



OPINION
RESEARCH
& STRATEGY

TO City of West Hollywood

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Designing in Color

RE: Key Findings from Focus Groups of West Hollywood Residents

DATE April 28, 2024

INTRODUCTION

Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) recently conducted a series of four focus group sessions with West Hollywood residents as part of the research informing the City's updated Strategic Plan. The groups were designed to provide context on the opinions of residents in the City who do not frequently participate in public engagement processes, and inform a follow-up survey which will provide statistical reinforcement of the discussion in the focus groups. To help understand the differences in resident opinions across the City, FM3 conducted three sessions with participants divided by geography: one each with residents who live on the Eastside of the City (East of Fairfax), the City Center (between La Cienega and Fairfax) and the Westside (West of La Cienega). Additionally, a fourth session was held with residents who identify as LGBTQ+. Sessions were held on December 16, 2023 at Plummer Park, and included ten participants per geographic session and nine in the LGBTQ+ session.

LIMITATIONS

An important note of caution is that, while residents were recruited from different geographic areas of the City, the results of these focus groups should be considered suggestive of the broad attitudes and perceptions present within the sub-groups of residents from which participants were recruited, but not to represent these views with statistical precision. Nor can the participants' responses necessarily be extrapolated to other sub-groups of residents in West Hollywood. Another important reminder is that the focus groups intentionally excluded residents who are closely engaged with the City and participate often in public processes. Therefore, the focus group discussion may not have highlighted some issues that would have been raised more strongly if more of the participants had closer ties to City government and policy.

SUMMARY OR OVERVIEW

- Participants appreciated that West Hollywood is a diverse and welcoming community, as well as the proximity to shopping and activities.
- Residents of different areas of the City also noted the benefits of their own neighborhoods relative to others in the city, such as the Westside was considered livelier, the City Center as safer and more convenient, and the Eastside as more affordable and “real.”
- Several concerns were mentioned repeatedly throughout the groups including crime, safety and homelessness, cost of living and housing, and the loss of local small businesses and community character.
- There was broad support for the concept of increasing affordable housing citywide and in respondents’ own neighborhoods, although there were some varied opinions on the meaning of “affordable housing” and how it should be increased.
- The term “environmental sustainability” was better understood than “environmental resiliency.”
- There was a sense that Block-by-Block Security Ambassadors are “better than nothing,” but few felt they had a significant impact in improving the safety of the City.
- Most participants were concerned about the direction of the local economy, specifically the loss of “mom and pop” businesses, while they also felt that they could largely find businesses to serve nearly all their needs within the boundaries of West Hollywood.
- Few participants had a lot of direct engagement with the City, but that may have been at least partially a factor of the recruitment criteria which intentionally sought out residents who do not frequently express their opinions to City government.

More detailed takeaways from the focus group sessions are provided below.

TOP BENEFITS OF LIFE IN WEST HOLLYWOOD AND MOST SERIOUS PROBLEMS

- Participants appreciated that West Hollywood is a diverse and welcoming community, as well as its walkability and the proximity to shopping and activities.
- Residents of different areas of the City also noted the benefits of their own neighborhoods relative to others in the City, such as the Westside being considered livelier, the Central area safer and more convenient, and the Eastside as more affordable and “real.”
- The comfort felt by LGBTQ+ residents in West Hollywood was a major factor in their decision to move to West Hollywood and for many, is a predominant factor in why they continue to live in the City.
- Many residents (especially those on the Eastside) also cited the affordability of housing in West Hollywood compared to other nearby cities as the reason they live in the City. In some ways, their decision was less about choosing to live in West Hollywood, and more simply about living where they could afford.
 - Residents compare their neighborhoods to different cities, depending on where they live in West Hollywood. Most Eastside residents viewed their neighborhood in relation to Hollywood or the broader City of LA, while most Westside residents compared their neighborhood to Beverly Hills or other communities west of West Hollywood.

- Several concerns were mentioned repeatedly throughout the groups as serious issues in West Hollywood and seemed to dominate many people’s thinking about the City:
 - Crime and safety
 - Homelessness (which was closely related to safety)
 - Cost of housing
 - Cost of living in general
 - Loss of local small businesses
 - Loss of community character
- Participants’ most common priorities for the City to take action on now were aligned with the issues they considered to be the most serious problems:
 - Addressing crime and security
 - Addressing homelessness
 - Supporting “mom and pop” businesses
 - Limiting the development of new housing if that housing is not affordable for residents

The preliminary themes developed for the Strategic Plan anticipated many of the concerns commonly raised most residents, so the focus groups were structured to allow for discussion on these topics. Those findings are presented in greater detail below.

NEIGHBORHOODS AND HOUSING

- Participants were concerned about the visual appeal and character of their neighborhood and largely agreed that the look and feel of their neighborhood had declined over the last five years. Some felt it had stayed the same, but just a few thought it had improved.
 - Participants mostly cited the loss of classic, small West Hollywood single-family homes which had been replaced with more generic looking apartment buildings.
 - Several people mentioned that they felt the City government had encouraged the building of these larger buildings in order to generate revenue for the City.
- There was also a concern about the City not being as clean as it once was.
- The lack of housing that is affordable for most residents was a common topic of discussion during the sessions. When asked to define “affordable housing,” respondents generally understood it to be housing that is offered below market rate, with two similar but different perspectives:
 - Housing that is subsidized and/or regulated by a government agency and required to be for very low-income residents.
 - Housing that is priced in a relationship with tenants’ annual income so they can meet other basic needs.
- There was broad support for more affordable housing in West Hollywood generally and in participants’ own neighborhoods as shown in **Figure 1** on the following page.

