

Expanding Housing Choice

Exploring ways to provide a wider variety of housing options



APPENDIX B – SUMMARY OF QUESTIONNAIRE COMMENTS

Survey participants offered comments that give a more nuanced picture of their opinions. Every respondent has their own vision for how Durham should develop. In general, Durham residents like their neighborhoods and want to preserve their character, while recognizing that housing is increasingly unaffordable for many and greater housing choice and supply are needed.

Question 2: Median home sale prices have increased by 35% since 2013. Do you view this as a problem?

Respondents are concerned about a lack of affordable housing options in Durham, particularly as they perceive a discrepancy between rapidly rising home values and wages. Some are concerned for more vulnerable groups, such as low-income households and the elderly, while others point out the impact on the middle class and public-sector workers like teachers, firefighters, and police officers. Participants link rising home prices to a lack of supply and call for more supply in general, more types of housing, and greater density and growth.

Many of these comments acknowledge that rising prices impact homeowners and sellers differently from buyers and renters. Homeowners generally benefit from significant increases in the value of their homes, but prospective first-time owners are finding it difficult to enter the market, and renters are finding fewer rentals at attainable price points. Additionally, not every homeowner is happy about rising prices. Younger homeowners looking to upgrade from starter homes, or older homeowners wishing to downsize, are finding that they are priced out of their own neighborhoods or those where they'd like to move, and as a result they are forced to stay in homes that don't fit their needs.

Not everyone views rising home prices as a crisis. Many respondents see this as a sign of Durham's increasing prosperity and the natural result of the city becoming a more desirable place to live, while others believe this is part of the recovery from the 2008 recession and that housing prices have been artificially depressed. Some respondents don't see an affordability crisis at all, observing that home prices in Durham are still attainable in comparison to peer cities.

Question 3: In your opinion, what are the top two (2) things driving the cost of housing?

Participants were given five options and allowed to select two. Their comments echo thoughts from the previous question, and responses also mention developer greed, restrictive or antiquated zoning, and protectionist neighborhoods as forces driving the cost increase.

Question 5: Would you be open to new types of housing in your neighborhood as a way to address the housing shortage?

For some respondents, the answer to this question is a categorical yes or no, but for many, it depends. Durham residents like their neighborhoods, and even those in favor of adding more units want some assurance that their neighborhood won't lose its character. Character encompasses scale, density, design and aesthetics, historic preservation, safety, and other

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elements that are more difficult to describe and quantify, like social cohesion and the racial and class makeup of the neighborhood. Consequently, many respondents are in favor of adding more options, but only the right options – what these are, of course, varies by respondent. They tend to feel more positively about duplexes, triplexes, and ADUs, while larger apartment buildings are a point of concern. Quality of life is a priority: commenters are eager to enhance and preserve walkability, green space, and transit options, and they are concerned about increasing traffic and congestion.

Concerns about affordability exist among respondents in favor of adding more housing types, as well as those opposed; some feel that added units will increase affordability, while others think affordability will be compromised. Some participants view increased density and variety of housing as benefits in their own right. Others believe this will have a negative influence on their property values. Broadly speaking, there is no consensus on whether adding new housing types to existing neighborhoods will make them more or less desirable.

Question 7: Would you be comfortable with duplexes in your neighborhood?

Many Durham residents assume duplexes will be rented and associate them with absentee landlords, poorly maintained properties, and tenants who don't engage in neighborhood life or even disrupt it; there is particular resistance to low-income and Section 8 housing. Otherwise, respondents have the same concerns about duplexes as they do about increased housing variety in general, as summarized above. Chief among these is a concern for the preservation of neighborhood character, both aesthetic and social: respondents want duplexes to enhance or blend into the neighborhood, and they are unsure that duplex residents will behave in ways they deem appropriate.

However, many respondents are excited about the prospect of adding duplexes to their neighborhoods as long as their concerns are addressed; some would enjoy living in a neighborhood with a variety of housing types, and others are willing to accept greater density as long as it doesn't compromise the livability of their neighborhood.

