



# **Attitudes and Perceptions of Citizens Pertaining to Housing Insecurity, Affordable Housing, Housing Development & Shelters in the City of Westbrook, Maine**

Saint Joseph's College of Maine in partnership with  
The Westbrook Community Housing Coalition

## **Research Report Prepared by**

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## Background

In September of 2023, Dr. Dale Brooker and the LS 300 Class at Saint Joseph's College of Maine in partnership with the Westbrook Community Housing Coalition worked collectively to get a better understanding of the fears, challenges and opposition that exist in the Westbrook community around commercial development, affordable housing, and shelters. As the City looks to finish executing their Comprehensive Plan, increase the housing supply and promote a robust and flourishing downtown, there was a desire to get a better understanding of what concerns, fears, etc. that the citizens of Westbrook have around supporting new development. There has been opposition in many neighborhoods as developers look to add apartment buildings, opposition downtown against utilizing parking lots as mixed use opportunities, and even opposition to anything that is not affordable housing. This led to the development and deployment of a survey instrument to gain insights on the attitudes and perception of citizens within the City of Westbrook.

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## Issues Related to Housing Insecurity

The State of Maine Housing Production Needs Study highlights the shortage of housing in the State of Maine with 80,000 homes being needed over the next seven years alone. The research noted that there are several factors related to housing supply, affordability and development. While the shortage of housing is certainly at issue within the state, the key issue of affordability is only one element when it comes to fully understanding housing insecurity in local communities. The need to be housing secure is tied closely to rent prices, age, number of people in the household and various economic factors.

## Issues Related to Housing Development & Affordable Housing

Across the State of Maine, there is a need for more housing to be developed and to make it more affordable for Mainers. This holds true in the City of Westbrook where this need is partially being met with recent news of a 186-unit mixed-income housing community near downtown Westbrook,



offering workforce, 55-plus, and market-rate homes for rent. However, housing development in other areas of the city are being contested with various proposals focusing on balancing downtown development needs that serve businesses with the need for more affordable housing. In response to the ongoing challenges associated with housing development and affordability, the City Council of Westbrook has created a committee focused on economic development and housing.

## Issues Related to Shelters

The City of Portland recently positioned its newest shelter close to the City of Westbrook on Riverside Street. This shelter along with the growing need for many homeless people in the greater Portland area to have a place to be secure prompted the City of Westbrook to consider looking at ordinances that may allow for emergency shelters to be established and run within the city limits. Current zoning within the City of Westbrook does allow for Women's shelters and supportive housing but currently does not allow for emergency shelters to exist. In September of 2023, it was estimated that there were over 100 unhoused children in the City of Westbrook's school system.

## Research Design

A series of questions were designed to help better understand the attitudes and concerns of the citizens of Westbrook, Maine with respect to housing insecurity, housing development and shelters. Other open ended questions gauged various general concerns about other issues related to housing and shelters. Demographic information was captured with respect to how long these citizens had lived in Westbrook, whether they rented or owned their homes, their household income and how much they paid in rent or for their mortgage.

The questions were organized and formatted into a Google Form which generated a QR code. The QR code was shared with citizens by way of social media including Facebook and LinkedIn. The Google Form was clear in that the information provided would be kept confidential, that not every question needed to be answered and that completion of any or all of the questions would acknowledge consent on the part of the citizen.



## Summary of Findings

### Demographics

The average age of citizens filling out the survey was 44 years of age. Of those responding, the average time of living within Westbrook was just over sixteen (16.25 years). For each of those responding to the question with regard to the number of people within the household, there was an average of 2.9 people in each household.

Over eighty percent (82.9%) of citizens felt as though their current house fits their needs. Furthermore, 81.7% of the citizens own their current living space. Most people own a home that they feel fits their needs. Of the 18% that do not currently own, only 6.8% of them indicated that they plan on owning in the future. For the 18% that rent, the average rental rate was \$1827.30, with a range from \$900-\$3000. Of those responding, 80% indicated that their rent or house payment was “reasonable”. Citizens were asked whether or not they would likely leave Westbrook in the future and of those who responded, 79% indicated that they had not thought about leaving.

### Housing Insecurity

Citizens were asked about their awareness related to the housing insecurity taking place in the greater Portland area as well if they felt enough was being done to address it. Of those responding, a significant number (over 85%) of citizens acknowledged that they were significantly or completely aware of this particular issue. Citizens of Westbrook were directly asked as to whether or not they thought about leaving Westbrook due to housing costs (rent or housing prices). Over 25% of those responding indicated that they are in fact considering leaving due to this reason.

A question was also used to assess whether or not citizens felt as though the City was doing enough to address housing insecurity. Over half of those responding (53%) indicated that they felt there was not enough being done to address housing insecurity, while 21% were unsure or did not know enough to answer the question. Of those responding, 26% had noted they did feel as though the City was doing enough in addressing the issue.



