted as the principal non-governmental constraints.

The following from Healdsburg's "Housing Element" and from the Grand Jury's interviews illustrate the city's outreach, philosophy, and culture:

- A community outreach interview captured the sentiment: "Aquí en Healdsburg la renta es muy caro... Tres o más personas tienen que vivir juntos para cubrir la renta." (English: "Here in Healdsburg, the rent is very expensive... Three or more people need to live together to cover the rent.")
- A comment by an HEWG member highlighted the city's partnership with Reach for Home, a non-profit addressing homelessness, emphasizing a personalized approach: "In Healdsburg, they know those experiencing homelessness by name, not numbers..."
- Another HEWG committee member underscored the necessity of trust between the community, local legislature, and developers, alongside a clear, transparent plan for housing development.

This holistic, community-centric approach has yielded significant outcomes:

- Increasing deed-restricted affordable housing to over 10% of total housing stock in eight years.
- Passage of Measure S, allocating 2% of TOT revenue (approx. \$1.5M annually) to affordable housing.
- Passage of Measures P and H, allowing middle-income deed-restricted housing outside GMO constraints, allowing middle-income deed-restricted housing outside GMO constraints.
- Negotiating workforce housing inclusion in hotel developments.

- Preserving 39 units of older, lower rent housing (often referred to as naturally occurring) affordable housing and establishing 10 units for Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), a term used to combine long-term affordable housing with supportive services to help individuals, particularly those experiencing chronic homelessness, achieve housing stability.
- Planning 168 affordable units on two city-owned sites.
- Developing a Navigation Center providing homes for 11 formerly homeless families/individuals.
- Securing over \$7 million in Project Homekey¹⁷ funding for an interim housing program.
- Establishing a formal Housing Department and new staff positions.

Healdsburg's coordinated efforts have exceeded fifth Cycle Housing Element goals and established a foundation for the sixth Cycle, driven by this "spark" of community will.

Rohnert Park: Proactive Outreach and Planning

Rohnert Park has emerged as a regional leader, surpassing its fifth Cycle Housing Element goal (1,794 units) and positioning itself to exceed the sixth cycle requirement (1,580 units, 2023–2031). This achievement reflects a strong community commitment. Rohnert Park's demographic—younger and less affluent than the county average—faces significant rental cost burdens. In response, City leadership, including a supportive mayor and city council, empowered housing staff to conduct broad public engagement and community-based planning.

Key outreach elements included:

- A Housing Element¹⁸ webpage attracting over 1,200 email subscribers.
- A bilingual housing needs survey (Dec 2021) with 1,344 responses.
- Five public workshops engaging over 30 stakeholders, including the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria.
- Citywide newsletter distribution and targeted social media campaigns.
- Door-to-door outreach in Spanish-speaking communities, distributing over 1,000 door hangers with multilingual QR-coded survey access.
- Repeated outreach in 2023 for feedback on the draft Housing Element.
- A community-wide survey offering incentives generated over 1,500 comments, indicating strong public interest in addressing affordability, homelessness, and infrastructure related to new housing.

This consistent, multilingual, and inclusive approach fostered an informed and supportive resident base, reflecting a proactive "community will" instrumental in advancing Rohnert Park's affordable housing objectives.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of Healdsburg and Rohnert Park demonstrate that addressing affordable housing challenges requires a synergistic combination of adaptive growth management, strategic land acquisition, streamlined entitlement processes, diverse financing mechanisms, and robust leadership,

¹⁷ www.hcd.ca.gov/grants-and-funding/homekey

¹⁸ http://www.rpcity.org/city_hall/departments/development_services/housing/housing_element_2023-2031x

along with deep community involvement. While specific instruments and approaches may vary based on local contexts, the underlying commitment to proactive planning and collaborative engagement appears to be a crucial determinant of success in expanding affordable housing opportunities. The Grand Jury concluded that the key ingredient of this collaborative engagement is community will, which exists within Healdsburg and Rohnert Park and should be fostered throughout the county.

The Grand Jury believes that cities, unincorporated municipalities and the County can learn from each other by meeting periodically, sharing experiences and identifying best practices. Rohnert Park and Healdsburg housing staff, community members and city leadership generously shared their successes and challenges with the Civil Grand Jury, and we strongly encourage the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, housing staff, city mayors, city council members, grassroots representatives, and housing advocates throughout Sonoma County to meet with and learn from each other.

