

# Reimagining Housing Futures: Community-Centered Brownfield Redevelopment in Salt Lake City, Utah

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## Introduction

This poster presents findings from an ongoing research project examining how brownfield-to-housing redevelopment can serve as a strategy to address the affordable housing crisis in small and mid-sized communities.

The study integrates findings from a **comparative case study** of three communities, but focuses on **Salt Lake City, Utah** supplemented with document analysis of public documents.

The EPA defines **brownfields** as abandoned, underused, or idled properties, where redevelopment is complicated by the actual or perceived presence of environmental contamination (U.S. EPA, 2017). Brownfields include a wide variety of property types, from former industrial facilities to small commercial sites.



Image Left: The Other Side Village, Salt Lake City, Utah. It is transitional housing built on a brownfield site which was a landfill before. Through support from the city, the site was remediated and now 44 tiny homes are being built on it.

Images Right: The site for The Other Side Village before construction was a brownfield. It was a landfill which was acquired for redevelopment and through support from the city and county, remediated for much higher use.

Images are from the official website for The Other Side Village.



**COST-BURDENED**

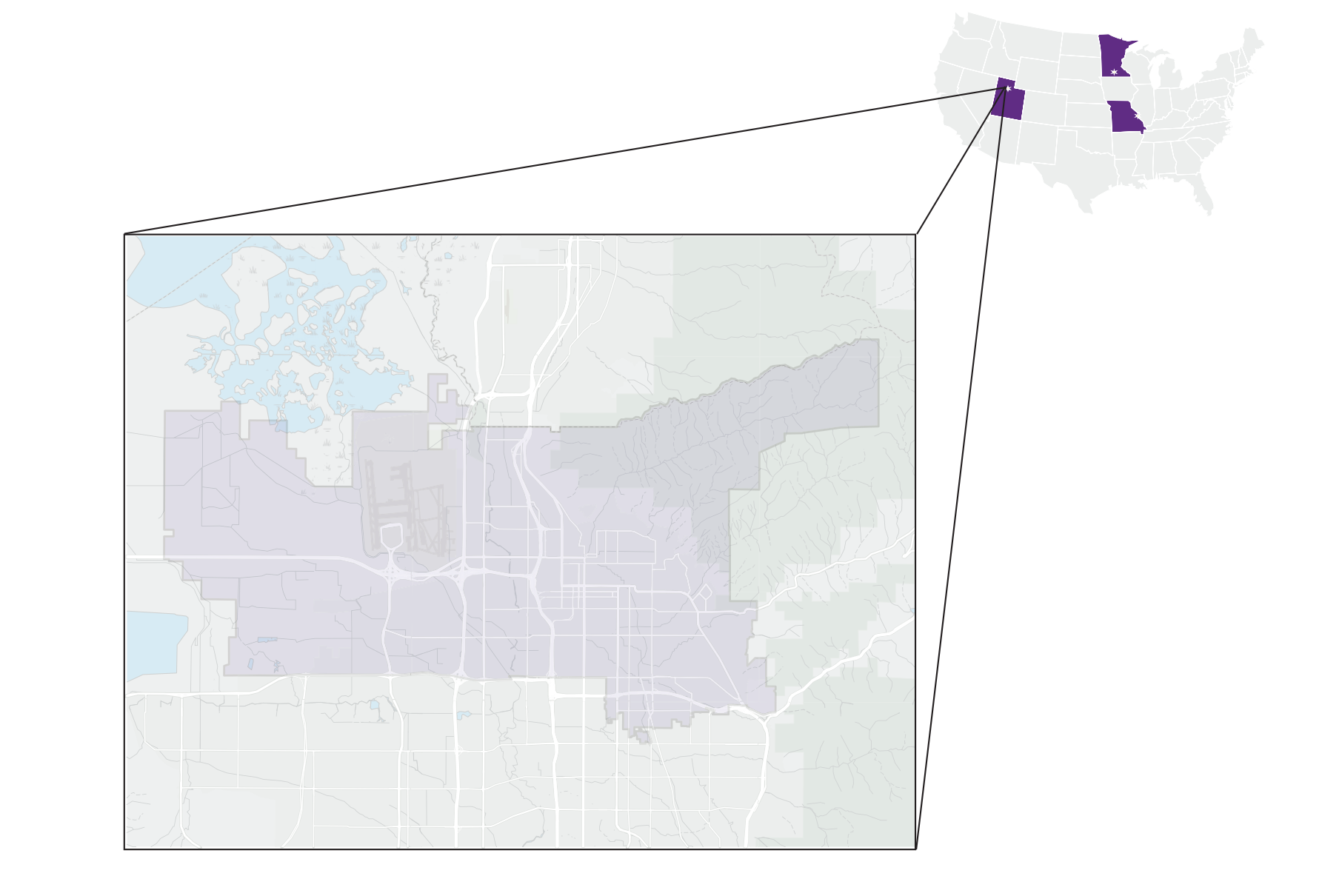
**VACANCY RATES**

**CLIMATE THREATS**

**22 million households** are **cost burdened**, spending more than **30%** of their income on housing.

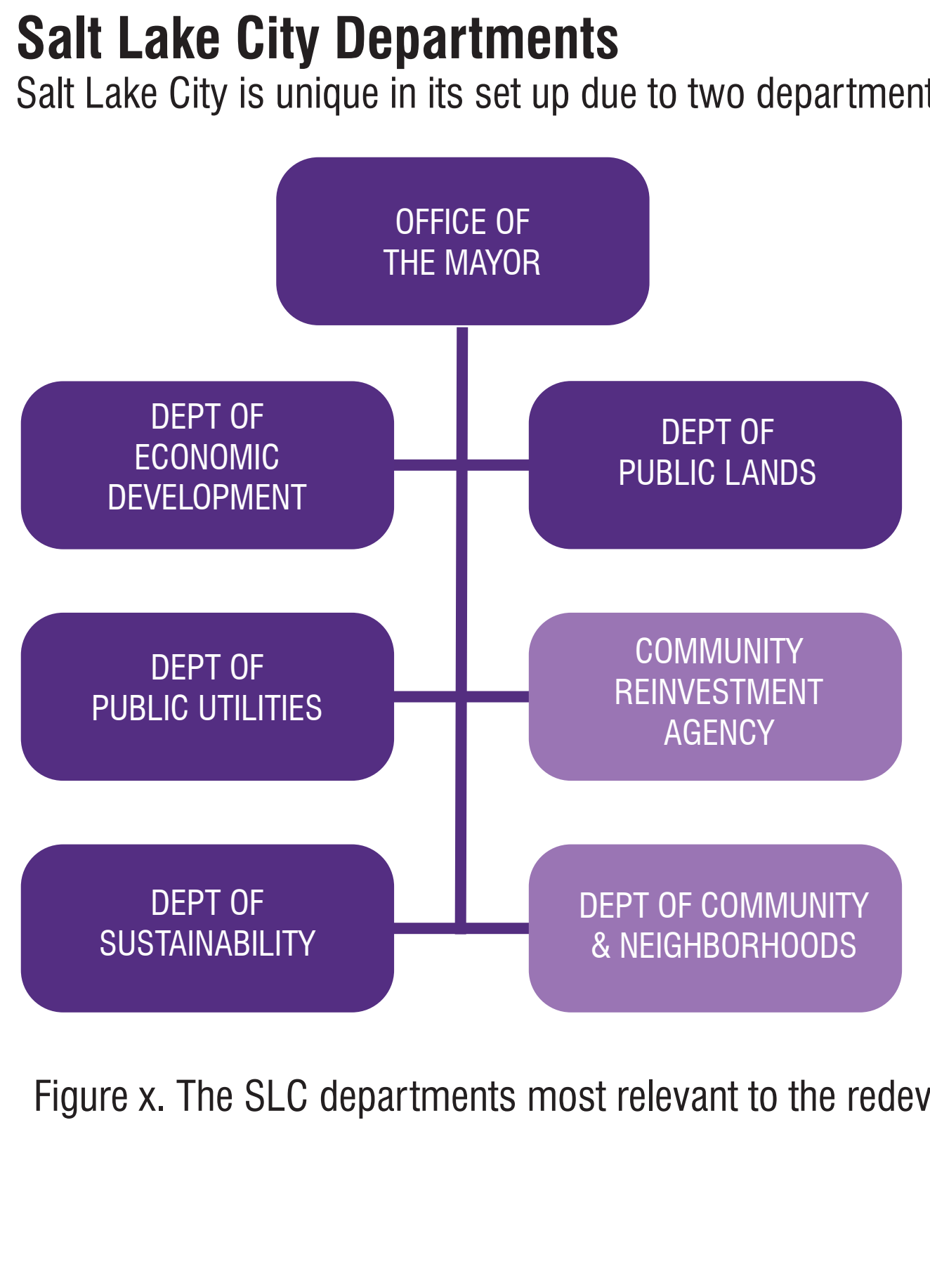
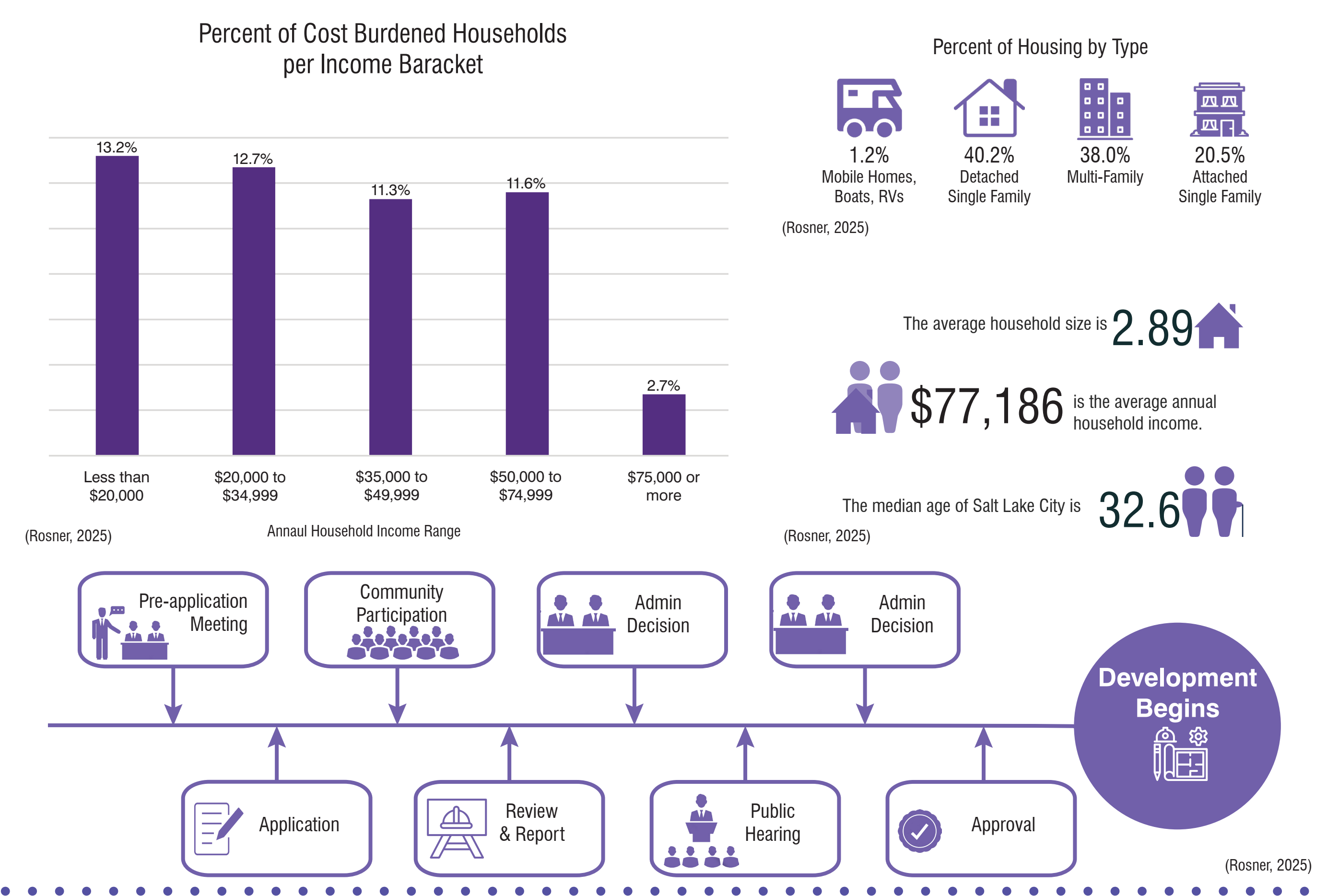
**3.8 million** affordable homes are needed. Vacancy rates for rental properties have hit a **historic low**.