### Key themes:

- Need for more affordable housing: This was the most commonly cited concern, with many respondents highlighting the lack of affordable housing options for both low-income individuals and working families.
- State and regional action: Several citizens suggested that the issue of housing insecurity requires action beyond the local level, urging state and regional governments to take responsibility.
- NIMBYism: Some expressed opposition to new housing developments, citing concerns about overcrowding, traffic, and the impact on local businesses.
- Praise for Westbrook's efforts: While many felt that more could be done, some acknowledged the efforts already being made by Westbrook, particularly compared to other communities in Maine.
- Lack of awareness: Several citizens admitted to not knowing enough about the issue or the specific actions being taken to address it.

### Specific perspectives:

- Concerns about affordability: A few citizens expressed the difficulty of affording rent in Westbrook, even with a full-time job.
- Need for diverse housing options: The need for more than just affordable housing was highlighted, with suggestions for transitional housing, workforce housing, and smaller-scale housing units.
- Supportive services: Some citizens pointed to the need for additional support services to help individuals overcome homelessness and achieve long-term housing stability.
- Mental health and addiction concerns: Several citizens acknowledged the role of mental health and addiction in contributing to housing insecurity.
- Focus on temporary housing: While some called for more permanent solutions, others emphasized the need for temporary housing options for those experiencing homelessness.



## Housing Development & Affordability

Citizens were asked about their support for building more affordable housing units in Westbrook. Over eighty percent (83.1%) of those responding indicated that they were in favor of more affordable housing development. The follow up question to this inquired as to whether or not they were supportive of affordable housing in their own neighborhoods. Those in favor then dipped to about 73% of citizens being in support of affordable housing units being placed in their current neighborhood.

A question was then used to assess whether or not citizens felt the City of Westbrook was doing enough to manage housing development. A majority of those citizens responding to the question (58%) were of the opinion that the city was not doing enough, while 42% indicated that the city was in fact doing enough.

Open ended questions were designed to understand issues related to both housing development and housing affordability within the City of Westbrook. The open ended responses to questions posed to citizen reveal several recurring themes:

### Concerns about affordability:

- Unaffordability of new housing: Many citizens expressed concern that new housing developments are unaffordable for middle and lower-income earners.
- Need for diverse housing options: Some citizens called for a wider variety of housing options, including apartments, condos, and mixed-income developments, to meet the needs of different income levels and household sizes.
- Impact on existing residents: Some worried that rising rents and property values will displace existing residents and make it difficult for them to stay in Westbrook.



#### Concerns about sprawl and infrastructure:

- Overdevelopment: There were citizens that indicated Westbrook is being overdeveloped and that there is a lack of open space and green areas.
- Traffic and parking: Concerns were expressed about increased traffic congestion and limited parking availability as a result of new development.
- School overcrowding: There were citizens that expressed worry that new development would lead to overcrowded schools and inadequate resources.

#### Concerns about the planning process:

- Lack of transparency and communication: Several citizens felt that the city is not transparent about its development plans and does not adequately communicate with residents.
- Lack of community input: There were some citizens who felt that their voices were not being heard and that they were not involved in the planning process.
- NIMBYism: Others believed that some citizens are opposed to development for selfish reasons and are not considering the needs of the broader community.

#### Desire for a balanced approach:

- Need for affordable housing: Citizens recognized the need for more affordable housing options, but they also wanted to ensure that development is done responsibly and in a way that benefits the entire community.
- Focus on walkable neighborhoods and green space: There were some citizens that called for the development of walkable neighborhoods with easy access to public transportation, green space, and other amenities.
- Long-term planning: Citizens urged the city to develop a long-term vision for the future of Westbrook that addresses housing needs while also protecting the environment and preserving the character of the community.



#### Other concerns:

- Impact of development on schools: Concerns were raised about the ability of schools to accommodate the influx of new students.
- Development on public land: There were some citizens who opposed the use of public land for housing development.
- Focus on business needs: A few citizens felt that the city focuses too much on the needs of businesses and not enough on the needs of residents.
- Need for a sliding scale for housing costs: There were some citizens who suggested a sliding scale for housing costs to ensure affordability for a wider range of income levels.
- Need for diverse architectural styles: A few citizens expressed concern that new developments lack aesthetic appeal and do not reflect the character of Westbrook.

#### Positive perspectives:

- Support for development: A few citizens supported development and believed it is necessary to meet the housing needs of a growing population.
- Acknowledgement of the housing crisis: Citizens recognized that Westbrook is facing a housing crisis and that the city needs to take action to address it.
- Support for affordable housing: A few citizens expressed support for the development of affordable housing options.
- Call for better communication and planning: There were some citizens that called for the city to improve its communication with residents and to develop a more comprehensive plan for the future of Westbrook.

