

IMPACT

Room at the Table: Increasing civic participation in local land use decision-making

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Introduction

In Connecticut, local land use boards composed of elected and appointed officials make the decisions on how land is used in a community—where homes and businesses are permitted, how large buildings can be, how much parking is required, etc. These boards include Planning & Zoning Commissions (PZCs), Planning Commissions (PCs), Zoning Commissions (ZCs) and Zoning Boards of Appeal (ZBAs). These decisions fundamentally shape the past, present and future of our communities by regulating the type, scale and location of development, infrastructure and open space, and setting the stage for how spaces are used and who they serve.

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Local decision-making has a long and cherished history in Connecticut.

Local decision-making has a long and cherished history in Connecticut. The quintessential American democratic concept of a “town hall” meeting comes from 17th century New England meeting halls, where local residents would debate consequential issues in the community. Today as it was back then, local participation can ensure that decisionmaking and policy is responsive to local desires and circumstances.

The citizens who voluntarily serve on land use boards provide a valuable public service, weighing the benefits and impacts of land use proposals and shaping the immediate and long-term future of their towns and cities. Given this extremely consequential role, **all local citizens should have a chance to serve on these bodies and contribute to local decision-making.** Access to the local decision-making process is part of the democratic spirit and history of this practice.

10%

10% on local land use boards in Fairfield and New London Counties are vacant.

10%

10% of land use board members are serving in expired terms in Fairfield and New London Counties.

Anecdotally, however, we know that it can be difficult for municipalities to fill seats on these all-volunteer boards, and broad citizen participation can be challenging for a number of reasons: the time commitment required of those who serve; evening meetings that conflict with childcare and work obligations; and general lack of awareness of how to get involved. A [national survey of land-use decision makers](#) published by the Urban Institute in 2023 noted that there is limited support for participation on land use boards, and that “the vast majority of positions are uncompensated, burdensome (requiring at least one day’s work per month to attend and prepare for meetings), and lack important supports such as child care.” Additionally, [training is limited](#) for board members, who may or may not have experience with land use and zoning regulations, policies, and best practices. Taken together, these challenges represent barriers to participation. They can lead to land use board memberships that skew towards people who face fewer of these barriers, resulting in land use decision making that does not necessarily reflect the full range of views and needs in local communities.

Now, through the Centers for Housing Opportunity (CHO) in Fairfield County and Eastern Connecticut, the Housing Collective has gathered demographic data on the composition of land use boards in Fairfield County and New London County that confirms this. Findings reveal that 10% of land use decision-making seats in both counties are unfilled, 10% of land

[Skip to content](#) ; are serving in expired terms, and decision makers as a whole are not demographically representative of the residents in their local communities or regions. ●

Fairfield County Land Use Board Membership

New London County Land Use Board Membership

In order to expand and better support broader civic participation in the land use decision-making process, local communities and organizations should consider how to make the process more accessible to a wider range of residents, starting by addressing some of the well-known challenges and barriers to entry noted above.

Land Use Decisions Made in Connecticut?

The state of Connecticut grants municipalities the authority to make land use decisions at the local level, via State Statute, §8-2. ● Land use boards in municipalities across the state meet regularly, typically one or more times per month, to review and approve or deny applications related to how land can be used in a community. This includes Planning Commissions, Zoning Commissions, (combined) Planning & Zoning Commissions, and Zoning Boards of Appeals. [Responsibilities of these boards](#) include, but are not limited to:

Planning Commissions: Planning Commissions are responsible for revising the town's plan of conservation and development, and regulating the way individuals subdivide and develop land, which includes requirements for drainage; parks and open space; and streets, curbs and sidewalks. The planning function includes commenting on the location of proposed streets, parks, schools, public housing projects, and utilities.

Zoning Commissions: Zoning Commissions are responsible for how people can use their land. The commissions establish categories of land uses (commercial, residential, or industrial uses, for example) and designate districts or zones where those uses are permitted.

Planning & Zoning Commissions: A combined Planning and Zoning Commission handles the responsibilities of both the planning and zoning commission, although it still enacts the functions of planning and zoning separately.

