ECOnorthwest

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Regional Housing Needs Assessment

Denver Regional Council of Governments

Prepared for: Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG)

ECOnorthwest

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Acknowledgments

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That assistance notwithstanding, ECOnorthwest is responsible for the content of this report. The staff at ECOnorthwest prepared this report based on their general knowledge of the economics of housing and regional economies. ECOnorthwest also relied on information derived from government agencies, private statistical services, the reports of others, interviews of individuals, or other sources believed to be reliable. ECOnorthwest has not independently verified the accuracy of all such information and makes no representation regarding its accuracy or completeness. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute the authors' current opinions, which may change as more information becomes available.

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Executive Summary

Denver's past and future growth requires more housing

The Denver region has experienced rapid growth in recent years, with a 17 percent increase in residents since 2010 and a 33 percent increase in jobs. Many of the region's 3.4 million residents struggle to find affordable and accessible housing in their location of choice as home prices and rents have increased far faster than incomes.

The Regional Housing Needs Assessment provided the opportunity for local governments, non-profits, industry representatives and other organizations involved in housing preservation and production across the Denver region to better understand the scope, scale, and nature of housing issues in the region. The Denver region while interconnected through jobs and transportation, has historically approached housing policy at the town, city, and county level.

Addressing the regional housing needs will require greater coordination across local jurisdictions as many of the barriers are too complex and broader than one local community can take on alone and there is tremendous opportunity to more efficient address barriers collaboratively.

> **Overview**
>
> **The region needs to build 511,000 units by 2050 to meet current and future housing needs.**
>
> **Despite periodic building booms, the region has not produced enough housing to keep pace with population and job growth.**
>
> **Much of the new housing in the region does not support the diversity of housing needs across all income levels and household types.**
>
> **Diverse factors create barriers to housing production.**
>
> **A regional housing strategy is critical to coordinate efforts across sectors and align housing development with broader regional goals for transportation and economic development.**

Measuring regional housing need

DRCOG conducted this Regional Housing Needs Assessment to establish an objective, data-driven understanding of the baseline housing need for both the current and future population.

Using a methodology shaped by best practices and the guidance of a local Advisory Group, the Regional Housing Needs Assessment estimates that 511,000 units are needed across the region by 2050 to meet both the needs of the current population and to accommodate projected population growth and changing demographics. Just over 300,000 of these housing units will need to be affordable to households earning 60 percent or less of the median income. Older adults will make up a greater share of the population, shaping trends around housing needs, such as income and mobility.

Understanding barriers to housing production

The barriers to producing more housing—and at a higher rate than past trends— vary significantly depending on the unique characteristics of each community and evolve over time in response to changing circumstances. The interplay between factors such as market conditions, the regulatory environment, infrastructure availability, community consensus, and financial resources can hinder the delivery of new housing. These barriers are especially challenging to creating housing affordable at low and moderate incomes—either by preventing them from moving forward altogether or by resulting in the development of fewer units than what might be allowed or desired under current conditions.

Moving toward a regional housing strategy

Addressing regional issues requires regional partnership. Many stakeholders in the region, including DRCOG's member governments, have long identified the need for coordinating regional housing efforts to address the overall housing supply and affordability challenges. Local communities, however, often struggle with access to consistent and reliable data, or staff capacity, to develop and implement strategic and effective housing policy.

A regional strategy is intended to foster shared understanding, collaboration, and actions to help member governments, in partnership with other stakeholders, make progress toward addressing the region's housing needs. As part of this Regional Housing Needs Assessment, DRCOG collaborated with public and private sector partners across the region to develop a framework that will serve as the foundation for creating a regional housing strategy starting in late 2024. By working collaboratively to develop a comprehensive regional housing strategy and integrate it with other key planning efforts, DRCOG and its partners can take a significant step toward fostering more equitable, resilient, and livable communities for all residents of the Denver region. The Regional Housing Needs Assessment aims to provide a thorough analysis of housing needs and to develop a better understanding of barriers related to housing production, creating a strong foundation for developing the regional housing strategy. The forthcoming regional housing strategy will build upon the findings and insights presented in this report.

1. Introduction and context

The Denver region has experienced substantial growth over the last decade. Since 2010, the population has increased by 17 percent to 3.4 million residents, while the number of jobs increased by 33 percent. However, housing production has failed to keep pace with population growth. As vacancy rates hit historic lows, home prices and rents have soared. The median home sale price in Denver reached $550,000 as of December 2023, increasing by 180 percent over the last decade while incomes increased by 55 percent during the same period.[1] Home sale prices and rents are out of reach for median income earners, and over 51 percent of renters cost-burdened across the region.[2] Moreover, the most recent Point-in-Time count showed the highest number of unsheltered homeless people in the region since 2008.[3,4] These trends grow more acute within local communities, particularly when disaggregated by race, income, age, and other demographic factors, exacerbating issues of housing access, displacement, and inequity.

Housing markets are regional

People make choices about where to live based on access to jobs, affordability, schools, amenities, childcare and other factors that often transcend jurisdictional boundaries. Despite this shared regional market, housing policy and planning in the Denver region has primarily occurred at the town, city or county level, resulting in fragmented efforts that have struggled to adequately account for and address regional dynamics that shape housing demand, supply, and ultimately, affordability. Greater efforts for coordinated policy and planning are needed to better address housing barriers that local communities cannot take on alone.

DRCOG supports regional planning and coordination

The Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) is a planning organization in which local governments collaborate to set policies, guidelines, and funding priorities across key areas including transportation, growth and development, aging, and disability resources. DRCOG's member governments include 9 counties and 49 cities and towns as shown in Exhibit 1. Representatives from these governments work together to make life better for those who call the region home.

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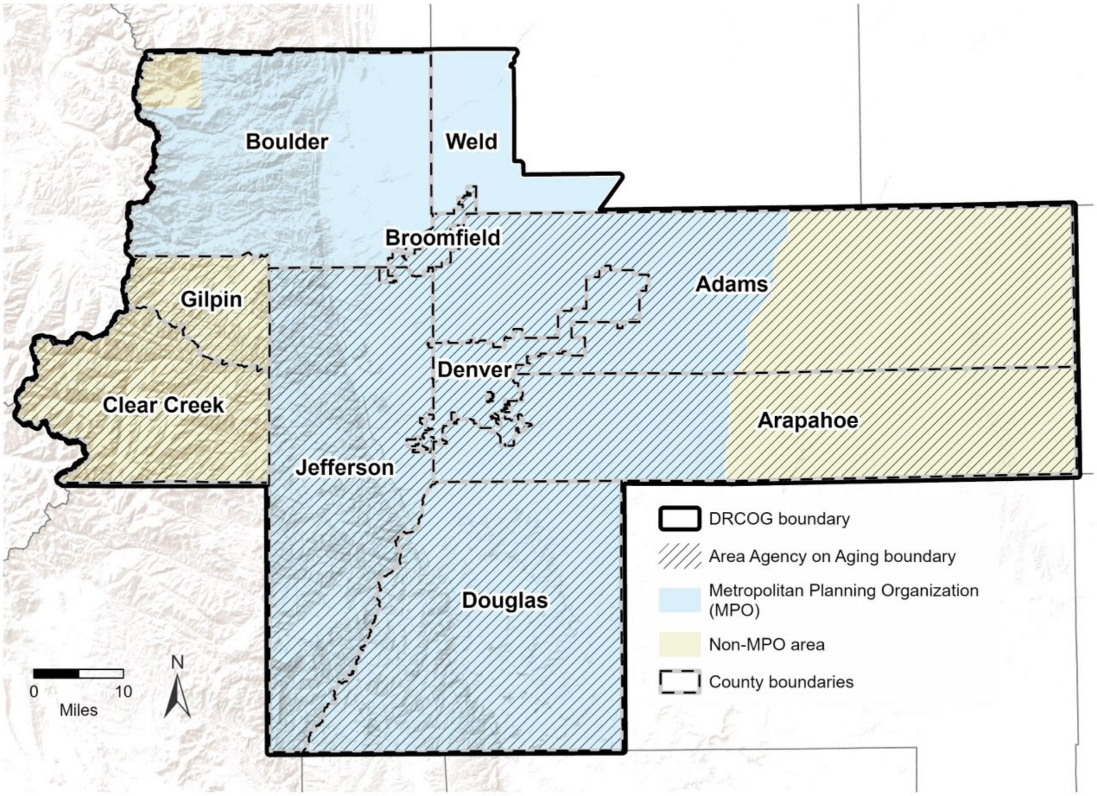
[1] Redfin; Zillow, 2023
[2] Denver County Median Family Income 2023
[3] Metro Denver Homelessness Initiative
[4] Point-In-Time Count is an annual survey conducted in the United States to assess homelessness. The Point-In-Time Count serves as a snapshot of homelessness in a community by providing an estimate of the overall scope of homelessness on a single night. It includes both sheltered (those in emergency shelters and transitional housing) and unsheltered (those without shelter) populations.

Exhibit 1: DRCOG Planning Area



Source: DRCOG

In 2017, DRCOG adopted Metro Vision, which is the long-range plan for growth and development across the Denver region. The plan provides guidance and coordination between counties and municipalities on regional land use, transportation, and a variety of other government policies. It is centered around promoting sustainable, managed growth for the Denver region, with implementation occurring through local initiatives aligned with Metro Vision's overall framework. The plan recognizes that many of the effects associated with growth—such as traffic, air quality and housing costs—cross jurisdictional boundaries and local governments must work collaboratively to address them.

REGIONAL PLANNING PROCESS

New Role for Housing in Transportation Planning

In 2021, the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act amended the scope of the metropolitan transportation planning process, related to the factors a Metropolitan Planning Organization must consider, adding *housing*, alongside *transportation improvements*, and *state and local planning growth* and *economic development patterns*.

Metro Vision recognizes the interconnections between DRCOG's traditional planning focus on transportation, growth, and aging and disability needs with housing, economic development, community health, and resilience. One of Metro

Vision's overarching themes is "healthy, inclusive, and livable communities" with desired outcomes related to increased housing diversity to meet the needs of residents of all ages, incomes, and abilities. To this end, Metro Vision outlines specific objectives to diversify the region's housing stock, increase the regional supply of housing attainable for a variety of households, and increase opportunities for diverse housing accessible by multimodal transportation.