There were many themes that seem to have occurred throughout the data. One of the biggest themes seems to be the opposition to developing or even building anything in downtown Westbrook, or main street area that is. Many of the concerns stated that further development would lead to further congesting the downtown area. While many shared this idea, many also believed that adding more development would bring more people into the city while the infrastructures were not able to support that many more people. One thing that we have noticed throughout the data is that many of the people that responded to the survey seemed to be housing secure, whose responses could have easily skewed the data from what it actually may look like. The issue with





this is that many of those who answered survey questions seem to point out the fact that these people are housing secure but are trying to advocate for people who are not, which may not allow us to understand the true struggles regarding the housing crisis in the city of Westbrook.

## Shelters

Citizens were asked for their position on shelters being part of the City of Westbrook. Of those responding to the general question on their position, a majority (65%) of citizens expressed positive and supportive positions, while 28% of those responding expressed unsupportive positions. The following open ended responses highlight a few of these feelings and attitudes:

### Supportive:

- *“I am all for them.”*
- *“I would like to see one that is well managed and well staffed by qualified individuals connecting people to services.”*
- *“Offer shelter to those who want and need it, but staff them with the intent of getting the homeless into housing ASAP.”*

### Unsupportive:

- *“Not in my town.”*
- *“Not high on the list as Westbrook has limited services and financial resources.”*
- *“Communal shelters are the most expensive and least effective strategy to address homelessness. Programs like housing first and shelter plus care are much more effective; housing stock should be prioritized over building communal shelters.”*

The responses further revealed several key themes related to community perceptions of shelters:

### Safety:

- **Concerns about crime and drug use:** A few citizens associated shelters with increased crime rates, drug abuse, and public safety issues.
- **Fear for personal safety and property values:** Some citizens worried that shelters will negatively impact their own safety and the safety of their families, leading to decreased property values.



- Concerns for the safety of shelter residents: A few citizens expressed concern about the safety of individuals living in shelters and the need to ensure their well-being.

#### Social and economic concerns:

- Shelters as temporary solutions: Many viewed shelters as short-term solutions that do not address the root causes of homelessness.
- Need for permanent housing and support services: Citizens emphasized the need for long-term housing solutions and comprehensive support services to help individuals transition out of homelessness.
- Concerns about attracting homeless populations from other areas: Citizens worried that shelters will attract homeless individuals from other communities, overwhelming resources and straining social services.
- NIMBYism: There was some indication that a "Not in my backyard" sentiment existed among a few citizens, with some expressing opposition to shelters being located in their neighborhoods.

#### Compassion and support:

- Recognition of the need for shelters: Despite concerns, many citizens acknowledged the need for shelters to provide basic necessities and support for homeless individuals.
- Desire to help the homeless: Some citizens expressed empathy and a desire to find solutions to homelessness.
- Call for proactive approach: Some of those responding, urged the community to be proactive in addressing homelessness and providing resources for those in need.

#### Other themes:

- Lack of information and understanding: Many citizens expressed a lack of knowledge about shelters and the services they provide.
- Focus on specific shelters: Some responses referenced specific shelters, such as the Oxford Street Shelter or the new shelter on Riverside.
- Need for better planning and communication: Citizens called for improved planning and communication from city officials regarding the development and operation of shelters.



- Importance of addressing root causes: Some emphasized the need to address the underlying causes of homelessness, such as poverty, mental health issues, and addiction.

## Discussion

**Housing Insecurity:** Overall, the responses demonstrated a complex and nuanced understanding of the issue of housing insecurity in Westbrook. While there was recognition of the efforts being made, many citizens believed that more needs to be done, particularly at the state and regional level, to address the lack of affordable housing options and provide comprehensive support services for individuals in need.

**Housing Development & Affordability:** The comments of citizens revealed a range of perspectives on housing development in Westbrook. While many expressed concerns about affordability, sprawl, and the planning process, others recognized the need for more housing and supported development that is done responsibly and meets the needs of the community. The analysis highlighted the importance of addressing these concerns through transparent communication, public engagement, and a focus on developing a balanced approach to housing development in Westbrook.

**Shelters:** The analysis revealed a complex mix of perceptions and concerns surrounding shelters. While some citizens expressed fear and negativity, many recognized the need for shelters and support efforts to help homeless individuals. Moving forward, addressing the concerns around safety, providing comprehensive support services, and fostering open communication will be crucial in building community support for effective solutions to homelessness.

While there are several trends that help better understand this data and what it means, it is important to understand that this is not a complete data set or big enough sample size of the population of residents in the city of Westbrook to conclude any statistically significant findings. This survey strictly allowed those involved to get a sense of what people were feeling in the city, which in turn could help city council as well as other interested organizations.



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