**38 million** homes are located in areas at risk of **extreme heat, flooding, fire** or other climate threats.



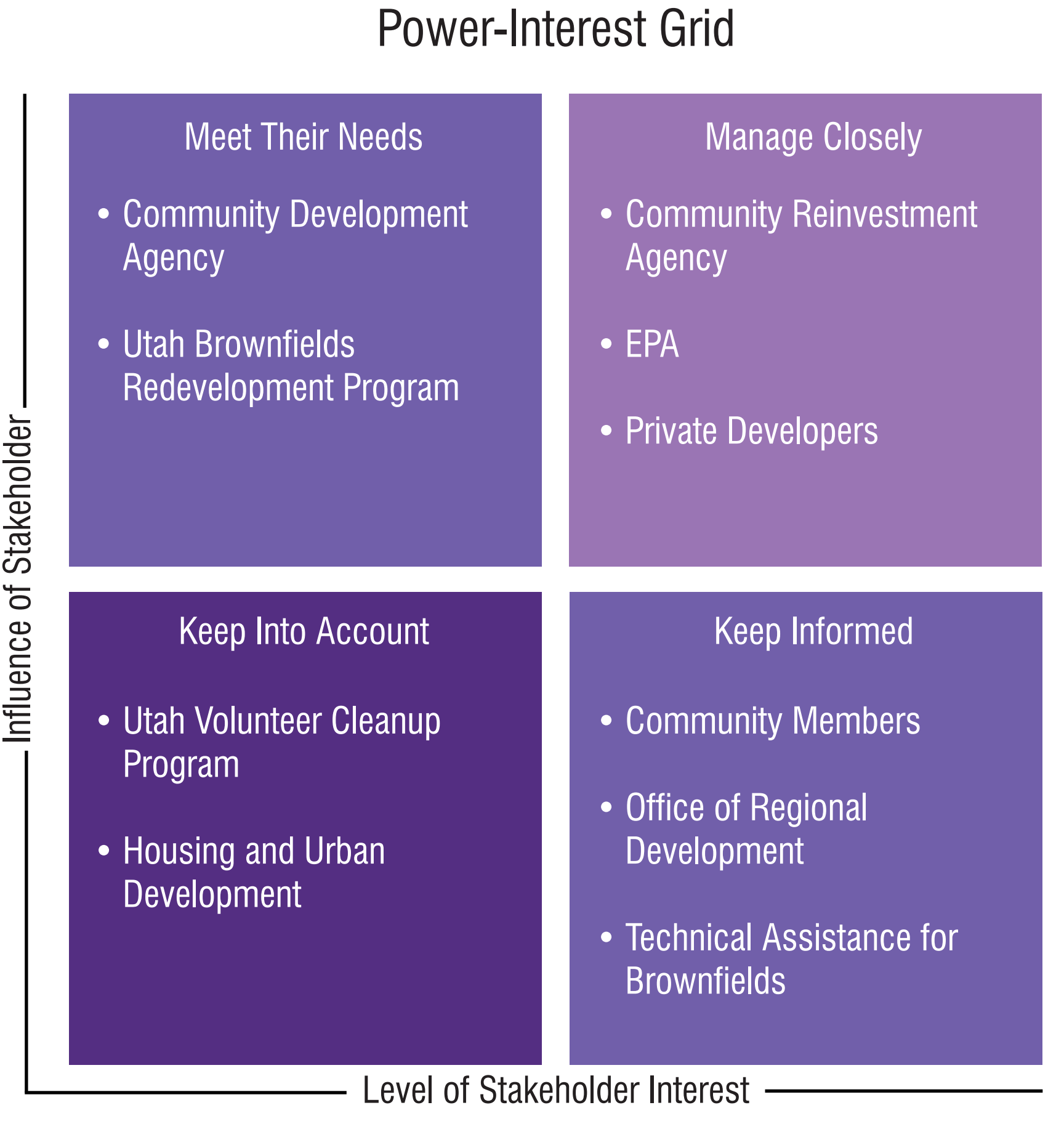
- Three case study sites:
- Salt Lake City, Utah
  - St. Louis, Missouri
  - Mankato, Minnesota

- Comparative Case Study**
- Interview data transcribed, coded, and analyzed using qualitative methods
  - Findings triangulated with policy documents
- Topics Explored:**
- Local governance and leadership
  - Community engagement strategies
  - Funding and financing models
  - Project outcomes and barriers
- Interlocutors:**
- City/State Departments
  - Technical Experts
  - For-profit and non-profit developers



**Community Reinvestment Agency**  
 The CRA is the city's redevelopment arm, authorized under Utah's state law, which uses tax increment and other financing tools to spur development in target areas. The CRA invests in affordable housing, gap financing, commercial revitalization, and neighborhood projects to spur growth.

**Community and Neighborhoods**  
 CAN plays a coordinating role in overseeing key city functions tied to neighborhood well-being. It includes divisions such as Building Services, Housing Stability, Planning, Real Estate, Transportation, and Youth & Family, and is responsible for things like zoning and infrastructure oversight.



## Initial Findings

### 1. Regulatory & Financial Barriers

**“Right-Sizing” Remediation Improves Project Viability**

“Your transit-oriented developments are going to be much more high density, so your sites are going to be covered. So the reality is, leaving some pollution in place may be way different than ...in the suburbs...you're not going to see many kids digging by a light rail line... so your exposure scenarios...are going to be different.”