As the designated metropolitan planning organization for the Denver region, DRCOG is well-positioned to convene member governments and regional stakeholders, provide consistent guidance, data, and tools to help advance Metro Vision and encourage collaboration to meet the diverse housing needs across the region. This support from DRCOG allows local jurisdictions to focus on how they can influence development—by managing and encouraging new housing in ways that are consistent within a community's specific vision. Ultimately, increasing housing options relies on local policy, but regional coordination enables strategic and consistent action toward creating more equitable access and housing affordability across the Denver region.

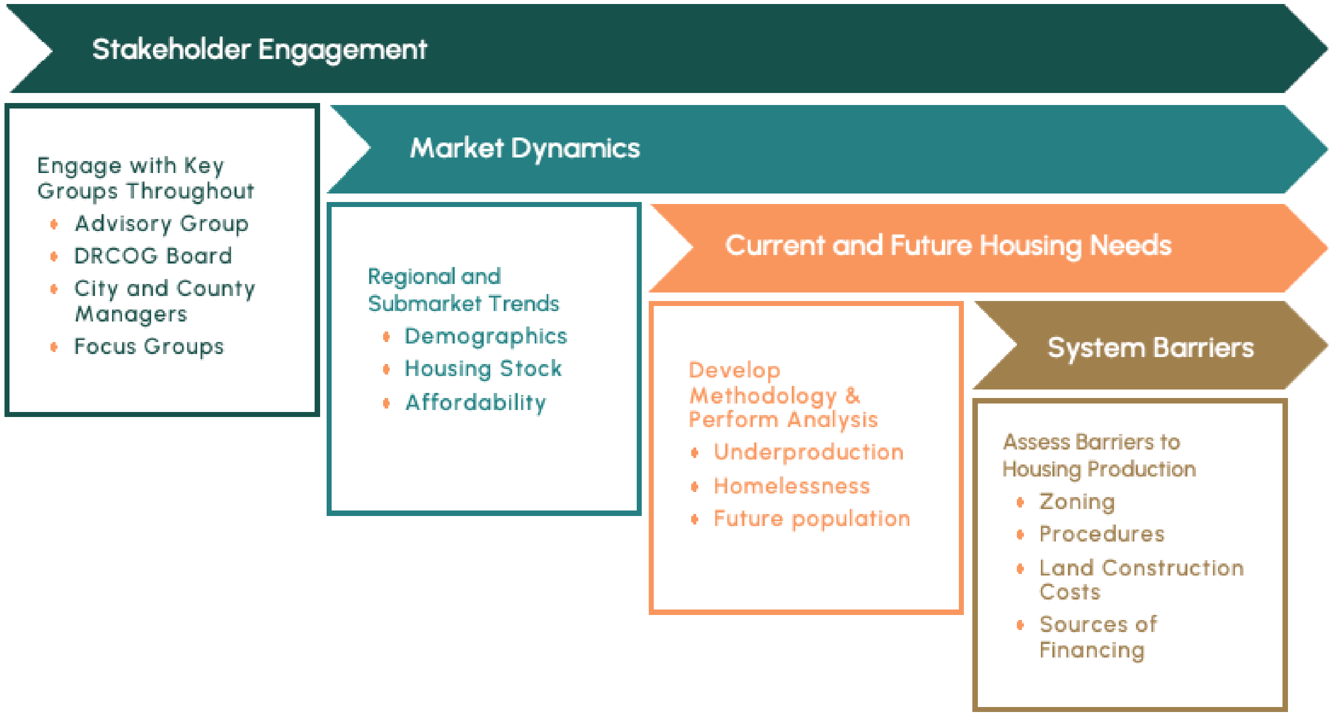
Building toward a regional strategy

DRCOG is approaching regional housing planning in two distinct pieces over the next two years. The first piece is a Regional Housing Needs Assessment, which developed a methodology and conducted an analysis to quantify housing needs across the region through 2050, as represented in Exhibit 2. This analysis helps provide a baseline understanding of the scope and scale of housing issues across the region and identifies key barriers to housing production.

Throughout the development of the Regional Housing Needs Assessment, the project team engaged key groups whose work touches on regional housing issues from different perspectives. An Advisory Group composed of representatives from local government, state agencies, housing developers, service providers, and advocates met six times throughout the project to provide feedback and guidance on the approach, methods, and key barriers to producing more needed housing in the Denver region. This group also helped establish the framework for a regional housing strategy.

In addition to the Advisory Group, the project team convened multiple focus groups and individual stakeholder meetings representing an array of interests and perspectives across approximately 200 participants. These conversations gathered critical information about municipal planning, infrastructure and utilities, the homebuilding sector, affordable housing, regional economic development, housing finance, aging services, and climate and sustainability issues. Input from this wide range of participants helped illuminate the challenges faced by public and private sector actors working to increase opportunity in the region and identify how a coordinated housing strategy could support those efforts. See Appendix A for a more detailed summary of stakeholder engagement activities.

Exhibit 2. Regional Housing Needs Assessment Process



The Regional Housing Strategy, expected to begin in late 2024, will involve working with local governments and housing partners across the region to develop a strategy to collectively address these identified housing needs.

What is a regional housing needs assessment?

Regional Housing Needs Assessments are critical tools for quantifying housing needs at a regional level. A housing needs assessment uses data on key demographic factors, housing stock characteristics, market trends, and forecasted population and job growth to understand the number of housing units an area will need to produce to meet current and future housing need over a specified planning period. With thoughtful design, these assessments offer planners and policymakers a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of housing need for people across the income spectrum and with different household characteristics, which allows for a more targeted and effective approach to meeting diverse needs.

2. Regional housing needs

DRCOG conducted this Regional Housing Needs Assessment to establish an objective, data-driven understanding of the baseline housing need for both the current and future population. Understanding the total need and affordability gaps at all income levels will critically inform local, regional and statewide efforts to address housing need. In addition, this housing needs assessment will serve as a foundation for the development of a regional housing strategy which will articulate what we can do collectively as a region. Throughout this Regional Housing Needs Assessment development, the following guiding principles were identified by DRCOG staff, the consultant team, and the Advisory Group to inform the process.

» **This chapter summarizes DRCOG's approach, methodology, results and key findings for regional housing needs.**

- Proactively determine housing need for the region.
- Develop a data-driven approach to policy and planning.
- Maintain transparency around data sources, limitations, and methodological choices.
- Align with Metro Vision planning areas and goals.
- Align future strategy development with subregional and local needs.

Key Findings

The key findings section summarizes important takeaways about regional housing needs. Further context and discussion follow.

» **The region needs to build 511,000 units by 2050 to meet current and future housing needs. While housing is needed at all income levels, housing that is affordable to households earning less than 60 percent of Area Median Income represents the largest share. The market will not deliver this type of housing on its own, particularly at the volume needed. Government subsidies and creative partnerships with private market actors will be required to meet housing needs.**

» **Adults aged 65 and older will comprise a larger share of the population by 2050 and household sizes are shrinking. These shifts in household composition along with forecasted housing need by income category shows that jurisdictions and the region**

will need to plan for more diverse housing options for a broader range of household incomes to meet current and future housing needs.

» **The Denver region has seen booms and busts in housing production over the past several decades. Yet new housing has not kept pace with overall population growth over the same period. A steep decline in construction during the Great Recession contributes to the shortage of needed housing today. As an additional challenge, the existing housing stock does not support the diversity of housing needs across all income levels and household types.**

» **The differences in need and supply across submarkets highlight the range of housing dynamics across the region and demonstrate the need for more tailored strategy development for submarkets and the local governments within them. Opportunities to align housing with transportation access, job centers and other key factors also differ across regional submarkets and highlight the different roles they can play in meeting the region's overall housing needs.**

How to measure regional housing need

This Regional Housing Need Assessment estimates the number of households across the Denver region that will need dwelling units affordable to them between 2023 and 2050. This estimate of needed housing is created using Census data on population and housing, regional population forecasts, and other local data sources. A detailed description of the data sources and methodology used in this RHNA is included in Appendix C.

At a high level, the method used in this Regional Housing Needs Assessment has two primary components:

- **Future need:** To project future housing need, the analysis uses the State Demography Office's projected household growth for the Denver region through 2050. This household projection gets translated to housing units by factoring in a healthier vacancy rate that enables greater mobility within the housing market and across the region. This number is then compared to the current supply of housing.
- **Current need:** To estimate current need, two components must be included. Underproduction is the estimated number of housing units that are needed to provide sufficient housing to current residents that are well captured in census surveys. Homelessness need is the estimated number of housing units that are needed for those currently experiencing homelessness who are not well captured in census surveys.

Regional housing needs

The analysis shows the Denver region will need to produce just over 511,000 new housing units between 2023-2050 to address current need, driven by underproduction and people experiencing homelessness, and future need, driven by anticipated population growth. A breakdown by component of the total housing need through 2050 for the Denver Region is shown in Exhibit 3 below.

