A LIVABLE CITIES AGENDA

An Imagine Better Brief
A Livable Cities Agenda

Building a city where there is room and dignity for all

City government has a vital role to play in creating and incentivizing the creation and proper upkeep of homes for its residents at all income levels and stages of life, from families with children in our schools, to young adults making their way in the world, to our elders who provide the leadership and continuity that make our historic home such a special place. The following principles for housing and community policy will make New Haven a more equitable and prosperous place.

**Approach housing and community with a racial equity and economic justice lens**

To make positive change, we must recognize the roots of our current challenges. A recent report by Data Haven presents a stark picture: while holistic community well-being is relatively high in more affluent parts of New Haven, our less affluent neighborhoods report the least levels of wellbeing. Black and Latino New Haveners are likely to live in these neighborhoods, which have faced decades of intentional disinvestment by powerful public and private actors. Residents in these neighborhoods are more likely to rely on public transportation, to face food insecurity, face serious debt challenges, and to report that they’re “just getting by.” Many of these current racial inequalities have racist roots, and our community has a responsibility to help fix them.

**Zone up to take advantage of our centrality**

One of the major hurdles standing in the way of affordable housing is our city’s zoning laws. Some zoning regulations were helpful in the emerging industrial city—it makes sense not to let a tannery or chemical factory locate next to a school. Today, however, we understand the serious negative effects of the zoning regulations that have been piled and layered on top of each other—including heightened racial segregation, underused land, increased greenhouse emissions, and more.

As detailed in a wide array of public policy papers - including Elm City Communities’ Breaking Ground report - parking, side yard, backyard, stairwell, and setback requirements all increase the cost of housing. The separation of uses prevents housing from being built atop commercial space. Oversized streets limit the space allowed for housing. All of this increases housing costs and reduces New Haveners’ chances of having affordable places to live. Changing our zoning rules will make housing more affordable and increase the overall health of our city.

Liam for New Haven
Enforcement & Landlord Licensing

*Enforce rental codes and landlord licensing*

While the government does many things to benefit homeowners, it doesn’t do enough to support the majority of New Haveners who rent their homes. The Census Bureau has found that New Haven has one of the lowest vacancy rates in the nation. This provides market power for landlords to raise rents and neglect maintenance. In a time of scarcity, rents increase and take up too much of the household budget. This can force families to make dire choices between paying rent and meeting other needs such as food and medical care. Because housing isn’t a productive resource, high housing costs also hurt other parts of the local economy. Upzoning and new construction will help alleviate that market stress, but we don’t need to rely on new housing to take action to support renters—we can start by enforcing the laws that are already on the books.

The Livable City Initiative is woefully under-resourced. Recent reporting by the *Yale Daily News* and the *New Haven Independent* highlighted an overwhelmed staff at LCI, New Haven’s main office for holding landlords accountable for substandard conditions at their properties. Building inspection and enforcement currently account for approximately 1 percent of discretionary spending–and LCI is just a fraction of that category. Conditions that lead to collapsing ceilings overhead or black mold causing children to develop asthma are conditions that are crimes themselves.

Moreover, the city government is failing in its licensing efforts. New Haven fought a state Supreme Court case for the right to impose licensing requirements on local landlords. However, a similar report by the *New Haven Independent* detailed widespread failures to license local rental properties - often with catastrophic consequences. If the will is there, the city has the power to fix this.

We need to:

- Re-focus LCI to solely work on housing code enforcement;
- Expand the number of housing inspectors on LCI staff; and
- Actively seek to enforce the city’s licensing requirements

"New Haven fought a state Supreme Court case for the right to license landlords. It should use that power for the benefit of its residents."

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Strengthening Bargaining Power for Residents

Strengthen Tenants’ Unions

Landlords and tenants do not come to the negotiating table with equal bargaining power - particularly in a tight rental market like New Haven’s. This disadvantages renting residents and disproportionately favors out-of-state corporate interests. Tenants’ unions provide a bulwark against abusive landlords through collective action.

The city can support tenants’ unions by:
- Extending the requirement to recertify tenants union membership from six months to one year
- Allow tenants unions to file joint complaints with the Fair Rent Commission

Develop a Framework for Evaluating Tax Breaks to Developers

New Haven city government historically has provided tax breaks to developers in exchange for affordable housing in new developments. However, because the city does not have a defined framework for what kinds of incentives to trade for different levels of affordability, the city is often outmatched by developers and does not play with the strongest hand in these negotiations.

To combat these trends, the city needs to develop a framework to evaluate any tax breaks provided to developers that is proportional to the level of affordability created by the new development and incentivizes the creation the types of housing that are particularly needed in New Haven, such as three- and four-bedroom units that are so valuable for working families.
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The Surrounding Environment

*Equitable Neighborhoods Built for Livability*

Housing is the cornerstone of a “livable” city. But housing does not make a city livable by itself—the community in which the home is located shapes our lives, too. Residents want to have access to green space and feel comfortable having children or elders cross the street without being endangered. The map of pedestrian deaths shows that safety and walkability are not equitably distributed throughout the city, and residents notice that this is related to city policies like traffic calming. We must open - and connect - more community green space for relaxation, community events, and athletic and cultural activities.

True livability requires an equitable approach to green space, clean air, trees, and infrastructure. We enhance livability in all neighborhoods by ensuring that the city equitably:

- Deploys traffic calming measures,
- Invests in tree coverage in all neighborhoods,
- Invests in the built environment and to make it easy and safe for residents to use alternatives to cars for daily travel,
- Provides access to green space throughout the city and connects those green space to one another, and
- Maintains the condition of the communal green space through a functioning Parks Department.
"All of the Above" Housing Policy

Removing outdated zoning restrictions that stifle the supply of housing can address some aspects of our housing shortage. History has also shown that the market alone won’t meet all our needs. Housing and community development are one of the main responsibilities—and powers—of local government in Connecticut. This is why we need an “all of the above” housing affordability strategy. A comprehensive approach to providing housing stability includes:

- Zoning that encourages efficient use of our land
- Affordability set-asides in new developments
- Rent stabilization regulations to help people stay in homes they already have
- Expanding shelter and other resources for the unhoused
- More effective implementation of direct assistance and programs funded by city, state, and federal agencies

"Housing is stability. Housing is dignity. Housing is absolutely necessary, critical infrastructure."

-Sen. Raphael Warnock