

County of Santa Barbara Planning and Development Department

Housing Simulations Bolster the 2023-2031 Housing Element Update Rezone Process

Overview: The County's easy-to-use online housing simulations increased public participation and simplified complex planning concepts during the 2023-2031 Housing Element Update (HEU) rezone process.

Challenge: California is experiencing a severe and prolonged housing crisis. The County's sixth-cycle Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) totaled 5,664 units, almost 10 times larger than its fifth-cycle RHNA. State law mandated that the County demonstrate it had sufficient land zoned to meet its RHNA. An inventory revealed a shortfall of 1,657 units for lower- and moderate-income households and, therefore, state law required that the County select and rezone sites (i.e., change allowed land use and/or increase density) to increase the housing supply. County planners identified 36 potential rezone sites, more sites than necessary to give County decision-makers flexibility in choosing sites. However, selecting sufficient rezone sites to meet the County's RHNA for all income levels required specialized maps and complex calculations for two state-identified sub-regions of the county – North County and the South Coast. In addition, selecting rezone sites was controversial and demanded significant public input, which was a challenge as few people attended the County's initial public meetings.

Solution: To engage stakeholders in the rezone process, the County worked with a public policy consulting firm, Balancing Act, to develop housing simulations for the North County and the South Coast. The simulations allowed users to select or deselect potential rezone sites using interactive maps. The simulations calculated the resulting number of potential housing units by income level based on the sites selected. They also featured a drop-down menu of the potential rezone sites and their key features. Once users selected sufficient sites to meet the County's RHNA, the simulations would inform users that they had created a "housing plan" which they could submit to County planners and decision-makers. The County launched the simulations on the HEU webpage in October, 2023. By asking users to create a custom housing plan that met the RHNA, the simulations put users in a decision-maker role and encouraged them to consider the trade-offs in selecting various potential rezone sites. For example, the simulations showed users they may need to choose between preserving agricultural lands and existing recreation facilities (e.g., golf course). This exercise helped the public to understand the complexities of the RHNA and advocate for or against particular potential rezone sites. County planners also used the housing simulations to present maps of the potential rezone sites and perform and display real-time calculations as decision-makers

selected/deselected combinations of potential rezone sites during four rezone adoption hearings in winter/spring 2024.

Innovation: The County and Balancing Act took an innovative approach to modifying Balancing Act's simulation software, which was designed for fiscal planning. Together, the County and Balancing Act reimagined and transformed the budget balancing tool into a first-of-its-kind RHNA balancing tool. The County designed new features that were executed by Balancing Act and displayed on the County's webpage, including: an interactive map of each county sub-region; color-coded parcels to distinguish different types of sites; and a guided tour that showed users how to navigate the simulations. These user-friendly additions simplified complex planning concepts and empowered users to make their own housing plan that met the County's RHNA.

Results: Housing simulation's success was threefold: (1) Enhanced transparency and understanding of the rezone process; (2) Garnered significant and meaningful public participation – 7,398 stakeholders viewed the housing simulations and 250 stakeholders submitted housing plans, the results of which were presented to decision-makers; and (3) Performed crucial calculations and provided a visual narrative during the four rezone adoption hearings.

Replicability: Each of California's 58 counties and 482 cities must update its Housing Element every five or eight years. The housing simulation's adaptability and user-friendly interface make it ideal for statewide implementation, promoting a more inclusive and democratic planning process. Moreover, its crucial role in helping to address a RHNA shortfall exemplifies its capacity to help jurisdictions meet their housing goals efficiently and effectively, aligning with state mandates and local needs.

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Additional Materials:

Introductory video: [Introduction to Balancing Act on Vimeo](#)

North County housing simulation: <https://sbco.abalancingact.com/north-county>

South Coast housing simulation: <https://sbco.abalancingact.com/south-coast>