Addressing the Affordable Housing Crisis

Lessons from a Deliberative Dialogue

San Diego Deliberation Network

A Regional Collaboration for Civic Conversation

I.   BACKGROUND

The San Diego Deliberation Network (SDDN) is a nonprofit organization that helps people, governments, and organizations collaboratively work through problems that are unsolvable without civic engagement. SDDN researches and frames issues that matter to a community, convenes participants, and facilitates deliberation with the intent of driving meaningful action.

In the City of San Diego, the issue of affordable housing is one that reaches across a wide range of community stakeholders, resulting in a diverse set of perspectives and potential solutions. Accordingly, debates on how to define the issue lead to proposed solutions ranging from supply-side economics to rent control, homeless shelters to Housing-First policies, and high-density redevelopment to community preservation. Many of these proposed solutions have sparked fierce debate, paralyzing action. In some instances, a subset of a community may agree on a path to resolving a particular aspect of affordable housing, but doing so alienates others who view the issue through a radically different lens. In other instances, there may be consensus around what should be done at an aggregate policy-level (e.g. building more units, rent control, Section 8 housing vouchers), but community members begin to reconsider implementation in their own neighborhoods.

Given the crowded and so often contentious atmosphere associated with the issue of affordable housing, SDDN was eager to lend its moderators and deliberative framework at the Voice of San Diego's Politifest event on October 6, 2018, an annual San Diego public affairs summit. In doing so, SDDN was hopeful that it could drive a more meaningful and informed dialogue that would result in solution recommendations that had the collective ownership of the participants who generated them. These recommendations could then be recorded, assessed, aggregated with other dialogues within the City, and ultimately presented to the parties identified as having agency in the change process.

II.   FRAMEWORK

With just one hour to conduct the dialogue and outbrief at Politifest, SDDN generated an issue framing guide for participants to consider while forming their own position. This had three primary benefits:

A. Shaping Participant Behavior

By putting forward four possible approaches to addressing the issue of affordable housing, participants received a non-verbal cue to consider multiple perspectives and stakeholders while articulating their own recommendations. Moreover, the issue guide was formatted in a way that encouraged participants who may have already aligned with a certain approach to consider "Why can't we do this?" counter-points. In debate-style forums, the framing of only two approaches to a problem at the outset of a conversation can often have a constraining effect on the way participants believe they are allowed to think about the issue.

B. Time Prioritization

Concise representation of the four prevailing approaches to resolving the problem served as a way to mitigate time spent deliberating potential solutions from scratch. Specifically, this allowed participants to spend more time collaboratively forming creative recommendations that aggregated the benefits and addressed the pitfalls of approaches that had already been well established.

C. Informed Participation

The presentation and acknowledgment of a basic set of facts prior to beginning the dialogue was fundamental in preempting the purveyance of false information and, by extension, time spent debating facts fundamental to solution generation.

While developing the issue framing guide as a means of shaping participant engagement was important, it was also critical that moderators come across as impartial and informed, yet curious and inclusive. To do so, a moderator's script was used to prompt participation and progress the dialogue in the short time allotted. Opening questions included,

> *"What is the most important thing that we should be doing now to address the issue of affordable housing?"*

> *"What do you think we should do about the housing situation in San Diego?"*

followed by questions that provoked critical thinking and helped gauge the saliency of particular sub-topics, such as,

> *"One of the tensions in these approaches is how much a voice communities should have in the type of housing that gets built. Should communities have the*

ability to block new housing? If so, how does that decision align with a regionwide need for new construction?"

"Should we limit new housing construction in East and North County in order to limit greenhouse gas emissions?

"Should we build high density housing in the central core to promote use of mass transit?"

"Would you want to live in a dense "smart growth" community?

Depending on the type of responses that the moderators received, responses to participant comments included:

"That sounds like [reference to one of the approaches in the issue framing guide]. Do you favor that approach over the others?"

"What are the downsides of that idea?"

"Are you willing to accept the costs associated with pursuing that [identify costs referenced in the issue framing guide]?"