FINDINGS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury determined that:

- F1. Adaptive growth management is crucial but faces limits: Both Healdsburg (Measures P & H) and Rohnert Park (exemptions for affordable housing within its GMO) have actively adapted their growth management ordinances to facilitate affordable housing. However, community concerns regarding local character and a perceived lack of safeguards can limit further expansions, as evidenced by the failure of Healdsburg's Measure O.
- F2. Strategic use of public land is a key lever: Both municipalities used land banking (e.g., Healdsburg's 155 Dry Creek Road, Rohnert Park's 30-acre downtown parcel) and then went through the surplus property process to make sites available for affordable housing development.
- F3. A diverse portfolio of financing mechanisms is employed: Cities do not rely on a single funding source. Healdsburg utilizes inclusionary housing, significant state grants (e.g., \$21.1 million AHSC for Saggio Hills), and dedicated local revenue from special taxes (Measure S TOT). Rohnert Park also uses inclusionary housing, state pro-housing incentives, density bonuses, and innovative bond financing through the CSCDA Workforce Housing Program.
- F4. Streamlined entitlement processes expedite development: Both Healdsburg (no-cost pre-application meetings, fast-tracking) and Rohnert Park (optional pre-application meetings, structured review cycles) have implemented measures to streamline their entitlement processes, offering early feedback and utilizing Development Agreements (DAs) to provide certainty for developers of affordable housing.
- F5. Aligned political leadership and empowered staff are foundational: The success in both cities is partly attributed to city councils that view affordable housing as a nonpartisan, moral imperative, coupled with knowledgeable and empowered housing staff who can effectively implement strategic plans, policy reforms, and resource allocation. Healdsburg even established a dedicated Housing Department.
- F6. Proactive and inclusive community engagement cultivates "community will": Both cities demonstrated that extensive, tailored community involvement—such as Healdsburg's diverse Housing Element Working Group (HEWG) and Rohnert Park's broad, multilingual outreach and surveys—is essential for building public understanding and the "community will" (or "chispa") needed to support and overcome opposition to affordable housing projects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. By January 30, 2026, Healdsburg and Rohnert Park will each create an ongoing community engagement plan, which includes multilingual community outreach and education, surveys, public workshops, and dedicated working groups.
- R2. By January 30, 2026, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (BOS) and each of the nine city councils will agree to create an ongoing Affordable Housing Collaborative, which includes jurisdiction leaders, community members, grass roots organizations and housing advocates, who will share both positive and negative experiences and identify “best practices.”

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code §§ 933 and 933.05, the Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

- F1-6. City Councils of Healdsburg and Rohnert Park.
- R1. City Councils of Healdsburg and Rohnert Park.
- R2. Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

INVITED RESPONSES

- R2: Mayor, Cloverdale; Mayor, Cotati; Mayor, Petaluma; Mayor, Santa Rosa; Mayor, Sebastopol; Mayor, Sonoma.

The governing bodies indicated above should be aware that their comments and responses must be conducted subject to the notice, agenda and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.

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State of California. California Government Code. Sections relevant to Housing Elements (e.g., Article 10.6, § 65580 et seq.), Density Bonus Law (e.g., § 65915 et seq.), and other housing legislation mentioned (SB 9, SB 35, SB 330, AB 2162, Government Code Section 65583.1(c)).

Sonoma County Civic Grand Jury (2022-2023). "Affordable Housing: Past, Present, and Future"

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.

APPENDIX

[Income Limits for Affordable Housing in Sonoma County \(2025\)](#)¹⁹ There are multiple definitions of low-income limits for affordable housing. The above link provides charts for state programs and for federal programs for Sonoma County. All limits are based on the percentage of Area Median Income and Household size. The charts below provide income limits and rent limits for both state and federal programs.

State and Local Programs Income Limits*

The income limits below apply to the following programs: Sonoma County Density Bonus, Sonoma County Second Dwelling Unit, County Fund for Housing, California Redevelopment Law

These Income Limits apply only to Sonoma County Community Development Commission assisted units. They are **not** to be used as a guide for programs regulated by any agency other than the Sonoma County Community Development Commission. Please contact staff with any questions or concerns.