Exhibit 3: Summary of housing need by component, 2023–2050

Component	Housing units	Share
Current need	52,000	10%
Future need	458,000	90%
Total units	**511,000**	**100%**

Source: ECOnorthwest analysis; DRCOG synthesis of State Demography Office 2022 Household Forecast; and U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-year 2013 Public Use Microdata Sample estimates; Metro Denver Homeless Initiative State of Homelessness Report, 2022–2023

Total housing need by income

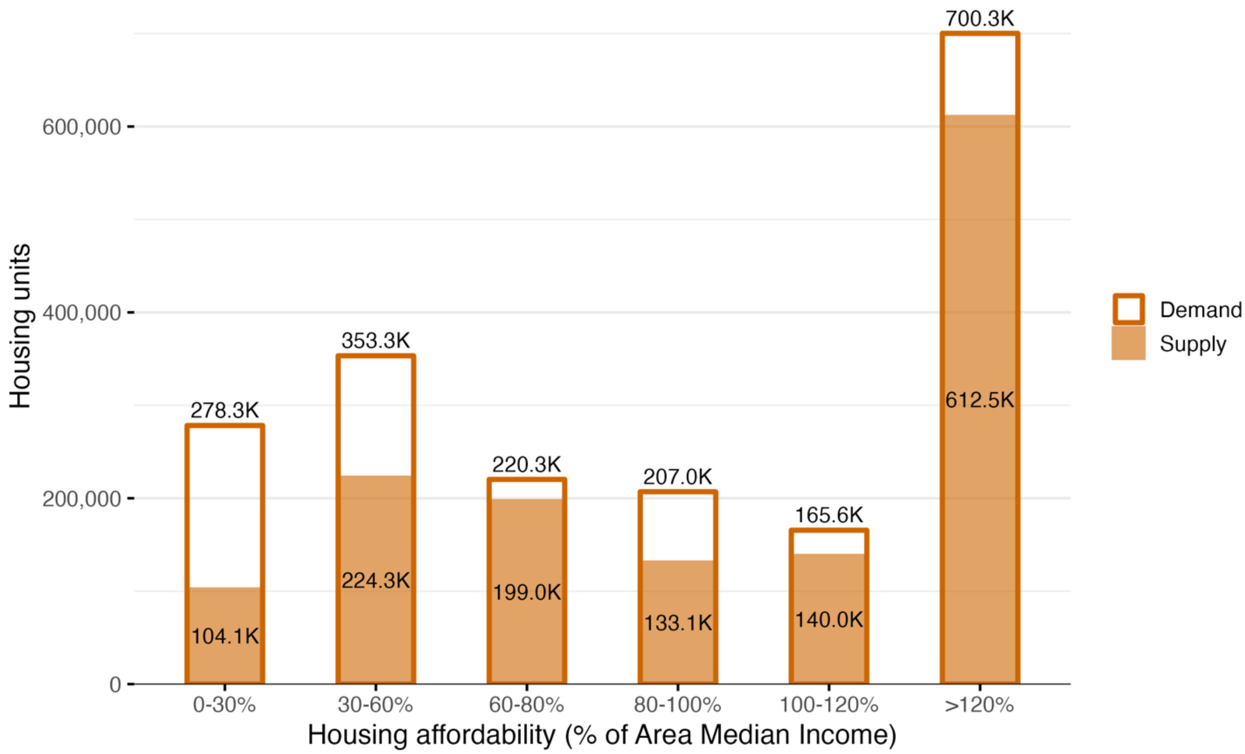
The Regional Housing Needs Assessment allocates total housing needs by 2050 based on different income levels, recognizing that households across the income spectrum need affordable housing options. Exhibit 4 shows the distribution of total needed units by Area Median Income relative to the current supply of housing affordable to households earning those incomes.[5] Exhibit 5 shows the distribution of total needed units by income and housing need component.

Housing needs for the Denver region are heavily skewed toward lower income households. An estimated 303,000 housing units for households earning 0–60 percent of the Area Median Income are needed to meet current and future demand. The private market typically fails to deliver housing affordable to these income levels, as they require a patchwork of financial subsidies to build and maintain. Housing needs are lower for households in the 60–80 percent Area Median Income range, partly due to an existing supply of housing affordable to these income levels.[6] Just over 187,000 units serving higher earning households above 80 percent of Area Median Income are also needed. The market can potentially produce housing for these income levels on its own, assuming supportive local policies are in place.

[5] According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, housing is considered affordable for a household if their housing costs do not exceed more than 30 percent of their annual income, including additional expenses such as insurance, property tax, and utility expenses. This standard of affordability traces back to rent caps established for public housing tenants.

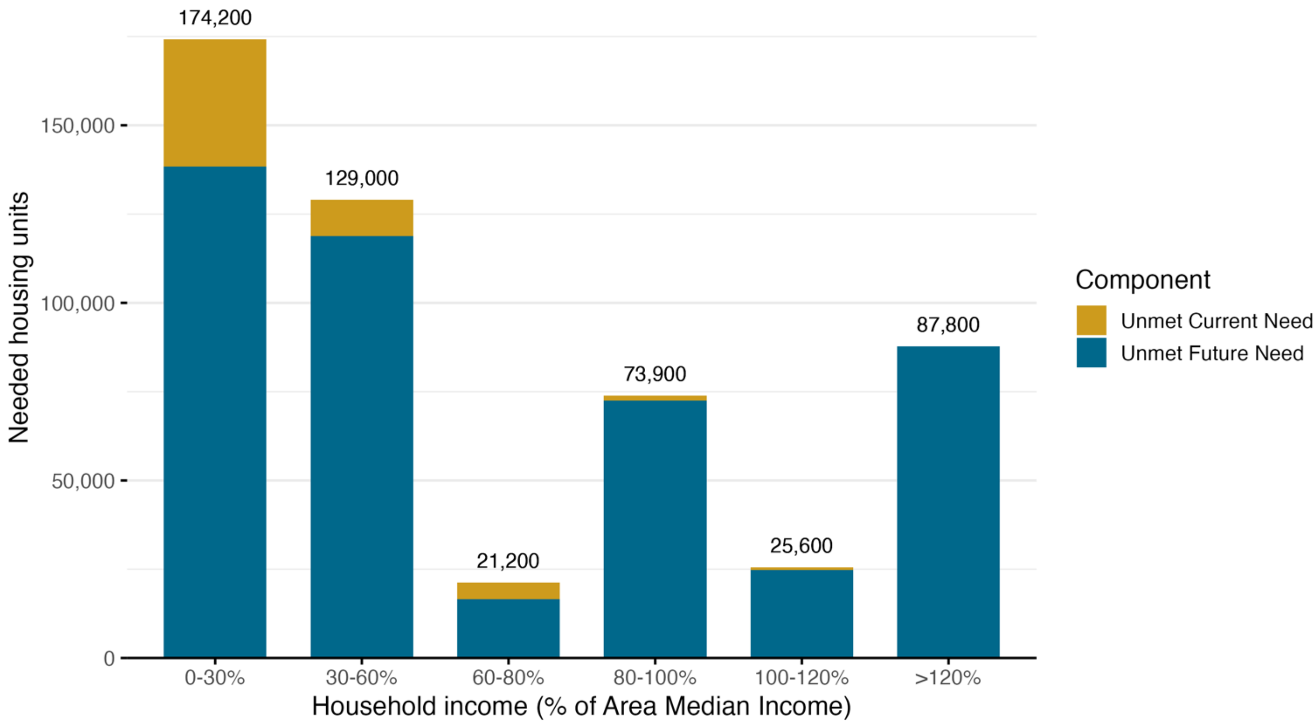
[6] While there is a relative match between the number of households at this income level and the number of housing units affordable to them, mismatches at lower and higher income levels increase the competition for moderately priced housing. As a result, many communities observe a shortage of available housing affordable to households earning between 60 and 100 percent of Area Median Income.

Exhibit 4: Housing need compared to current supply by income, 2023–2050



Source: ECOnorthwest analysis; DRCOG synthesis of State Demography Office 2022 Household Forecast and U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-year 2013 Public Use Microdata Sample estimates; Metro Denver Homeless Initiative State of Homelessness Report, 2022–2023

Exhibit 5. Housing need components by income, 2023–2050



Source: ECOnorthwest analysis; DRCOG synthesis of State Demography Office 2022 Household Forecast and U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-year 2013 Public Use Microdata Sample estimates; Metro Denver Homeless Initiative State of Homelessness Report, 2022–2023

10-year scaled estimate

The Regional Housing Needs Assessment estimates need through 2050, but this estimate can be adjusted for a shorter planning horizon to better understand the number of units needed in the near term and to align policies and strategies with current market conditions. Therefore, the analysis includes results adjusted for a 10-year horizon, out to 2032. All of current need units are included in the 10-year scaled estimate. The 10-year estimate represents 42 percent of the total need through 2050.

Over 216,000 housing units are needed in the Denver region between 2023 and 2032 to address current need, driven by underproduction and people experiencing homelessness, and future need, driven by anticipated population growth through 2032. A breakdown by component of the housing need through 2032 for the Denver region is shown in Exhibit 6 below.

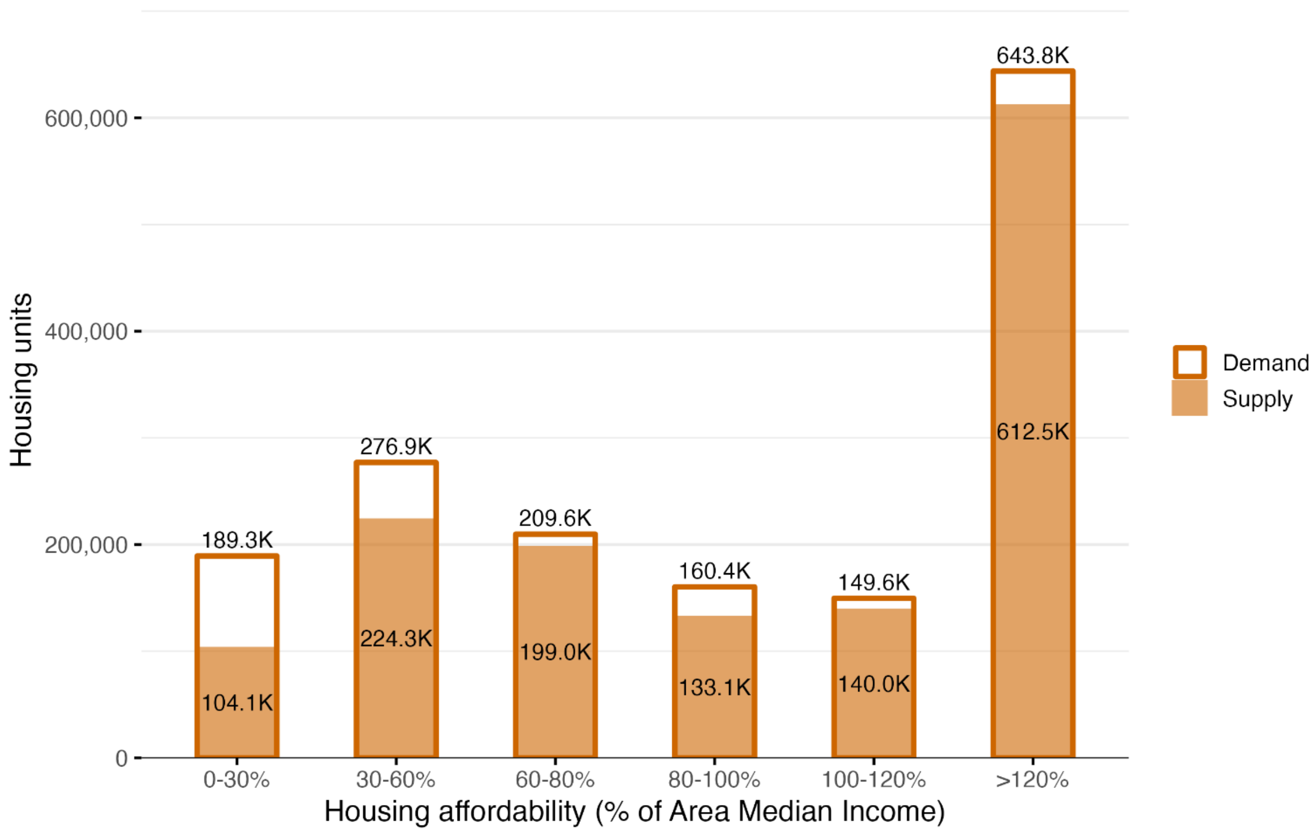
Exhibit 6: 10-Year scaled estimate of housing need

