WHAT'S IN A NAME?

STRATEGIC PHRASING TO COUNTERACT NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN NEWPORT BEACH, CALIFORNIA

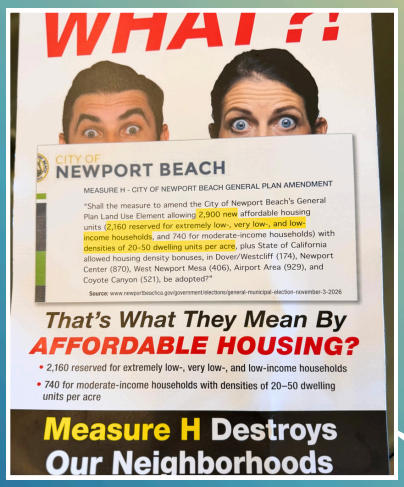
LILY LIEBERMAN, UPPP 219, FALL 2026

INTRODUCTION

While planners, policymakers, and legislators may have a thorough grasp of affordable housing requirements in their local area, research shows that few Americans agree on what "affordable" housing means, and that **prejudicial assumptions around safety and undesirability persist** (Douglas et al., 2024). In particularly high-income areas, negative perceptions and disapproval of "affordable" or "workforce" housing projects put elderly residents, residents with disabilities, retail and service workers, students, and families in a difficult position. Without instant solutions for changing large swaths of public opinion, policymakers are obligated to engage with the problems of the discourse, and find a path forward that reduces voter opposition to mixed-income housing development **where voter approval can be a barrier to construction.**

BACKGROUND

It's impossible to ignore the role that language plays in local debates around housing development. In Newport Beach, CA, residents often reject the idea of building affordable housing due to a perceived "mismatch" between the housing type and the high median home price — despite the fact that as early as 2011, "**22% of households [were] unable to make rent at most apartments in the city"** (Reicher, 2011). The commentary provided by the Daily Pilot, an LA Times subsidiary, on this issue? "**Seldom do the words 'affordable housing' and 'Newport Beach' appear in the same sentence**" (Reicher, 2011).



Mailer distributed to Newport Beach residents on October 5th, 2026 stokes fear about "affordable" housing

[redacted] Newport Shores · 28 Aug
People who need **affordable housing** should live in a city that doesn't have elevated prices on everything. Beach towns are not those type of places. Everything including **housing** is expensive in beach t...

[redacted] Newport Heights / Cliff Haven · 15 Sep
Sharon, the last thing we want is **affordable housing** that damages the Newport Beach **housing** market. The Irvine Company builds plenty of **affordable housing**; they build it in Irvine.

[redacted] Newport Heights / Cliff Haven · 20 Sep
...top of the market. The tide raises all boats. We do not want **affordable** or market-controlled **housing**, which only hurts property values. If they are part-time residents, all the better; less traffic.

Various comments made by Newport Beach residents on the social media/neighborhood watch platform NextDoor between August 28, 2026, and September 20, 2026. This type of commentary on the perceived mismatch between "affordable" housing and Newport Beach's housing market abounds under public posts and in private groups. Names and profile pictures redacted to protect privacy.

Governments have an opportunity to **counteract negative perceptions of "affordable housing" by making strategic choices in the language** used in city reports, marketing materials, and communications with the public. Changing the language used to describe income-restricted housing might help supporters argue for specific goals, set goals and stick to them, and **banish misperceptions** that keep residents from voting in support of housing for their less-affluent friends, family, and neighbors.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS + RECOMMENDATIONS

In “Words matter: The importance of issue framing and the case of affordable housing,” author Edward G. Goetz found that presenting suburban respondents with different names for “affordable” housing “produced a difference in public opinion of **more than 30 percentage points**, with **those whose question referred to lifecycle housing expressing greater support**” (2008). These results, which were significant mostly among White, non-Hispanic respondents, may have implications for communicating with largely White, affluent communities, like Newport Beach — a city where White residents make up 78% of the population (US Census, 2025).

Policymakers should **adjust official language to refer to income-restricted housing proposals in site-specific terms**, using “lifecycle housing” as the preferred term in all communications. This word choice allows policymakers to dodge preconceived notions about “affordable housing,” and to address any potential concerns on the basis of facts — for instance, is [x] the right number of units? What about the location? These are concrete policy questions that keep projects in meaningful debate, **paired with word choices that keep communities from tilting at windmills.**

Goetz’ Study Design

Group A	Group B
(Half of respondents) Answered a survey about support for: **“affordable housing”**	(Half of respondents) Answered a survey about support for: **“lifecycle housing”**

Results

Group A	Group B
~40% support	**~70%** support

CONCLUSION

As Goetz observes, “The phrase affordable housing seems to be **stigmatized and perhaps associated with race** among the residents of this affluent, White suburb” (2008). In other words, affordable housing carries baggage. In the long term, striving to change the public’s perception of affordable housing will be valuable, and merits significant policy and planning consideration. In the short-term, planners, advocates, and legislators **may experience mild relief from pushback** in affluent, NIMBY-minded neighborhoods by simply changing the terms used to converse, conduct public meetings, survey residents, phrase consent calendar or agenda items, promote workshops, and more.

Opting for different language is free, can be adjusted over time with mild operational bumps, and conveys arguably more vital information about each proposed housing project. Importantly, this recommendation can be put into practice at speed — and **attract support in communities that might otherwise remain hostile to affordable housing projects.**

References

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The "Prosperity Political Action Committee" is the attributed sponsor of this mailer, but with no website or contact information, it is not clear which group is associated, as a number of "Prosperity" PACs exist in the United States. There is no named author, supporter, or candidate.

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