Zoning Boards of Appeals: Zoning Boards of Appeals are responsible for hearing and deciding appeals to the zoning code and special permits and exceptions from the zoning code. They are also responsible for granting variances (in other words, exceptions) from existing zoning regulations.

Each of these boards are composed of community members who are elected or appointed to serve staggered terms of two to six years, with four-year terms the most common. ● For those who serve, the commitment is substantial. Board members attend one or more evening meetings a month that very often run late into the night, review technical application materials to prepare for these meetings, and often physically visit sites that are the subject of applications.

Making Room at the Table

Jul 22, 2025

12:00-1:00pm

Land use commissioners, planners, and staff from the Centers for Housing Opportunity (CHO) will share new CHO research about the obstacles to civic participation on land use boards, and explore how communities can bring more voices into the land use decision making process.

Hosted By **Centers for Housing Opportunity**

Region **Eastern CT; Fairfield County, CT; CT**

Who Makes Land Use Decisions in Fairfield and New London Counties?

Access to these land use boards is generally limited to community members who are engaged with or connected to the life of their local government and are able to make a substantial time commitment. ● While a broader group of residents may be engaged with schools, youth sports and other local activities, this produces a dynamic in which only a subset of a community's population tends to serve on its land use boards. This bears out in the data, which reveals that in both Fairfield and New London Counties, land use board members are disproportionately male and are older and whiter than the populations of their local communities and their counties.

For example, according to the US Census' 2021 American Community Survey, the overall male population in Fairfield and New London Counties is 49% and 48%, respectively. But of those who serve on land use boards, 69% and 72% are men. Notable differences also exist with respect to race. In Fairfield and New London Counties, the overall population is 58% and 73% white, respectively. However, among those who serve on land use boards, the percentages are 92% and 97% white. The median age of those who serve on land use boards in Fairfield and New London Counties is 60 and 63 respectively, while the median age of residents in those counties is 40 and 41.

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rs are overrepresented on these boards compared to the overall resident population. In Fairfield and New London Counties, 90% and 92% of those who serve on land use boards are homeowners, respectively, while homeowners represent 67% and 68% of the population in these counties. In other words, only 10% and 8% respectively of those community members who are in land use decision making positions are renters.

	Fairfield County Board Members	Fairfield County Population	New London County Board Members	New London County Population	Total Board Members
Male	70%	49%	72%	48%	70%
Female	30%	51%	28%	52%	30%
White	94%	58%	97%	73%	94%
Non-White	6%	42%	3%	27%	6%
Homeowners	91%	67%	92%	68%	91%
Median Age	61	40	63	41	61

Source: Centers for Housing Opportunity survey; US Census - American Community Survey, 2021

These findings are consistent with the [Urban Institute’s 2023 study](#), which found that in the Northeast region of the United States, 73% of land use board members were men and 91% of members were white.

PATHS TO PARTICIPATION: APPOINTMENT AND ELECTION

Of the 52 boards surveyed in Fairfield County, 35 boards consist of elected members and 17 consist of appointed members. Of the 53 boards surveyed in New London County, 28 boards consist of elected members and 25 boards consist of appointed members. ● Together, these boards have 879 seats, including members and alternates. ● As previously noted, approximately 10% of seats on these boards in both Fairfield and New London Counties are currently vacant and an additional 10% of current members are serving on expired terms.

Land Use Boards

	Fairfield County	New London County	Total
Boards	52	53	105
Elected	35	28	63

Skip to content	Fairfield County	New London County	Total
Appointed	17	25	42

Land Use Board Seats

	Fairfield County	New London County	Total
Seats	435	444	879
Filled Seats	90%	89%	90%
Vacant Seats	10%	11%	10%
Serving In Expired Term	14%	6%	10%

Source: Centers for Housing Opportunity survey

The process of joining local land use decision-making boards varies depending upon if boards are appointed or elected. In communities where boards are appointed, participation is typically solicited through posting of opportunities to serve on municipal websites, newsletters, or other public communications, and also by word of mouth. Generally, those who seek to be considered for an opening go through an application process and are considered for appointment and then appointed by the chief elected official or governing body (eg, city/town council, board of alders, representative town meeting, etc.). One consideration is the “minority representation rule,” which requires most municipalities in Connecticut to ensure that one political party does not have all seats on a board or commission. As a result, at least one seat must be filled by a member of the opposing political party.

