



## Sightline Housing and Urban Development Program Summary

**Opportunity:** In progressive, tech-booming cities across the Northwest and beyond, tight local land-use constraints on urban housing—and the exorbitant housing prices that result—constitute a [gargantuan problem](#). In fact, an accumulating [body of research](#) shows that growth-blocking rules in such cities form barriers not only to local housing affordability but also to [national prosperity, social equity](#), and [environmental sustainability](#). Density, it seems, is a crucial fix to several of the gravest challenges.

Yet the political forces that block density, notably networks of homeowners, [usually hold veto power](#) over local change. Progress against these entrenched forces has been glacial in pace, so housing prices have continued to surge. In Seattle, a citizens' commission called the [Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda \(HALA\)](#) recently reached a surprising [consensus](#) in favor of sweeping increases in density—upzoning much of the city—coupled with new requirements for affordability.

This grand bargain is a new thing under the sun: a bold consensus for rapid housing growth, steered toward affordability, coming from a quintessentially liberal, green city long skeptical of developers and high-rise towers. Intriguingly, it also reflects an emerging and unusual political coalition, bringing social justice advocates together with urbanists in a bloc that may be able to overcome opponents of housing development. This nascent coalition has yet to push the HALA recommendations to adoption by the city council and other decision makers, but it has a fighting chance—a chance of making Seattle not only a prosperous and low-carbon city but also one affordable to everyone from students to bank presidents.

**Purpose:** Sightline, an influential participant in the HALA commission, will seize this unusual opportunity by redoubling our work on housing affordability toward two ultimate goals:

- (1) Win adoption and **implementation of HALA's** recommendations, including citywide upzones, in collaboration with Mayor Ed Murray, HALA's champions on the city council, and the emerging HALA political coalition called Growing Together.
- (2) Propagate the growth + affordability model outside of Seattle by **telling the HALA story** in ways that reach key audiences elsewhere in the Northwest and across the United States, ultimately planting the Seattle model in leaders' minds as a new and pragmatic way forward.

**Sightline Institute** is the Northwest's sustainability think tank. We have a long track record of using research and effective communications to advance social change. We will deeply engage these strengths in the housing affordability fight for a period of at least two years. We discuss our plans below in the categories into which we divide our staff and programs: policy research, communications, and communications strategy.

**Policy Research** is Sightline's foundational function. Understanding problems and identifying promising solutions, artfully and accurately describing both, correcting popular misunderstandings, developing powerful arguments and deflating opponents' attacks—these are our stock in trade. Our work left fingerprints all over the HALA process, from recommendations on liberalizing rules for accessory dwelling units to the framing of the whole report. We have written and spoken extensively about HALA (examples [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Much more work remains for us in making the case for

HALA to Seattle decision makers and to the court of public opinion. To do that work, Sightline will devote time from its existing staff, and hire a new, dedicated, full-time senior researcher-writer-advocate. We may also contract for specialized research, such as geographic information systems analysis, and will consider hiring a dedicated research assistant. Sightline will also coordinate with HALA partners, especially the Growing Together Coalition.

Sightline's success in influencing the HALA consensus in the first place stemmed entirely from our policy research, conducted and published over years and injected into the deliberations. (See, for example, [here](#) and [here](#).) The particular issues and questions our research will focus on during this project are hard to predict in advance. They will flow from the debate in Seattle, as we strive to support HALA's champions in winning adoption of its recommendations in the city council and in other decision-making bodies (purpose 1), especially in the early months. Our research will also document the Seattle story so that we can spread it nationally (purpose 2).

**Communications (Media):** For Sightline, getting the facts right is only the first step. Communicating them well is just as important. Our researchers are skilled writers and public speakers, routinely interviewed by the media, and commonly called on to brief decision makers and social-change leaders. Our communications staff cultivates relationships with key media outlets in the Northwest, so we're positioned to influence coverage. We will publish a steady stream of articles and reports, targeted to the issues of the day, and will also deploy infographics, videos, events, and social media campaigns to shape public debate. We are brainstorming, for example, about a series of short videos profiling people who work in Seattle and deserve a chance to live in the city but cannot currently afford to: "What's your Seattle housing story?" The civic counterweight to the politics of angry homeowners is not only pie charts and white papers but also parades of young parents, cash-pinched entrepreneurs, school janitors, and others currently excluded—all on video telling their stories.

Our communications work will focus initially on winning HALA's recommendations in Seattle (purpose 1), but telling the story to the rest of the country (purpose 2), through the media, will also be essential – and a natural complement. This may include placing stories in national media outlets and producing videos that tell the Seattle story.

**Communications Strategy:** To chart a path toward adoption of HALA recommendations in Seattle and toward more victories elsewhere, we need to understand public values and beliefs about housing. We need to know how to engage communities in productive conversations that move the debate away from obstructionism and toward welcoming newcomers. We'll need to assemble state-of-the-art framing and messaging guidance. That's the role of our Communications Strategy program, which is already engaging in Sightline's housing efforts but will become much more involved. If available opinion research proves inadequate, we may need to commission original opinion research such as focus groups and polling.

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