Component	Housing units	Share
Current need	52,000	24%
Future need	164,000	76%
Total units	**216,000**	**100%**

Source ECOnorthwest analysis; DRCOG synthesis of State Demography Office 2022 Household Forecast and U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-year 2013 Public Use Microdata Sample estimates; Metro Denver Homeless Initiative State of Homelessness Report, 2022–2023

Exhibit 7 shows the 10-year distribution of total needed units by area median income relative to the current supply of housing affordable to households earning those incomes. The distributions reflect the assumptions and methods, discussed above, that allocate all units to address homelessness and more of the units to address underproduction to the lowest income categories. Therefore, the 10-year estimate still shows the greatest need in the 0–60 percent Area Median Income categories.

Exhibit 7. 10-Year scaled estimate of housing need compared to current supply by income



Source: ECOnorthwest analysis; DRCOG synthesis of State Demography Office 2022 Household Forecast and U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-year 2013 Public Use Microdata Sample estimates; Metro Denver Homeless Initiative State of Homelessness Report, 2022–2023

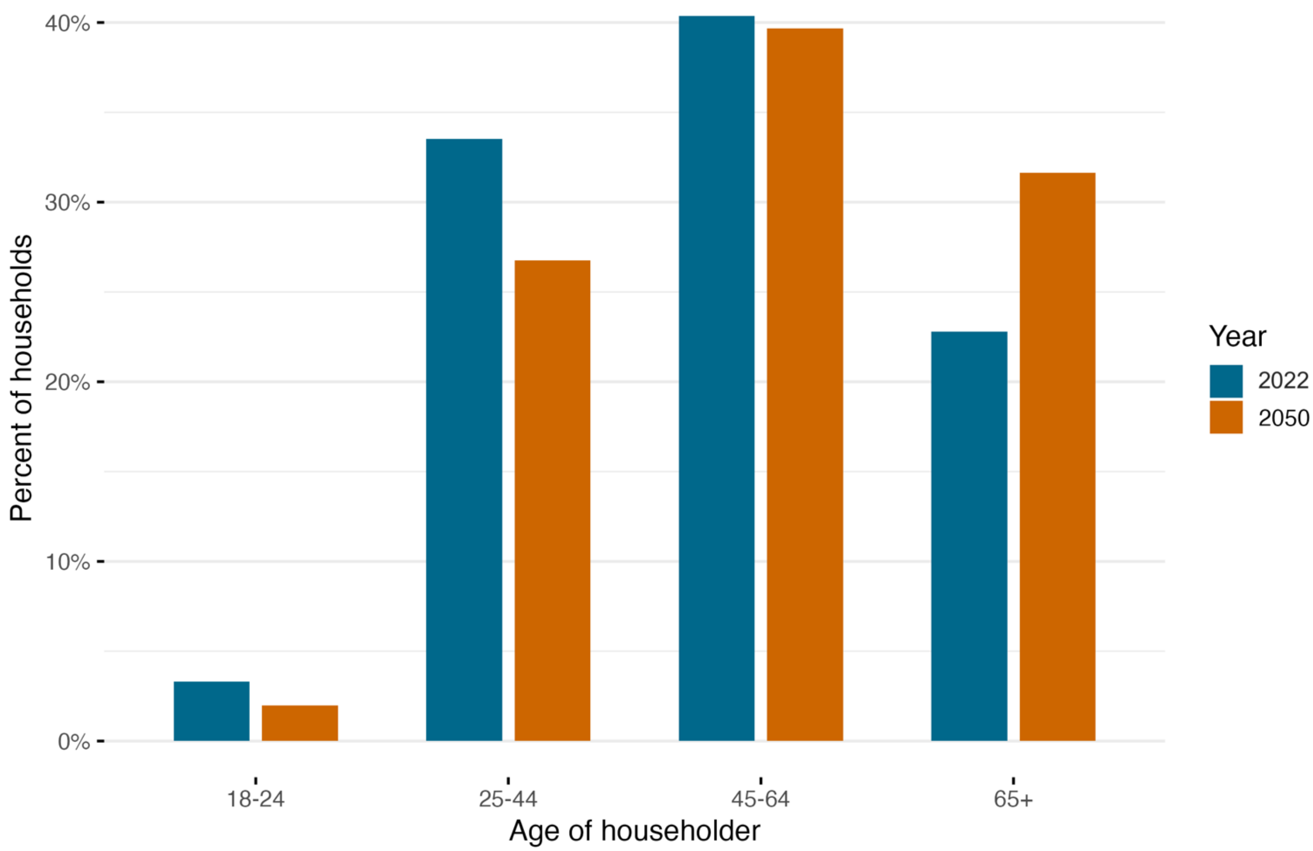
Key trends driving regional needs

Many factors shape the details of current and future housing needs, including demographic shifts and economic trends. In the Denver region, a few key trends are important for understanding why housing needs are heavily skewed toward lower income households. A more detailed assessment of demographic and housing trends is provided in Appendix B.

The region's population is aging

According to the 2022 Colorado State Demography Office household forecast for 2023 through 2050, adults over the age of 65 will become a larger share of population than they are currently. Since retirement often coincides with fixed or lower incomes compared to working years, the growth in the older adult population will contribute to a rise in the share of lower-income households overall. While some older adults may have accumulated greater wealth over their working years, many have fixed incomes that leave them susceptible to increasing housing costs. Others may have that wealth primarily as home equity, and thus locked into a home that may not meet their changing needs. The expected growth in this segment of the population contributes to the pressing need for more affordable housing options that also meet the mobility needs of older adults across the Denver region.

Exhibit 8. Percent of households by age range, 2022 & 2050, Denver region



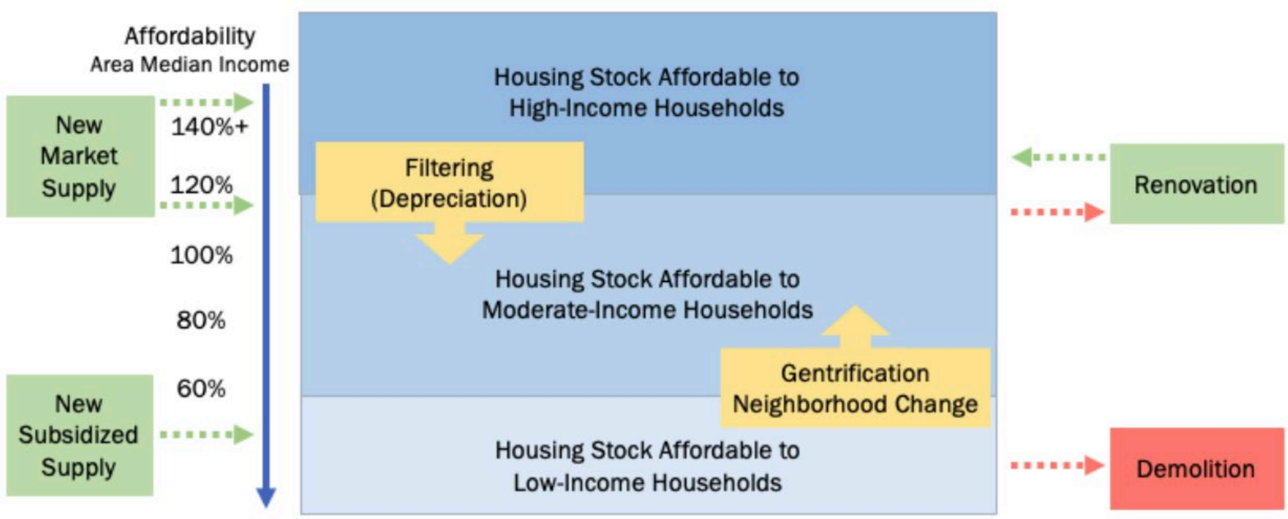
Source: DRCOG synthesis of State Demography Office 2022 Household Forecast and U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-year 2013 Public Use Microdata Sample estimates.

Existing housing supply has not kept pace with demand

In a growing region, new housing supply is needed to accommodate new households arriving to the area, natural population growth, changing preferences, and natural turnover and vacancy. New housing supply is essential to allow households the option to move and selfsort into the neighborhoods, housing types, and affordability levels that meet their needs and optimize their regular travel behaviors. Housing markets in growing areas like the Denver region need ample and well-distributed new supply. In a well-supplied housing market, households can move through the stock via a process called "filtering" or the "housing ladder." Over time, housing ages and depreciates, becoming relatively more affordable for different households.

New market-rate housing is typically priced for and occupied by higher income households, while new subsidized housing is usually priced for low-income households. Many higher income households move into newly constructed units from older, smaller or more affordable housing, which is then vacant and available for households with moderate incomes. When there is an adequate supply of new housing for a region's population, this dynamic creates a steady, though slow, process of increasing the supply of affordable housing through "filtering" as properties age (Exhibit 9). Some properties will eventually be demolished if they age or depreciate until they are no longer habitable or the cost of needed renovations exceeds the value. In under-supplied markets, however, this filtering process can slow further, stop, or move in reverse. In very tight housing markets, with steep competition for housing units, higher income households will occupy older or lower-cost units, causing a "mismatch" between what those households can afford and their actual housing costs. At the same time, lower income households will experience this "mismatch" by having to pay a larger share of their income toward housing as competition increases rents. Renovations can also reposition lower cost units for higher income households. When competition and demand concentrate in specific locations, these dynamics contribute to neighborhood gentrification and the loss of affordable housing units.