Question 9: Would you be comfortable with triplexes in your neighborhood?

Respondents who are comfortable with duplexes are generally also comfortable with triplexes, although there is a small number who are in favor of duplexes but feel triplexes add a level of density that is above their threshold for comfort. Concerns about rental properties are slightly greater for triplexes than for duplexes.

Question 10: Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) are allowed in most Durham neighborhoods. They are small, secondary dwelling units built on the same lot as the main house, and can be either attached or built independently. How interested would you be in building an ADU?

ADUs raise fewer concerns among survey respondents than duplexes and triplexes do, and respondents are better able to envision them fitting into the existing character of their neighborhoods. Even respondents who can't or don't want to build an ADU mention their potential usefulness, often citing specific family members such as aging parents or adult children who could benefit from a semi-independent living space. Others are very interested in building on their property for family

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members, as an additional source of income and help paying their mortgage, to add more affordable housing stock, and other reasons.

Reasons given by respondents who are unable or unwilling to add an ADU include site constraints, such as lot size and HOA rules; uncertainty about the permitting process or roadblocks within it; and concerns about the cost of building. Some respondents stymied by confusing requirements and high costs suggest that regulatory or financial incentives would make them more likely to build an ADU. Some of the aversion to renters from the duplex and triplex questions is present in these comments as well; several commenters are only in favor of ADUs if they house family members, not unrelated renters. Others are not interested in ADUs on their property or on anyone else's, citing privacy concerns and unwelcome density.

Question 11: What are the top three things that are keeping you from building an ADU?

Participants were given seven choices for this question and allowed to choose three, and were also able to include comments. The comments for this question are fairly similar to those for question 10, and taken together with the pie chart for question 11, give a good picture of respondents' views. Those commenters who have them are attached to their yards and gardens, which make it difficult for some to picture giving up any of that space for ADUs. Additionally, some respondents explicitly resist any pathways for people with lower incomes to live in their neighborhoods.

Question 12: To better understand the impacts of expanding housing choices, please rate how you feel about allowing more housing types in your neighborhood

Survey respondents were given 10 potential impacts of adding housing types to their neighborhood and asked to rate how likely they believed these impacts to be. In their comments, respondents frequently express that negative impacts are not inevitable, but careful planning and implementation is required to achieve desired outcomes. Some commenters also recognize that tradeoffs are inevitable in this process. Respondents are concerned about inadequate infrastructure, including transit, traffic, and parking. They are also concerned about environmental issues such as stormwater management and green space, and they highlight the importance of good design and sustainable development.

Themes from other responses appear here as well, including affordability – some think additional housing choices will make housing more affordable, while others disagree – and the importance of preserving neighborhood character. Respondents have mixed feelings about added density: some are eager for additional diversity of neighbors and variety of housing types, while others are worried their neighborhoods will be too crowded or are only interested in living in a single-family neighborhood.

Question 13: How satisfied are you with the housing choices currently available to you?

While 71% of participants are very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the housing choices available to them, there is significant anxiety expressed in their comments. Affordability is a major theme. Some are content in their homes but recognize it is difficult for others to buy, or that they themselves would be unable to buy in their neighborhood today; some homeowners feel trapped in homes that no longer fit their needs because there are no affordable and desirable options.

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New homeowners with recent experience in the grueling housing market had to compromise on location, quality, amenities, etc. for a home they could afford, or were consistently and frustratingly outbid. Respondents who rent have similar concerns about price. Owners and renters alike worry they will be priced out of their community.

The concept of the “missing middle” appears in these comments as well. Respondents perceive a glut of luxury apartments and large single-family homes and a deficit of smaller, more affordable options. This lack of options is particularly problematic for disabled people, older people, multi-generational families, and younger people wanting to live in vibrant, walkable areas with amenities at a price point they can afford.

Many respondents support more density and more supply to address some of these problems and preserve the diversity that they love about Durham, but some are unhappy with current new development, which they find unattractive and a poor fit for the city’s aesthetic character. In general, participants want more options, but they want to be sure that these options are the right fit for their neighborhood and for Durham as a whole.