Robert, Brownfields Redevelopment

Remediation strategies should be proportional to the end-use risk of a site. Higher-density housing near transit corridors may pose minimal exposure risk compared to single-family homes with open yards. Aligning cleanup requirements with realistic exposure scenarios can prevent costly over-remediation, maintain safety, and improve project feasibility.

**Overcomplexity Deters Developers**

“It definitely could be made simpler... it definitely deters developers from going to these contaminated sites...”

Paul, For-profit Developer

Excessive regulatory burden and bureaucratic complexity discourage participation—especially from small or mid-sized developers. Streamlined permitting and financial support are key to expanding access.

**“Right-Sizing” Remediation Improves Project Viability**

“If somebody's going to clean up a brownfield site, maybe give them some incentives... extra height, less parking... that could help offset the remediation costs.”

Paul, For-profit Developer

In the absence of grant funding, cities can still encourage redevelopment through zoning incentives like additional density allowances, reduced parking requirements, or flexible design standards. These non-monetary incentives help offset cleanup costs and make housing on brownfields more attractive to developers.

### 2. Institutional Capacity & Coordination

**Local Governments as Redevelopment Matchmakers**

“So it typically is us reaching out... we still have Revolving Loan funds or we have assessment grants, we could help you inform your decision...”

Rebecca, Regional Development

Cities often play a catalytic role by connecting developers with properties and funding, helping overcome information asymmetries that might otherwise stall redevelopment. See Figure x.

**Interdepartmental Alignment Streamlines Redevelopment**

“Consensus building within your department or within the city is really helpful. We're really lucky to have ... [an] aligned mayor and city council that have a vision which is honestly really helpful.”

Hugh, Real Estate Services

When city departments and leadership share a common vision and communicate regularly, redevelopment efforts are more efficient. Strong internal coordination reduces bottlenecks, aligns priorities, and ensures projects move forward smoothly across agencies. It also helps champion the cause to the community and helps build support within the community.

**Technical Assistance Expands Local Capacity Viability**

“TAB helped us... they helped us create an outline of how we were going to go through the process... helped us come up with a design...”

Paul, For-profit Developer

External support organizations, such as TAB, help communities overcome capacity constraints by offering structured guidance, convening stakeholders, and building long-term institutional memory. These partnerships strengthen early-stage planning and enable smaller municipalities to navigate complex brownfield-to-housing projects more confidently.

### 3. Project Planning & Feasibility

**Early Due Diligence is Essential**

“That is, that's probably the biggest thing that I spend customers, time with communities... is just the concept of frontside due diligence and the value of just not jumping in so fast...”

Robert, Brownfields Redevelopment

Well-informed early planning helps developers assess contamination, cost and feasibility before committing, reducing risk and supporting realistic project timelines and budgets.

**Zoning Reform Must Precede Design Viability**

“...the biggest challenge, really is just getting the zoning... the first thing is to see, well, could we build this, given the current set of policy (zoning) in place? If not, then you got to work on the policy (zoning) first.”

Charles, Non-profit Developer

Outdated or restrictive zoning can block housing typologies before a project even begins. Updating land use policies is often a necessary precondition for redevelopment.

**Infill Opportunities for Smart, Sustainable Growth**

“We are running out of real estate in the city... so we do have to find these, you know, creative ways to use properties that are underutilized within city boundaries.”

Caroline, Urban Sustainability

As developable land within cities becomes scarce, brownfield sites offer a sustainable alternative to environmentally harmful greenfield expansion. These sites are often already served by infrastructure—roads, utilities, transit—making them well-positioned for infill housing that leverages existing public investment.

### 4. Community Engagement & Accountability

**Community engagement must be structured and purpose**

“...a lot of times it's just not helpful. People have a lot of ideas that just aren't reality based.”

Nicole, Non-profit Developer

Strategic, Structured Engagement is Essential. Community engagement must be intentional and informed by project scope. While community voices are vital, unfocused or open-ended processes can result in unrealistic expectations or slow progress.

**Local Voices Build Better Outcomes**

“Community input and engagement is so important to bridge the gap and ensure people living and working there have their interests accounted for.”

Margaret, Technical Assistance

Meaningful community engagement fosters trust, aligns projects with local priorities, and can reduce opposition during implementation.

**Conclusion**

Preliminary insights highlight the importance of early access to site information, layered funding mechanisms, and strategic use of brownfields as infill opportunities. Equally critical is the role of local governments as redevelopment matchmakers and community champions. Addressing financial and regulatory barriers with incentives and flexibility will encourage the development of housing on previously underutilized land.