Exhibit 9. Illustration of housing market filtering



Source: ECOnorthwest

Housing production in the Denver region has largely kept pace with population growth in the last several years, and notably the share of multifamily units is growing. The region is still working from a place of historic underproduction and the existing housing stock does not support the diversity of housing needs across all income levels and household types. This has created a mismatch between household income and housing costs, where households are occupying housing units that generally cost less than the household can afford or they're likely occupying housing units that cost more than their income can afford, demonstrating a substantial need for more affordable housing options for lower income households making between 0–60 percent of Area Median Income and a need to continue delivering market-rate units that more adequately meet the demand for middle and higher-income households.

Even when filtering is occurring and housing is becoming relatively more affordable over time, governments still must invest in building new regulated affordable units to meet the needs of lower income residents. This type of housing almost always needs government intervention and public subsidy to be developed. Voucher-based assistance that subsidizes lower income residents' access to market-rate units is another way to help meet this need, though limited funding results in long waiting lists for households that qualify.

3. Submarket housing needs

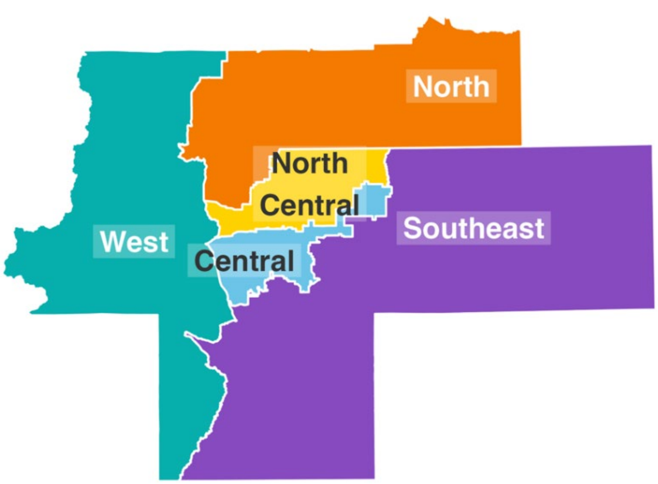
In consultation with DRCOG staff, the project team created a model for distributing the 10-year scaled estimate of the Regional Housing Needs Assessment results among five submarkets.

» **This chapter summarizes DRCOG's approach, methodology, results and key findings for submarket housing needs.**

Understanding housing need at a submarket level can better account for local differences rather than relying on regional trends or averages. This approach allows for more targeted strategy and policy development to support investments based on the distinct needs within specific submarkets, rather than utilizing a one-size-fits-all approach. Defining submarkets also provides a basis for understanding shared responsibility that can support potential future collaboration between neighboring jurisdictions to address their shared housing needs.

The submarkets in this Regional Housing Needs Assessment are contiguous areas that were defined by evaluating how housing location decisions are made across the region in relation to commute patterns and employment locations. This approach allows DRCOG and stakeholders to understand how households make decisions related to job location, housing affordability, and transportation access. Exhibit 10 shows the five submarkets—West, Central, North Central, North, and Southeast—used in the Regional Housing Needs Assessment.

Exhibit 10. Regional submarkets



Source: ECOnorthest analysis of ACS 1-year 2022 PUMS and LODES data. Note that delineation follows Public Use Microdata Areas and thus extend beyond DRCOG boundary in the North Submarket.

Submarket housing needs

Regional housing need was distributed to the submarkets based on criteria that reflect both current conditions and needs and forecasted future conditions and needs. The criteria include factors that shape the demand for housing, align with regional planning goals for greater affordability across the region, and recognize the intricate relationship between transportation infrastructure and employment centers to improve access to job opportunities and reduce commute times. At a high level, the categories and rationale behind the criteria are as follows:

- **Population**: Housing need corresponds directly to population size.
- **Regional jobs**: Employment is a driver of housing demand. Better matching of job and housing locations creates more options for housing, shortens commute times, and eases strain on the region's transportation systems.
- **Multimodal accessibility**: Metro Vision outlines a plan for more compact urban development and a greater use of transit, walking, and biking for daily activities.
- **Housing availability:** Low rental vacancy rates help illuminate places where housing is particularly in high demand and short supply, relative to the region as a whole.
- **Housing affordability**: Every community in the Denver region has a role to play in planning for housing affordable to a range of incomes. Areas with a smaller supply of affordable housing contribute to regional inequities in access to opportunity and suboptimal transportation outcomes.

DRCOG can also use the above criteria to distribute the resulting submarket shares of regional need among local jurisdictions. Such a process will help illustrate local housing need by income in a regional and submarket context. The project team has equipped DRCOG staff to be able to run and refine this model as needed and as inputs to the regional housing needs estimate change, such as regional population and jobs forecasts from the State Demography Office.

Exhibit 11 shows the 10-year scaled estimate of total regional need—approximately 216,000 units distributed across the five regional submarkets, broken out by component of need.

Exhibit 11. Summary of submarket share of regional need, 10-year scaled estimate

Submarket	Current need	Future need	Total units
Central	14,000	56,000	**70,000**
North	8,000	29,000	**37,000**
North Central	7,000	27,000	**34,000**
Southeast	21,000	48,000	**69,000**
West	2,000	4,000	**6,000**

Source: ECOnorthwest analysis; DRCOG Small-Area Forecast (2020), DRCOG synthesis of State Demography Office 2022 Household Forecast, U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 1-year 2022 PUMS estimates; MDHI 2022–2023 State of Homelessness Report.

Submarket housing need by income

Differences in need across the submarkets highlight the imbalance of housing demand across the region relative to existing supply and affordability, as shown in Exhibit 12 and Exhibit 13. These differences contribute to problematic transportation outcomes, such as longer commutes and less access to opportunity. Variation across the submarkets also demonstrates the need to develop tailored strategies to meet varied needs across the region.

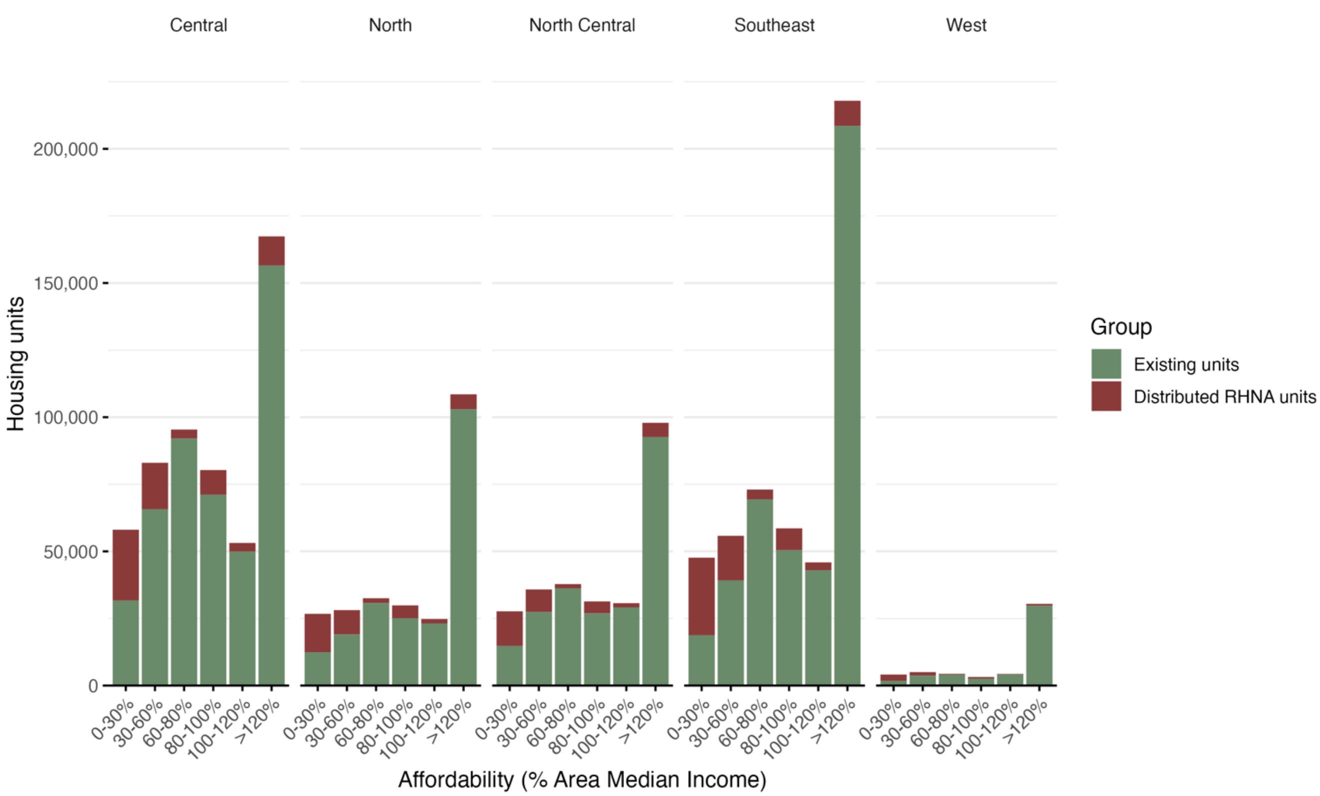
Exhibit 12. Submarket share of regional need by income, 10-year scaled estimate

SUBMARKET	0–30%	30–60%	60–80%	80–100%	100–120%	>120%	TOTAL
Central	27,000	17,000	3,000	9,000	3,000	11,000	**70,000**
North	14,000	9,000	2,000	5,000	2,000	5,000	**37,000**
North Central	13,000	8,000	2,000	4,000	2,000	5,000	**34,000**
Southeast	29,000	17,000	3,000	8,000	3,000	9,000	**69,000**
West	2,300	1,300	300	600	200	700	**6,000**
Total	**85,000**	**52,000**	**11,000**	**27,000**	**10,000**	**31,000**	**216,000**

Source: ECOnorthwest analysis; DRCOG Small-Area Forecast (2020), DRCOG synthesis of State Demography Office 2022 Household Forecast, U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 1-year 2022 PUMS estimates; MDHI 2022–2023 State of Homelessness Report.