These Income Limits do not apply to CDBG, HOME or NSP restricted units. Please refer to separate schedule for these units which are regulated by federal income limits set annually by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. *Effective June 1, 2025*

PERSONS IN HOUSEHOLD	(15% AREA MEDIAN INCOME) ACUTELY LOW INCOME	EXTREMELY LOW INCOME	(50% AREA MEDIAN INCOME) VERY LOW INCOME	60% AREA MEDIAN INCOME	(80% AREA MEDIAN INCOME) LOW INCOME	(100% AREA MEDIAN INCOME) MEDIAN INCOME	(120% AREA MEDIAN INCOME) MODERATE INCOME
1	\$13,850	\$31,750	\$52,850	\$63,420	\$84,650	\$92,400	\$110,900
2	15,850	36,250	60,400	72,480	96,750	105,600	126,700
3	17,800	40,800	67,950	81,540	108,850	118,800	142,550
4	19,800	45,300	75,500	90,600	120,900	132,000	158,400
5	21,400	48,950	81,550	97,860	130,600	142,550	171,050
6	22,950	52,550	87,600	105,120	140,250	153,100	183,750
7	24,550	56,200	93,650	112,380	149,950	163,700	196,400
8	26,150	59,800	99,700	119,640	159,600	174,250	209,100

*The California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) has made its final decision to implement a new State Income Limit Hold Harmless (HH) Policy beginning 2013.

¹⁹ <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/incomelimits#local>

Maximum Rent Limits : Uses Formula in California Health & Safety Code 50052.5 & 50053

UNIT SIZE PERSONS IN HOUSEHOLD (MINIMUM - MAXIMUM)	EXTREMELY LOW INCOME RENT LIMIT	VERY LOW INCOME RENT LIMIT	LOW INCOME RENT LIMIT	Low Income 80% Rent Limit
Studio (1-2)	\$794	\$1,321	\$1,586	\$2,116
1 Bedroom (1-4)	906	1,510	1,812	2,419
2 Bedroom (2-6)	1020	1,699	2,039	2,721
3 Bedroom (3-8)	1133	1,888	2,265	3,023
4 Bedroom (4-10)	1224	2,039	2,447	3,265

Utility Allowance: Subtract from the maximum rent the approved utility allowance for any utilities that the tenant pays in addition to the rent. Confirm the appropriate utility allowance with the Sonoma County Community Development Commission.

Assumption: The rents are computed based on the income limits for an assumed household size equal to the number of bedrooms in the unit plus one person. For example, the rents for a three-bedroom unit are based upon the income limits for a four-person household.

Federal Programs Income Limits: The income limits below apply to the following programs: Home Investment Partnerships Program (HOME), Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG), Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP), and Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG). These income limits apply only to Sonoma County Community Development Commission assisted units. They are NOT to be used as a guide for programs regulated by any agency other than the Sonoma County Community Development Commission.

These Income Limits do not apply to state or locally regulated programs (Density Bonus, Second Dwelling Unit, County Fund for Housing, California Redevelopment Law). These units are regulated by state income limits set annually by the California Department of Housing and Community Development.

Area Median Income for a 4-person household: \$128,100

PERSONS IN HOUSEHOLD	30% AREA MEDIAN INCOME	VERY LOW INCOME (50% AMI) HOME LOW	60% AREA MEDIAN INCOME	LOW INCOME (80% AMI) HOME HIGH
1	\$31,750	\$52,850	\$63,420	\$84,650
2	36,250	60,400	72,480	96,750
3	40,800	67,950	81,540	108,850
4	45,300	75,500	90,600	120,900
5	48,950	81,550	97,860	130,600
6	52,550	87,600	105,120	140,250
7	56,200	93,650	112,380	149,950
8	59,800	99,700	119,640	159,600

Rent Limits: Maximum rent limits for all HOME, CDBG, and NSP Units as set by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

RENT LEVEL	STUDIO	1 BEDROOM	2 BEDROOM	3 BEDROOM	4 BEDROOM
HOME Low (Very Low-Income - 50%)	\$1,321	\$1,415	\$1,698	\$1,963	\$2,190
HOME High (Low Income - 65%)	\$1,699	\$1,821	\$2,187	\$2,519	\$2,790