

Housing Town Hall Summary

Date: July 29, 2024

Location: Montbello Recreation Center, Denver

Attendance: 147 residents

Duration: 2 hours (6:00 PM - 8:00 PM)

Opening Remarks

Maria Santos opened the town hall by acknowledging the housing crisis as the defining challenge facing working families in District 32. She framed the evening as a listening session first: "I'm not here with all the answers. I'm here to understand what you're experiencing, what's keeping you up at night, and what solutions you think will actually work."

She outlined her preliminary housing platform—15,000 new affordable units over 10 years, tenant protections against exploitative rent increases, and a state-backed affordable housing trust—but emphasized that constituent input would shape the final policy proposals.

Key Discussion Points

1. Rent Burden and Displacement

Multiple attendees described paying 50-60% of their income on rent, with some facing eviction after landlords raised rents by \$400-600/month following lease renewals. One single mother of three, Rosa Martinez, shared that her family's rent increased from \$1,450 to \$1,950 in one year, forcing her to choose between medication for her daughter's asthma and groceries.

Community Sentiment: The most urgent concern for renters is immediate protection from sudden rent spikes. Several attendees called for rent stabilization (caps on annual increases) and just-cause eviction protections.

Maria's Response: She committed to co-sponsoring legislation limiting annual rent increases to 7% or CPI + 5%, whichever is lower, for properties built before 2015. She also voiced support for requiring landlords to provide 180-day notice for rent increases over 10%.

2. Lack of Affordable Supply

Homeowners and prospective buyers voiced frustration with housing costs outpacing wage growth. James Kowalski, a teacher, described saving for eight years for a down payment only to be repeatedly outbid by investors paying cash \$50K over asking. "I have a good job, my wife has a good job, and we still can't afford to buy in the community where I teach," he said.

Community Sentiment: Strong support for prioritizing workforce housing (teachers, nurses, city employees) and limiting investor purchases of single-family homes. Some attendees called for banning corporate landlords entirely; others wanted incentives for owner-occupancy.

Maria's Response: She proposed a state-backed affordable housing trust funded by a 1% transfer tax on residential sales over \$1 million, which would subsidize construction of permanently affordable units. She also supported exploring a right of first refusal for owner-occupants when properties are listed, allowing residents to match investor offers before corporate buyers can close.

3. Homelessness and Supportive Housing

Several attendees raised concerns about the visible increase in unsheltered homelessness, particularly near schools and parks. A small but vocal minority called for enforcement-heavy approaches (camping bans, sweeps). The majority, however, emphasized that homelessness is a housing problem, not a criminal justice problem.

Sarah Kim, a social worker, noted: "I see people cycling through jail and emergency rooms because we have nowhere to send them. We need permanent supportive housing with wraparound services—mental health care, addiction treatment, job training. Band-aids don't work."

Community Sentiment: Broad consensus that homelessness cannot be solved without dramatically increasing supportive housing supply. Some tension between those prioritizing "neighborhood safety" and those emphasizing compassion and structural solutions.

Maria's Response: She committed to fighting for \$200 million in state funding for permanent supportive housing with onsite services, modeled on Denver's successful supportive housing social impact bond. She acknowledged the complexity: "Enforcement without housing options just moves people around. But neighbors also deserve safe, clean public spaces. We have to do both—expand housing AND invest in mental health crisis response teams."

4. Zoning and NIMBYism

A heated exchange occurred when developer Michael Torres advocated for upzoning single-family neighborhoods to allow duplexes, triplexes, and accessory dwelling units (ADUs). Longtime homeowners objected, citing concerns about parking, neighborhood character, and property values.

Linda Hernandez, a 30-year Montbello resident, argued: "We fought hard for homeownership in this community. We don't want developers coming in and changing everything." Another attendee countered: "My kids can't afford to live here anymore. If we don't build more housing, we're locking out the next generation."

Community Sentiment: Deep division between homeowners fearful of change and renters/younger residents desperate for more supply. General agreement that luxury development isn't solving the problem, but disagreement on whether density is the solution or another form of displacement.

Maria's Response: She acknowledged the tension and proposed community-led zoning reforms: "We need to allow more housing, but it has to be done with resident input, not top-down mandates. I support allowing ADUs by right, legalizing missing middle housing near transit corridors, and requiring affordability set-asides in any upzoned areas. Neighbors should have a say in *how* density happens, not *whether* it happens."

5. Property Tax Relief for Seniors

Elderly homeowners on fixed incomes described being priced out by rising property taxes as home values skyrocketed. William Carter, a 72-year-old veteran, said: "I bought my house in 1985 for \$89,000. Now it's worth \$650,000 on paper, and my property taxes have tripled. I'm being forced to sell the home I raised my kids in."

Community Sentiment: Strong support for property tax relief for seniors and long-term residents, including circuit breaker programs (capping taxes as a percentage of income) and deferral programs allowing seniors to postpone payment until sale or inheritance.

Maria's Response: She committed to sponsoring a Senior Property Tax Stabilization Act, capping annual increases at 3% for homeowners over 65 who've lived in their home for 10+ years. She also proposed a state-funded property tax deferral program to prevent forced sales.

Notable Quotes

"I work two jobs and still can't afford a one-bedroom. Something is fundamentally broken."

— Marcus Johnson, restaurant worker

"Developers get tax breaks to build luxury apartments no one here can afford. Meanwhile, teachers are commuting from an hour away. Where's the accountability?"

— Priya Patel, parent and PTA member

"We don't need more studies. We need shovels in the ground and keys in people's hands."

— Reverend Thompson, community organizer

Follow-Up Action Items

Maria committed to the following next steps:

1. **Policy Refinement:** Incorporate constituent feedback into a detailed housing platform, to be published by August 15. Specifically:
 - Draft rent stabilization bill with community input
 - Develop affordable housing trust fund proposal with transparent funding mechanisms
 - Create senior property tax relief legislation
 2. **Community Meetings:** Host three additional neighborhood housing forums in District 32 (Aurora, Stapleton, Park Hill) before the end of September to ensure diverse geographic input.
 3. **Constituent Follow-Up:** Campaign staff will contact attendees who submitted written questions or requested one-on-one meetings. Contact: housing@mariasantosforsenate.org.
 4. **Coalition Building:** Meet with tenant advocacy groups, affordable housing developers, and senior organizations to align on legislative priorities before the 2025 session.
 5. **Transparency Commitment:** Publish a quarterly "Housing Report Card" if elected, tracking progress on affordable unit construction, eviction rates, and rent trends in the district.
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Conclusion

The town hall revealed the housing crisis as deeply intersectional—cutting across renters and homeowners, young and old, displacement and homelessness. Maria's approach—centering constituent voices, refusing easy answers, and committing to both immediate relief and long-term supply solutions—resonated with the majority of attendees.

The path forward requires balancing competing interests: protecting current residents from displacement while opening doors for the next generation; increasing density without bulldozing neighborhood character; providing immediate tenant protections while addressing root causes through supply expansion.

As Maria closed the evening: "Housing isn't a commodity. It's a human right and the foundation of everything else—education, health, economic stability. If we get this right, everything else becomes possible."

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