Note: Components of need do not sum to total because of rounding.

Exhibit 13. Submarket share of total need compared to current supply, 10-year scaled estimate



Source: ECOnorthwest analysis; DRCOG synthesis of State Demography Office 2022 Household Forecast and U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-year 2013 Public Use Microdata Sample estimates; Metro Denver Homeless Initiative State of Homelessness Report, 2022–2023; DRCOG 2020 Small-Area Forecast

Regional submarket factors

Variation in housing need across the submarkets reflect different ways in which these areas have been affected by and responded to broader regional trends. These more localized trends can be used to inform policy decisions that support meeting a broader regional need.

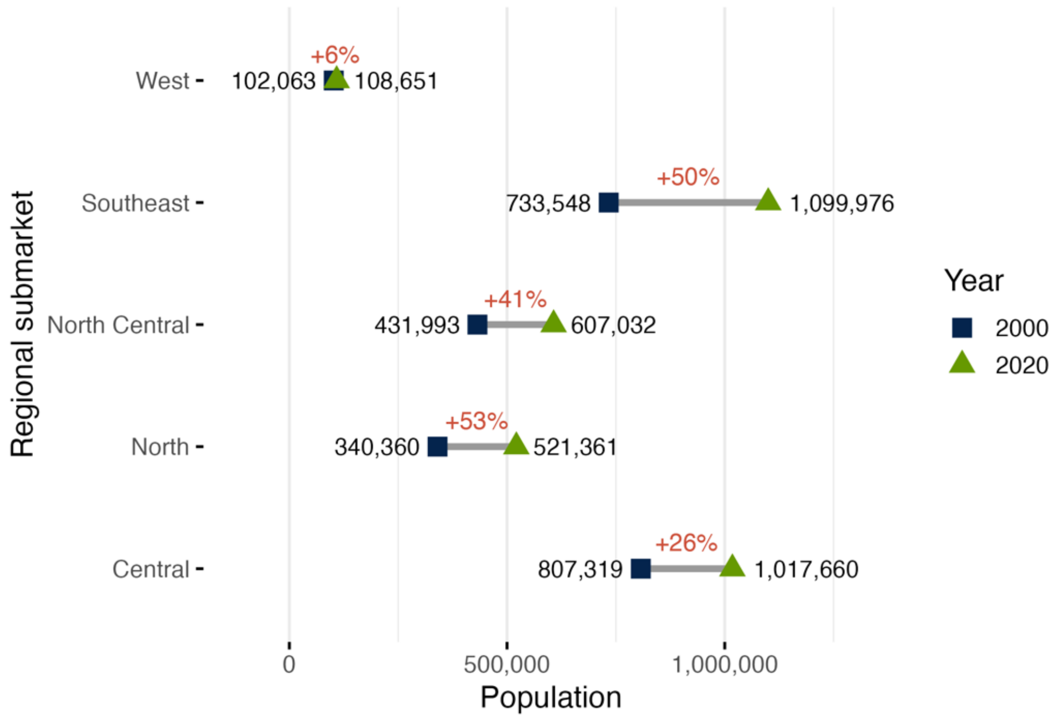
Population and job growth has been uneven

While the Denver region as a whole has seen significant job and population growth over the past several decades, these trends have not been distributed across the submarkets proportionately, as shown in Exhibit 14 and Exhibit 15.

The Southeast submarket, which includes cities such as Aurora, Castle Rock, Littleton, and Englewood saw the highest total population growth over the last 20 years with over 366,000 new people. While the Central submarket, which includes Denver and Lakewood, saw population grow by only 26 percent, this still accounted for over 210,000 new people over 20 years. The North Central region, which includes Northglenn, Westminster, Brighton and Commerce City, also grew rapidly with a 41 percent increase in population. The North submarket, encompassing cities like Boulder, Erie, Longmont, and Louisville, experienced the highest rate of population growth, 53 percent. The more isolated West submarket grew the least over the last two decades.

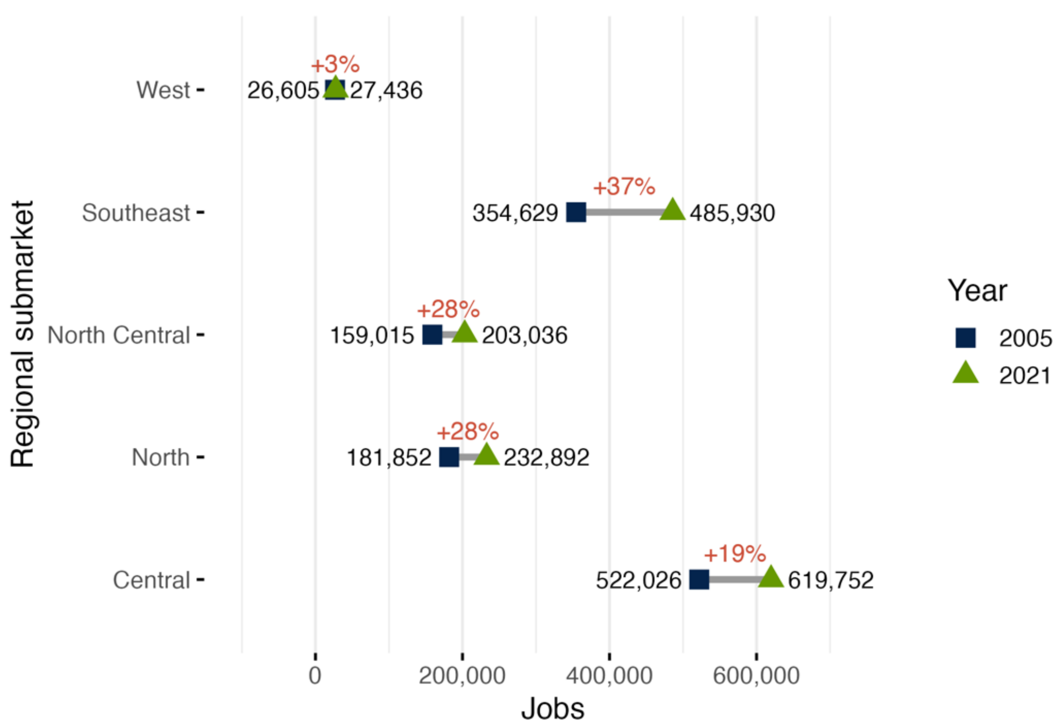
Exhibit 15 shows that the Southeast submarket has seen the largest increase in jobs since 2000, followed by the Central and North submarkets. These submarkets have all increased jobs for different reasons, for example land supply and new commercial development in the Southeast submarket, urban intensification and redevelopment in the Central submarket, and growth in institutional employment and tech and supportive industries in the North submarket. While employment growth is forecast to grow at slower rates through 2050, job growth will continue to occur, which will lead to increased demand for housing across the submarkets.

Exhibit 14. Population change, regional submarkets, 2000–2020



Source: ECOnorthwest analysis of U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census 2000, 2020.

Exhibit 15. Job growth, regional submarkets, 2005–2021

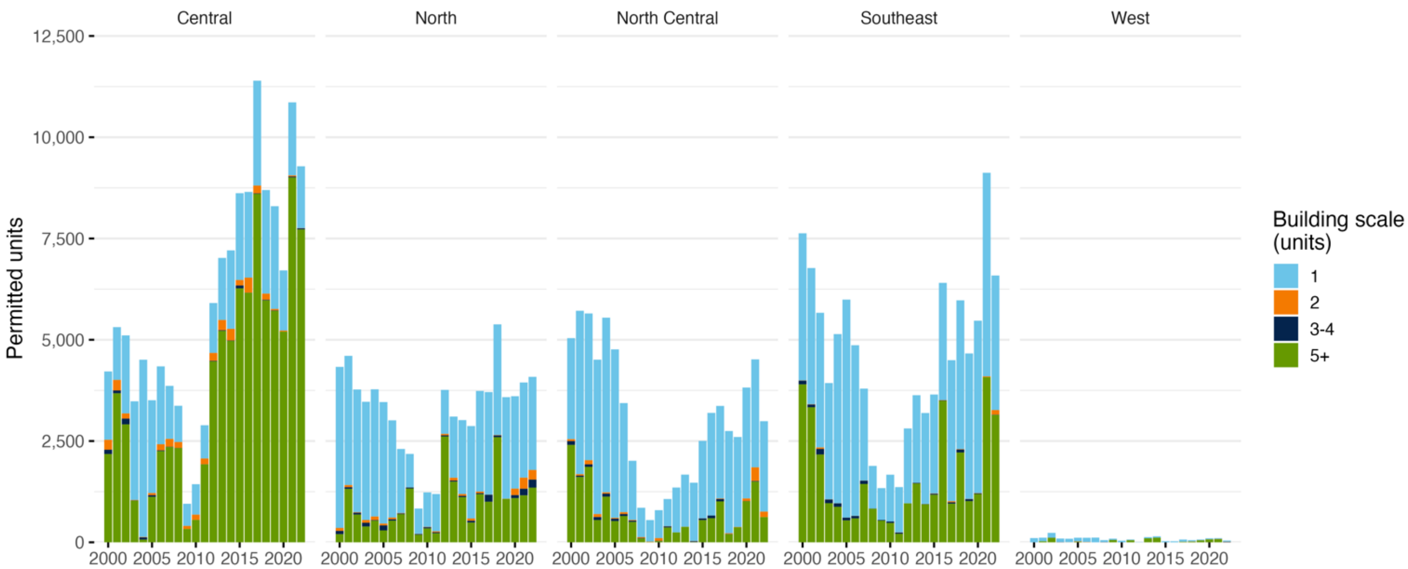


Source: ECOnorthwest analysis of LODES data 2005 and 2021.

New housing supply varies across the submarkets

Housing production trends across the submarkets can help paint a more complete picture of regional dynamics, especially in the context of the population and job growth trends. As shown in Exhibit 16, the submarkets have experienced varied amounts of new construction and differences in the types of housing being built.

Exhibit 16. Housing production, regional submarkets, 2000–2020



Source: ECOnorthwest analysis of U.S. Census Bureau Building Permit Survey.
Note: Unincorporated portions of the regional submarkets are not included in these totals.