In communities where land use boards are elected, individuals are elected through the democratic process, whereby community members vote for these individuals in an open election. Connecting with local political party leadership and expressing interest is generally the first step in order to appear on the ballot. The candidate must be endorsed through a formal political party process to be included as a candidate on the election ballot for the next election. Unaffiliated candidates- those who do not affiliate with either major political party- may be able to fill a spot on a political party’s ballot if that party is willing to work with the candidate.

Recommendations

and New London Counties demonstrates civic participation in local land use decision-making has room to grow. There is room for more people to serve, so land use boards can operate at full capacity. There is room for a greater diversity of people to serve, so land use boards can more closely resemble the communities they serve and benefit from the variety of opinion this would provide. And there is room for more education and training for land use board members who come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences and who may not be deeply familiar with land use planning and zoning and/or related regulatory frameworks and technical skills.

Communities can make it easier to recruit new members, and make it easier for members to participate.

Anecdotal evidence demonstrates that it can be difficult for communities to recruit new members, difficult for members to sustain their participation, and difficult to ensure that members receive the education and training they need. Communities can respond by making it easier to recruit new members, easier for members to participate on boards, and easier to access and participate in training. As a result, the local land use decision-making process can become more democratic in alignment with its stated purpose, and ensure local decisions are well-informed and responsive to the needs and desires of all residents.

The following recommendations, if implemented, could help increase and support participation and well-informed decision making on local land use boards.

INCREASING PARTICIPATION

Expand Awareness on How to Become a Board Member

Municipalities and/or relevant government and non-government organizations should create a simple, clear pamphlet on ‘How to Join a Land Use Board,’ post it online for easy access, and distribute it to the general public as a first step in raising awareness. Even the most basic online resource can help shift public perception and help more residents understand they can play a role in decision making.

Municipalities can also take steps to encourage greater participation on land use boards by more residents by advertising open positions on websites and social media pages and having a system for regularly updating their list of available positions. Other opportunities to consider include partnering with libraries and/or community organizations to host information sessions on becoming involved.

Draft a “Role Description”

Id consider drafting clear, simple, yet comprehensive descriptions of the roles, responsibilities, and requirements of land use board members, and make these descriptions broadly available. This “role description” would outline the position requirements - e.g., evening meeting frequency and duration, training requirements, availability of virtual meeting participation, etc. This will help to ensure that those who aspire to membership clearly understand the required responsibilities and commitment.

Outreach to Underrepresented Groups

Municipalities should take steps to proactively engage people who are underrepresented on land use boards, especially renters.

SUPPORTING PARTICIPATION

Ensure Effective Meetings

Municipalities should consider auditing their land use board meetings to identify opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Such an audit could include a review of meeting minutes and/or recordings to identify opportunities to improve facilitation and/or items/situations where administrative review could potentially be introduced. The intended result of such an audit would be recommendations for enhancing meeting facilitation, streamlining application review procedures and other related strategies, which would improve meeting efficiency and effectiveness for board members, applicants, and the general public.

Provide Childcare

Providing childcare during meetings would make board membership more accessible to parents.

Expand Hybrid Meetings to Increase Accessibility

Providing the option to participate remotely would reduce barriers to participation, allowing board members to attend from any location and more easily manage other responsibilities that may conflict with meetings. Additionally, hybrid meetings and sharing recordings of meetings are also opportunities to provide greater public access to meetings, deliberations, and decision making.

Consider Providing Stipends

Participation on a land use board often requires the time and expertise of a part-time job. For those who are working, those working more than one job, those who would have to pay for childcare, those who lack transportation options, and those facing other economic barriers to participation, a stipend could make the difference between participating or not. Offering a stipend can expand the universe of residents who can sit on land use boards.

equips board members with the knowledge, skills and tools necessary to make well-informed decisions that align with community objectives and legal frameworks. With a clear understanding of board member roles and responsibilities, land use, zoning and housing laws, planning principles, environmental consequences, and public engagement methodologies, board members can more effectively assess development proposals, resolve conflicts, and promote sustainable growth. This also mitigates legal risks by ensuring compliance with statutory requirements and comprehensive plans. Ultimately, land use education empowers land use board members to serve more effectively, fostering transparent and well-informed governance within communities. Specifically, local communities should consider the following:

Complete Required Training in Year One

In Connecticut, land use board members are required to participate in four hours of training every four years. Communities should ensure that all newly elected or appointed land use board members complete the required four hours of training within their first year of service.