In instances where any one particular participant was dominating the conversation, moderators were prompted to invite participation from other participants by asking questions such as:

"Does anyone have a perspective informed by experiences similar or different than those of [participant's name]?"

"I'm curious to hear other perspectives."

III.   FINDINGS

Approximately 40 participants gathered for the 60-minute dialogue. Although pre-registration for the SDDN-hosted session was suggested, admission was on a first-come, first-served basis and the room assigned to SDDN quickly reached capacity. Participants were divided into four large circles with one moderator per circle. Opening remarks by SDDN leadership described the concept of deliberative dialogue and provided an overview of how the issue framing guide was constructed.

The time constraints of the dialogue session limited the number of participant conclusions. However, preliminary consensus began to form around the following topics:

A. Community Planning Group Representation

While participants were quick to acknowledge that their Community Planning Groups (CPGs) were appropriately positioned to act as a voice that could aggregate and communicate preferences with respect to new development in their community, they complained that CPGs were too often led by an unrepresentative sample of members that prioritized a subset of the community's interests. To address this, participants recommended that CPGs be compelled to adopt more inclusive policies that would encourage input from a representative set of community members. Moreover, there was a call for CPGs to work more closely with their City Council district representatives to ensure that development concerns in one community were not overlooked for the concerns of another. To ensure equity and consistency in the decision-making process, participants called for increased transparency into how decisions were made at the CPG level and how those decisions were then considered by the City of San Diego when reviewing new development projects.

B. Usage of "Vacancy Tax" Proceeds

To subsidize the cost of existing housing for San Diegans that qualified, participants suggested directing proceeds from a "Vacancy Tax" on empty properties owned by absentee investors into an existing San Diego city housing authority.

C. Subsidies from Key Stakeholders

Acknowledging that City and State agencies were not the only ones impacted by the externalities of affordable housing shortages, participants recommended establishing avenues by which local employers, community organizations, school districts, and other key stakeholders could incentivize potential employees, neighbors, or sought-after students to settle in their communities by offering housing subsidies. Another discussion group suggested that all subsidies should be to individuals (like Section 8), rather than projects (like tax credits), to allow the market to work, as opposed to inefficient project subsidies involving government regulations. It was also suggested that all subsidies should come from the Federal government, not state or local, because affordable housing is a national problem.

D. **Increasing Density**

One possible approach discussed was "stealth densification" in single family zones, by allowing 2 or 3 units per site with appropriate restrictions. (A recent *New York Times* article reported on this approach in Minneapolis where the practice had been used as a way to maintain segregated neighborhoods.)

One moderator remarked that participants in his discussion group worked in the housing or related fields and learned from the session and enjoyed it, although it was brief.

Nine participants signed-up for additional information and were contacted after the event by email, where they were asked for their ideas on how the deliberative process might be used in the community and what complex topics should be addressed.

One attendee, representing a large nonprofit, grassroots organization, contacted SDDN about follow-on engagement with CPGs. That contact has led to an invitation to preview a beta version of online public polling software being considered by members of the College Area Community Planning Group. That group will be updating their community plan in 2019 and is seeking improved methods of community input to the update.

SDDN did not conduct a detailed post-event survey of participants to gauge shifts in attitude or movement toward action. Politifest's organizers, the Voice of San Diego, did circulate a post-event survey which allowed rating and comments about individual workshops and SDDN has requested the feedback provided on the affordable housing dialogue to further refine its practices.

IV. **CONCLUSION**

Members of the San Diego community, when guided by the principles of deliberative dialogue, can quickly begin to develop shared perspectives and consensus on traditionally divisive issues. While the results from the dialogue on the affordable housing crisis were encouraging, a few observations lend lessons for future SDDN-moderated dialogues:

- Time constraints are not conducive to developing collective ownership of the ideas that are generated throughout the dialogue

- Post-event follow-up that is open-ended, rather than suggesting or directing discrete action, is a missed opportunity

These conclusions should be considered when identifying venues and other opportunities for conducting deliberative dialogues using the affordable housing issue framing. However, by adhering to the principles of deliberative dialogue and the framework outlined herein, the goal of engaging community members to affect public policy can be achieved.