The Central submarket has seen a large increase in housing production after recovering from the 2008 recession. The Central submarket saw both the fastest housing recovery post-recession as well as seeing new housing production at rates both higher than other submarkets and higher than the previous 2002–2008 period of economic expansion. During the post-recession market recovery, the Central submarket began shifting toward more dense multifamily development in response to previous plans and policies. In 2022, the Central submarket delivered over 9,200 housing units, substantially more than its pre-2008 recession peak year.

The North submarket has returned to pre-recession levels of housing production, but new housing development is not occurring at rates that reflect rapid population growth in the submarket. The submarket had a record year in 2018, delivering just over 5,300 units. In 2022, over 4,000 units were built, similar to its early 2000s pace. While single-unit development continues to make up the largest share of new housing, there has been a notable increase of new multifamily units that make up a larger share of new production than in the pre-2008 economic cycle.

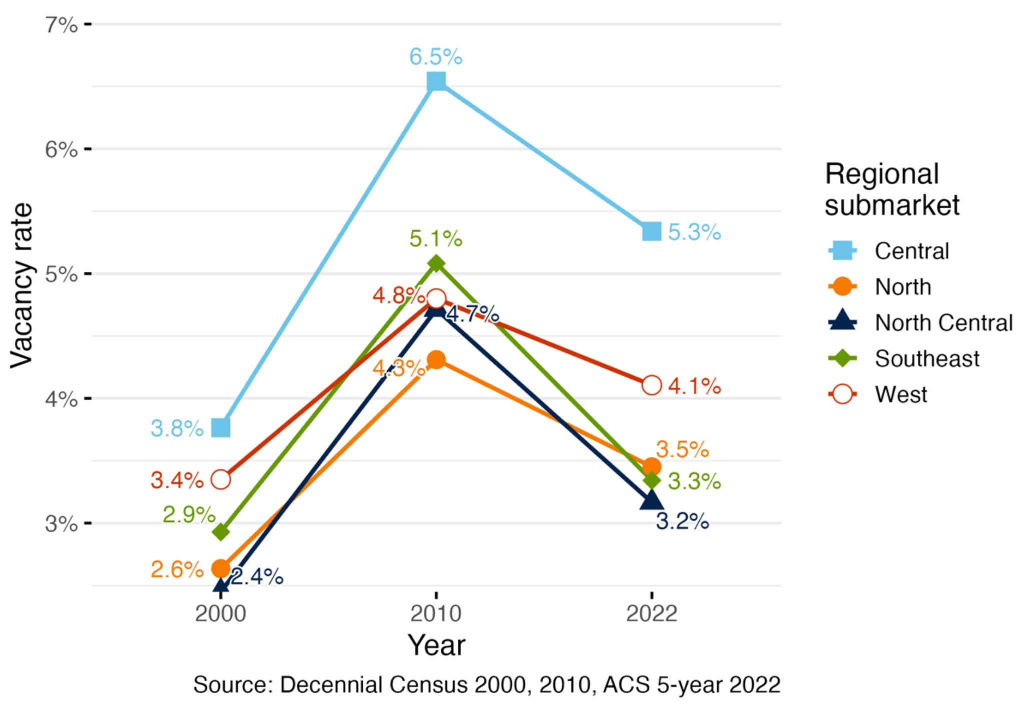
The North Central submarket appears to have struggled to fully recover post-recession compared to other submarkets. Housing production remained slow, with just under 3,000 units delivered in 2022, well below its pre-recession peaks and not in line with observed population growth, which can lead to housing pressures in the submarket.

The Southeast submarket has recovered to its pre-recession housing production levels, especially over the last few years. The submarket saw a record production year in 2021 with over 9,100 housing units permitted, and another 6,500 units in 2022. The Southwest submarket also saw a large increase in the share of multifamily production in 2021 and 2022.

The West submarket's production pace stayed relatively flat over the past decade. Fewer than 2,000 housing units were permitted between 2000 and 2020, which contributes to both limited housing availability and relatively slow population growth that has occurred in many of these smaller communities across the foothills.

Differences in housing production are partially reflected in the different rates of housing vacancy across the submarkets, as shown in Exhibit 17.

Exhibit 17. Vacancy trends by regional submarket, 2000–2022



Source: ECOnorthwest analysis of U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census 2000, 2010; American Community Survey 5-year 2022 estimates.

The North Central, Southeast, and Northern submarkets currently have the lowest vacancy rates for both ownership and rental housing in the region, indicating constrained housing markets as shown in Exhibit 17. The Central submarket indicates vacancies are slightly higher than other submarkets likely due to higher rates of recent multifamily development that has led to absorption periods for a larger volume of new units. The West submarket has seen relatively stable vacancy rates since 2000 due to relatively slow changing housing stock given the less urban character of communities in the submarket.

4. Systemic barriers to meeting housing needs

Two key challenges in meeting the Denver region's housing needs include building housing that supports the diversity of housing needs across all income levels and household types and ensuring that diverse housing options exist across the region's submarkets. When looking at the region as a whole, the production of market-rate housing has kept better pace with the demand from higher income households. This level of production needs to be sustained to continue meeting projected needs, and should be more evenly distributed across communities to create more opportunity for residents to make choices based on their needs and preferences. At the same time, the region will need to significantly increase the production of affordable housing, especially for the lowest income households to meet the scale of existing and future needs.

» **This chapter summarizes the varied and intersecting barriers to producing more housing overall and more diverse types of housing in the region.**

The barriers to meeting housing needs described in this report were identified by regional stakeholders including, local government staff, representatives from lending and investment institutions, developers, professional associations, state and regional agencies, consultants, as well as infrastructure/utility providers and advocacy and service organizations. The barriers to producing more housing—and at a higher rate than past trends—are varied, operate at multiple levels, and interact in complex ways. These obstacles are not uniform across the region; they vary significantly depending on the unique characteristics of each geographic location and evolve over time in response to changing circumstances. Typically, it is the combination and intersection of these barriers that hinders housing projects—especially those affordable at low and moderate incomes—either by preventing them from moving forward altogether or by resulting in the development of fewer units than what might be allowed or desired under current conditions.

The categories discussed below highlight key issues that affect how and how much housing is built in the region. Appendix D contains a more detailed discussion of each category and examples of how these barriers are experienced in communities across the Denver region.

Land use and zoning

Land use refers to the way in which land is utilized and managed, including how land should be allocated for various purposes, such as residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural, recreational, or conservation areas. Land use planning provides a vision for future development within neighborhoods, districts, towns, cities, counties, regions or other defined planning areas. Local jurisdictions play a crucial role in determining the balance of land uses within their boundaries through comprehensive plans, zoning ordinances, and development standards. They aim to ensure that the allocation of land aligns with the community's vision, goals, and priorities while considering factors such as economic development, environmental sustainability, and quality of life.

Zoning regulates local land use by establishing guidelines and restrictions used to control and guide property development in various areas within cities, towns, and counties. Communities are divided into districts or zones, each with specific regulations governing allowed uses, building size, dimensional requirements, density, parking, and other development standards.

Land use and zoning barriers include:

- **Zoning that supports a narrow range of housing types** limits the land available for more housing production and options.
- **Open space and off-street parking requirements** limit housing production by making many types of housing infeasible in many locations.
- **Exclusively commercial zones** also reduce the land available for more housing production.
- **Permitting and procedures** reduce housing production feasibility through greater costs including additional time, other delays, uncertainty, and risk.
- Where local regulation-based **incentives are not matched to needed housing types**, the value of such incentives are not able to make up for additional costs needed to increase housing production and options.

Infrastructure

Infrastructure refers to the fundamental facilities and services that support a community's development and operation. In the context of housing, key infrastructure includes transportation networks such as roads, public transit, sidewalks, and bikeways; water and sewer systems; stormwater management systems for collecting and treating runoff; energy sources such as electricity and natural gas; and community facilities such as schools and parks. The costs and construction of new infrastructure are often shared between the private and public sectors where private developers install infrastructure related to their projects and public sector agencies provide and maintain larger, off-site infrastructure systems, funded through taxes, user fees, and impact fees charged to developers. However, over time, the roles of the private and public sectors in providing and funding infrastructure projects have become more blurred due to funding challenges. Increasingly, private developers are required to contribute more to off-site infrastructure improvements, while public agencies need to explore innovative partnerships and financing mechanisms to deliver and maintain necessary facilities and services.

Infrastructure barriers include:

- **Limited infrastructure funding** leads to a heavy reliance on user fees, potentially burdening existing residents. Additionally, jurisdictions face the risk of taking on burdensome bond obligations, so they often delegate infrastructure development to developer-led special districts.
- **Limited capacity of existing systems** may require developers to facilitate upgrades themselves. These added costs can make housing projects less financially feasible, especially for affordable housing, resulting in less housing production, fewer units in the projects that do move forward, or a focus on higher-priced housing units that can absorb these additional costs.
- The presence of **multiple service providers** within a single jurisdiction complicates efforts to coordinate and potentially reduce or waive development fees.
- **Access to opportunity** presents a dual challenge in housing development. Areas that are destination-rich, compact, walkable, and well-served by existing transit typically have higher land costs, making development more expensive. Communities along historically underinvested corridors have concerns about the loss of more affordable housing options when the real estate market responds to regional transit improvements.

Development costs and market factors

The most important factor determining whether and what kind of housing gets built in our communities is financial feasibility. Both for-profit and nonprofit developers need the expected revenues of a finished project to at least cover the cost of repaying loans, providing a return on any investor equity, and covering their staffing and operational expenses. Local policies contribute to total project costs—regulations governing the size, unit density, materials and other design factors all affect a project budget. At the same time, broader market conditions influence the basic costs of development in ways that can make housing more expensive or less likely to be built.

Development costs and market barriers include:

- **Rising interest rates and insurance costs** affect housing development by slowing down development activity across all housing types, particularly affordable housing projects.
- **Elevated land values** may discourage public agencies from providing their holdings to support housing production due to their limited revenue options.
- Securing adequate **water supply** often incurs costs beyond just the infrastructure needed for delivery, further increasing development expenses.

- The construction industry faces a **labor shortage**, stemming from employment levels that have not fully recovered since the Great Recession, further exacerbated by high housing costs and the cyclical nature of Colorado's development industry.
- **Construction defect liability laws** have discouraged developers from building dense ownership housing, particularly condominiums.