Promote Continued Land Use Education

The required training should be considered a minimum, not a maximum, and communities should encourage and incentivize land use board members to not only participate in training to meet the stated requirement, but to approach education and training as an integral part of their participation on their local land use board.

Monitor for Additional Training Opportunities

Communities should consider monitoring for and informing their land use board members of relevant available training opportunities.

Pay for Additional Training & Incidentals

Communities should consider paying for the cost of training and related incidentals (such as childcare and parking), and potentially providing compensation for the time commitment required to participate in trainings.

Provide Meeting Facilitation Training for Land Use Board Chairs

Communities should consider providing facilitation training to land use board chairs to ensure meetings are effective.

Conclusion

The democratic process is the foundation of American civic life. Making sure that, to the greatest extent possible, all citizens have an equal opportunity to participate is essential to

To ensure that more residents have the opportunity to participate on their local land use boards, relevant stakeholders should work to address existing challenges to participation. This includes increasing public awareness about land use boards and vacancies, clarifying election and appointment processes, and proactively expanding access to more residents.

Additionally, municipalities should provide support and resources, like efficiency audits, role outlines, childcare, hybrid meeting options, and training opportunities on land use and zoning issues to those who volunteer their time serving on these boards to ensure that the land use boards are representative of the communities and regions they serve and that members have the information they need to make well informed decisions.

Appendices

APPENDIX A: ELECTED AND APPOINTED LAND USE BOARDS

Fairfield County

Municipality	P&Z Commission, or Planning Commission & Zoning Commission where not combined	Zoning Board of Appeals
Bethel	Elected	Elected
Bridgeport	Appointed	Appointed
Brookfield	Elected	Elected
Danbury	Elected	Appointed
Darien	Elected	Appointed
Easton	Appointed	Elected (Alternates Appointed)
Fairfield	Elected	Elected
Greenwich	Appointed	Appointed
Monroe	Elected	Appointed
New Canaan	Appointed	Appointed
New Fairfield	Elected	Elected
Newtown	Elected	Elected

Skip to content	Commission, or Planning Commission & Zoning Commission where not combined	Zoning Board of Appeals
Norwalk	Appointed	Appointed
Redding	Elected	Elected
Ridgfield	Elected	Elected
Shelton	Elected	Appointed
Sherman	Elected	Elected (Alternates Appointed)
Stamford	Appointed	Appointed
Stratford	Elected (Alternates Appointed)	Elected (Alternates Appointed)
Trumbull	Elected	Elected
Weston	Elected	Elected
Wesport	Elected	Elected
Wilton	Elected	Elected

New London County

Municipality	Planning, Zoning, or Planning & Zoning Commission	Zoning Board of Appeals
Bozrah	Appointed	Elected
Colchester	Appointed	Appointed
East Lyme	Elected	Appointed
Franklin	Elected	Elected
Griswold	Elected	Elected
Groton City	Appointed	Appointed
Groton Town	Appointed	Appointed
Lebanon	Elected	Elected
Ledyard	Appointed	Appointed
Lisbon	Elected	Elected
Lyme	Elected	Elected
Montville	Appointed	Appointed

Skip to content	Planning, Zoning, or Planning & Zoning Commission	Zoning Board of Appeals
New London	Appointed	Appointed
North Stonington	Elected	Elected
Norwich	Appointed	Appointed
Old Lyme	Elected	Elected
Preston	Elected	Elected
Salem	Elected	Elected
Sprague	Elected	Appointed
Stonington	Appointed	Appointed
Voluntown	Elected	Elected
Waterford	Appointed	Elected

APPENDIX B: DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY

This report includes an analysis of the demographic composition of Planning Commissions, Zoning Commissions, Planning & Zoning Commissions, and Zoning Boards of Appeal in Fairfield County and New London County, collectively referred to herein as “land use boards.”