Funding and finance

The terms "funding" and "financing" are often used interchangeably, but there is an important difference between the two. Funding describes the ultimate sources of money to pay for development costs and generally comes from private developers (for-profit or nonprofit) and investors or public sector partners (whether from local revenue sources, state funds, or federal funds). For affordable housing especially, the limited amount of funding available from all sources is the primary challenge to ramping up construction and preserving the affordable housing that already exists.

Financing describes mechanisms to distribute funding, such as loans, grants, and equity investments (among others). The features and requirements of different financing tools have implications for development costs, and some tools are better suited—or restricted, as in the case of tax credits—to certain kinds of development. Even jurisdictions that have limited sources of funding may be able to adjust how they finance development in order to better leverage funds to meet housing production needs.

Funding and finance barriers include:

- There's an over-reliance **on limited federal resources** for affordable housing development, with annual applications for federal tax credits in the state consistently exceeding the available supply.
- The **lack of a dedicated source of regional gap funding** creates challenges for projects that often face delays or even cancellation due to the time-consuming and complex process of assembling gap funding from multiple sources.
- **Local incentive programs** (e.g., voluntary inclusionary zoning) designed to boost affordable housing production often fall short of their intended goals.
- **Existing funding programs** for affordable housing development often favor larger-scale projects with experienced developers because of perceived lower risk, putting smaller communities at a disadvantage.

Community consensus and collective action

Beyond official rules, processes, and market factors, community consensus and collective action play crucial roles in shaping the local and regional housing landscape. The commitment of key stakeholders and elected officials is essential for enacting policies and allocating resources that support housing development. A lack of commitment or consensus can derail even well-intended efforts to meet housing needs. Similarly, collective action by community members and advocacy groups can either push housing initiatives forward or oppose development. Community consensus and collective action barriers include:

- **Local resistance to new housing development**, particularly affordable housing and diverse housing types, poses a significant barrier to addressing housing needs.
- The **lack of consistent local data** hinders a comprehensive understanding of housing needs across different jurisdictions.
- **Colorado's state tax policy**, particularly the Taxpayer Bill of Rights (TABOR), significantly constrains the government's ability to generate revenue that keeps pace with population growth and demographic changes. This often limits the capacity of government to fund housing initiatives and related services.

Interplay of barriers to building housing

Organizing barriers into key groups can help inform development of a future regional housing strategy with a framework that addresses both the broad issues and the on-the-ground experiences in the region. The interplay between factors such as market conditions, the regulatory environment, infrastructure availability, community context, and financial resources can lead to unintended outcomes. For example, land use and zoning barriers may create mismatches between areas with access to needed infrastructure, land prices or market demand to support feasible construction of more housing. Such interplay limits location flexibility and choices for the development of more housing and more housing options, affecting many sectors' ability to meet regional housing needs. Solutions to address these barriers will need to be multifaceted, well-researched, and comprehensive.

5. Moving toward a regional strategy

Addressing a regional issue requires regional partnership. Many stakeholders in the region, including DRCOG's member governments, have long identified the need for coordinating regional housing efforts to address the overall housing supply and affordability challenges. Local communities often struggle with access to consistent, reliable, and granular data for understanding demographic and housing trends that can establish a baseline to inform strategic and effective housing policy. Some communities may also lack the technical expertise and/or staff capacity to maintain regular coordination between neighboring jurisdictions that is necessary to meaningfully address housing affordability.

» **This chapter outlines a framework for developing a regional housing strategy to address the housing needs and challenges identified in the Regional Housing Needs Assessment.**

With a long history of regional planning and coordination, DRCOG is well positioned to convene diverse partners through the development of a regional strategy. A regional housing strategy will align efforts across the region and identify collective actions to address housing supply and affordability. DRCOG has collaborated with stakeholders and partners, including the Advisory Group, to develop a framework, described below, that will serve as the foundation for creating a regional housing strategy.

Components of a regional strategy

A regional strategy is intended to foster shared understanding, collaboration, and actions to help jurisdictions make progress toward addressing the region's housing needs. The housing strategy will aim to address the region's current and future housing needs outlined in this report while better coordinating housing and transportation. The framework offers preliminary purpose and vision, guiding principles, and focus areas to kickstart the process of developing a regional strategy led by DRCOG, in partnership with member jurisdictions, and other stakeholders.

Purpose and vision

Defining statements of purpose and vision help orient the strategy toward achieving broader goals for regional collaboration beyond the specific outcomes related to meeting housing needs. This preliminary vision builds on DRCOG's mission as a regional planning organization and its relationship with member jurisdictions.

- Support and further Metro Vision and the 2050 Metro Vision Regional Transportation Plan.
- Develop a consistent, data-informed, and equity-centered approach to analyzing and responding to housing needs while coordinating with the current and planned transportation system.
- Foster a culture of shared responsibility for addressing housing needs.
- Build consensus around a shared framework for action.
- Increase capacity within local communities to advance housing strategies and respond to evolving needs.
- Build a region that is more resilient, inclusive and equitable.

Guiding principles

The following principles offer guidance for how a regional housing strategy can focus efforts and encourage coordinated action that accommodates a variety of partners. To achieve those ends, a regional housing strategy should:

- Align with the region's **equity** vision for communities that offer access to opportunity and meet the needs of all races, ages, incomes, and abilities.
- Be **data-informed**, grounded in a **shared understanding** of the region's diverse housing needs.
- Ensure **flexibility** in responding to the contexts of communities across the region.
- Be **comprehensive** in addressing the barriers to more housing and more diverse types.
- Reflect the unique roles and authorities of each sector while facilitating **collaboration** and **shared accountability**.
- Identify resource requirements to ensure **actionable plans** and deliver **desired outcomes**.
- Balance **near-term results with long-term resilience** to meet housing needs under varied economic conditions.

Focus areas and intended outcomes

Clearly articulated outcomes are an essential component of a regional housing strategy. Organizing outcomes around the identified barriers to housing production in the Denver region clarifies how specific actions and interventions can directly address challenges and contribute to overall housing goals.

Exhibit 18. Example outcomes of a regional strategy, by focus area

Focus area	Intended outcomes

Land Use, Zoning & Regulatory Processes	Increased housing supply aligned with regional and local needs (by household size, income, location, and preferences).
Infrastructure	Better alignment between housing development and infrastructure availability, condition and capacity.
Development Costs & Market Factors	Construction of more—and more diverse and affordable—housing options.
Funding & Capacity	Expanded and sustained affordable housing and preservation efforts.
Community Consensus & Collective Action	Improved policy alignment, resource leveraging, and broad support for addressing shared housing needs.

Implementation considerations

Additional factors related to implementation will be critical to define through the strategy development process. These include:

- **Roles and Responsibilities**: For each intervention, outlining the sector or specific actors best positioned to lead, those who will play supportive or complementary roles, and identifying DRCOG's role will set the stage for coordinated action.
- **Costs and Timeline**: Estimating the scale of investment, sources of funding, and time required for implementation will help jurisdictions prioritize and sequence actions to meet their local needs.
- **Impact**: Given the diversity of barriers and issues the regional housing strategy aims to address, it may be valuable to characterize the impact of specific interventions, whether it directly results in additional housing unit, is focused on a specific segment of housing need (such as low-income or older adult housing) or contributes to capacity-building among jurisdictions or partners.

What is DRCOG's role?

Given DRCOG's broad reach and role in shaping regional development, it is uniquely positioned to coordinate regional housing needs and strategy, particularly because of its formal planning roles in regional transportation and growth, its ability and role in regional population forecasting, and collection of growth and permit data. Engagement conducted among a broad segment of member governments, housing developers, public agencies, community-based organizations, policy organizations and service providers suggests that DRCOG can build on these existing roles and strengths as the region moves toward developing a housing strategy and taking a more coordinated, collaborative approach to addressing housing needs on a regional level than ever before.

DRCOG is recognized as a valuable partner in ways that can be leveraged for regional housing work:

- **Convening and facilitation**: DRCOG has been an effective and trusted convener of diverse stakeholders on issues of regional planning and policy that can facilitate greater resource alignment and partnerships.
- **Data collection and analysis**: DRCOG is seen as an important source for comprehensive, standardized data for jurisdictions and other stakeholders across the region.
- **Technical assistance**: DRCOG has a record of providing technical assistance to member governments that supplements and extends their local capacities.
- **Education**: DRCOG's current role in sharing information and providing education on regional issues can be leveraged to share best practice strategies on implementation at the local level.

Participants identified additional roles DRCOG could step into or expand from its current activities:

- **Policy alignment:** DRCOG could be a voice for the region at the state level to help ensure that new legislation and policies related to housing are aligned with other programs and priorities (e.g., transportation investments, climate planning) and are designed and funded for effective implementation.
- **Funding coordination:** DRCOG has been successful in setting the regional agenda for transportation planning and directing investments in line with those goals. A greater role with understanding, communicating and addressing regionwide housing needs could provide an additional new lens through which to evaluate and consider regional transportation system investments as well as housing-transportation coordination strategies.

How DRCOG plans to move forward

DRCOG will continue to engage member governments and other regional partners and stakeholders in a robust and collaborative process to craft a regional housing strategy starting in late 2024. This process will involve working closely with local communities, housing providers, advocates, and other key stakeholders to build on the shared vision and guiding principles outlines in this report and develop an actionable strategy for addressing the region's housing needs.

A critical component of developing the regional housing strategy will be conducting extensive community engagement to gather input and insights from a wide range of perspectives. DRCOG recognizes that meaningful community engagement is essential for crafting effective solutions that are responsive to the diverse needs and priorities across the Denver region. This engagement will aim to build broader awareness of regional housing challenges, identify local concerns and opportunities, and foster buy-in and collective ownership of the resulting strategy.

The regional housing strategy will serve as an important tool for integrating regional housing priorities into DRCOG's other major planning initiatives. DRCOG will utilize the housing strategy to guide updates to Metro Vision and the Metro Vision Regional Transportation Plan. By aligning these plans with the housing strategy, DRCOG can ensure a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to addressing the region's housing needs in the context of transportation investments and other regional priorities. By working collaboratively to develop a comprehensive regional housing strategy and integrate it with other key planning efforts, DRCOG and its partners can take a significant step toward fostering more equitable, resilient, and livable communities for all residents of the Denver region.