How we identified the demographic composition of land use boards

Our approach was to send a survey to every municipality in Fairfield and New London Counties, requesting the following information for each board (Planning & Zoning Commission, or Planning Commission and Zoning Commission; and Zoning Board of Appeals) and each member member and alternate member serving on the land use boards-

Fairfield County

Board information requested-

☐ Elected or appointed

☒ Seats filled

☐ Seats vacant

Board member information requested-

☐ First/last name of the commissioner

☐ Commissioner's position on board

City of New London

[Skip to content](#) [gender](#)

Commissioner's age/age range

Commissioner's race/ethnicity (multiple choice)

Commissioner's profession

When commissioner's current term began

When commissioner's current term will end

Has the commissioner's term expired but they continue to serve? (multiple choice)

Does the commissioner own or rent their home? (multiple choice)

New London County

Member Self Survey-

First/Last Name

Town or Village serving

Year began serving

Race and Gender

Ethnicity

Whether Own or Rent

Profession

Email

Direct Outreach to Town Clerks-

Confirm number of seats

Confirm vacancies

Confirm, where possible, members serving on expired terms

In Fairfield County, surveys were sent to all municipalities via email with Housing Collective staff reaching out directly to staff in each municipality to encourage participation. Follow up emails were sent out three weeks after the initial survey distribution to encourage participation. 43% of municipalities in Fairfield County completed the survey.

In New London County, surveys were sent to decision makers and to town planners for distribution to and self reporting by commissioners. 55 respondents in New London County self reported demographic information. Follow up telephone calls and emails were sent during a two month period to gather additional information.

Housing Collective staff filled in survey data gaps in both counties through public database research. Resources utilized included municipal webpages and town charters, CT Secretary

[Skip to content](#) [errecords.com](#), municipal property records, LinkedIn, Facebook, board and commission meeting recordings, and name searches. Telephone conversations with municipal staff were also conducted to confirm survey data.

APPENDIX C: LAND USE BOARDS SURVERIED

Fairfield County

Municipality	Planning & Zoning Commission	Planning Commission	Zoning Commission	Zoning Board of Appeals
Bethel	x			x
Bridgeport	x			x
Brookfield		x	x	x
Danbury		x	x	x
Darien	x			x
Easton	x			x
Fairfield	x			x
Greenwich	x			x
Monroe	x			x
New Canaan	x			x
New Fairfield		x	x	x
Newton	x			x
Norwalk	x			x
Redding		x	x	x
Ridgfield	x			x
Shelton	x			x
Sherman	x			x
Stamford		x	x	x
Stratford		x	x	x
Trumbull	x			x
Weston	x			x
Wesport	x			x

Skip to content	Planning & Zoning Commission	Planning Commission	Zoning Commission	Zoning Board of Appeals
Wilton	x			x

New London County

Municipality	Planning & Zoning Commission	Planning Commission	Zoning Commission	Zoning Board of Appeals
Bozrah	x			x
Colchester	x			x
East Lyme		x	x	x
Franklin	x			x
Griswold	x			x
Groton City	x			x
Groton Town	x			x
Lebanon	x			x
Ledyard	x			x
Lisbon	x			x
Lyme	x			x
Montville	x			x
New London	x			x
North Stonington	x			x
Norwich				x
Old Lyme		x	x	x
Preston	x			x
Salem	x			x
Sprague	x			x
Stonington	x			x
Voluntown	x			x

Skip to content	Planning & Zoning Commission	Planning Commission	Zoning Commission	Zoning Board of Appeals
Waterford	x			x

Initiative	Centers for Housing Opportunity
Topic	Housing Affordability; Land Use; Zoning
Region	Eastern CT; Fairfield County, CT
Authors	Melissa Kaplan-Macey, Beth Sabilia, Lynn Haig, Emma Heintz, Mark McNulty, Nicole McCormack; Additional contributions and data collection by Ron Flores, Connecticut College Professor of Sociology, and interns Mahika Ahmed, Tiana Brathwaite, Annika Brown, Joshua Caskey, Ava Gebhart, and Kiersten Posey

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Get in Touch

communications@thehousingcollective.org

203.579.3180

815 Main Street, Suite 201
Bridgeport CT, 06604



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