Figure 1: Opinions on More Affordable Housing Citywide and in Participants' Neighborhoods

	East	Central	West	LGBTQ+	Total
Citywide Favor	10	10	6	9	35
Citywide Oppose	0	0	4	0	4
Neighborhood Favor	9	10	5	8	31
Neighborhood Oppose	1	0	5	1	8

- Participants who favor more affordable housing in the City and/or their neighborhood often discussed the need to make sure it is possible to keep the current character of the City as a diverse community, and that the number of people who are rent-burdened in West Hollywood is a major problem to them. There was also sympathy from some participants for the inability of the local workforce to find housing they can afford in the City.
- Those who opposed affordable housing either in the City or their own neighborhood expressed concerns about the need to tear down old homes to build new multi-unit buildings or the “change in character” of the neighborhood and the people who live there. Some also mentioned a worry that their own building or other buildings could be bought out and torn down to make room for affordable housing, leaving them displaced or reducing the number of rent controlled units.
- As FM3 has found in West Hollywood and other communities, there tended to be more support for “affordable housing” in concept than there was for the specific housing developments or City policies that would add more affordable housing in a City. And support dipped, but remained high as participants thought more about how affordable housing would be developed in the City, who it would benefit, and when participants were shown the income levels associated with different Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) targets for West Hollywood (**Figure 2** below for RHNA targets provided in groups, and **Figure 3** on the following page for opinions on more affordable housing after this information and discussion).

Figure 2: RHNA Targets Discussed with Focus Group Participants

Income Category	Maximum Annual Income for a family of two	Maximum Annual Income for a family of four	State Calculation of Need
Extremely low	\$30,300	\$37,850	533 units
Very Low	\$50,450	\$63,050	689 units
Low	\$80,750	\$100,900	682 units
Moderate	\$94,300	\$117,850	1,496 units
Above Moderate	Market rate	Market rate	3,933 units

Figure 3: Opinions on More Affordable Housing Citywide and in Participants' Neighborhoods after Info

	East	Central	West	LGBTQ+	Total
Citywide Favor	10	8	7	9	34
Citywide Oppose	0	2	3	0	5
Neighborhood Favor	8	5	6	7	26
Neighborhood Oppose	2	4	4	2	12

- The groups showed the need for the City to be cautious about sharing RHNA targets by income without providing significant information and context about what they mean. It was not easy for participants to wrap their heads around the information and several drew incorrect conclusions from the figures.

For example, most were surprised at the income expectations for low and moderate-income residents, although some came to see them as reasonable when they understood that the expectations are for multi-person households. Also, the exercise showed examples of family incomes for two and for four participants for illustrative purposes. But some participants felt excluded because they lived in households of one, three, or more than four people and the example did not include the income limits for their family size. Some of them interpreted that to mean there would not be affordable housing for them.

In addition, seeing the income levels for “extremely low” income families made some participants worry about the “wrong” kinds of people coming to West Hollywood and bringing elements of crime to their neighborhood or reducing the quality of restaurants and services in their area.

Lastly, some people felt that it was inappropriate to develop additional housing for lower-income people who do not live in the City now, while current residents struggle to afford the cost of rent. As such, there was a preference expressed for the City taking direct action to contain housing costs for existing residents compared to encouraging the building of more housing.

ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

- Environmental sustainability and other similar issues were not top of mind for many residents when they discussed the positive or negative aspects of West Hollywood, or the improvements they would like to see in the City.
- The term “environmental sustainability” was largely understood in the way it was intended with participants often thinking of “recycling,” “green,” being less wasteful, and solar energy, among other similar terms which are shown in the word cloud below (**Figure 4** on the following page).

Figure 4: Words and Phrases Commonly Used to Describe “Environmental Sustainability”



- The term “environmental resilience” was a harder concept to grasp with 12 participants unable to offer any definition or words or phrases that come to mind (**Figure 5**). Those who shared words or phrases often mentioned terms related to policy and/or long-term changes related to better caring for the environment, as seen in the word cloud below.

Figure 5: Words and Phrases Commonly Used to Describe “Environmental Resilience”



- Many participants doubted that the City is truly committed to doing something about its contribution to climate change. For several, there was a sense that the City provides “lip service” to climate change, but is not doing the things that would really make a difference. In many ways, residents were basing opinions on what they see in their day-to-day life with little awareness of the insides of City policies and efforts. For example, one mentioned that she sees thousands of plastic water bottles thrown out at the Pride parade, while another said he does not see solar roofs on many houses and a third said that Ambassadors at Plummer Park told her to throw her recyclables in a regular trash can. To those residents, those were examples that the City is not truly committed.
- At the same time, the City did receive credit from some for fostering public transportation, adding bike lanes, reducing street sweeping to conserve water, adding electric vehicle charging stations, and solar power at the new parking lot, among other steps. There were also some who did not know one way or another, but assumed by West Hollywood’s progressive reputation that the City is working to address the problem.
- Residents were somewhat short on ideas for how the City could do more to reduce its contribution to climate change, but those mentioned included making it easier to separate and compost organic waste, increasing the use of solar power, increasing public transportation alternatives to the Metro bus, and using more drought-tolerant plants on City medians.

SAFETY AND WELLBEING

- Community safety was one of the top concerns of focus group participants, with many participants mentioning that they do not feel safe in their area of the City at certain times. Several said they do not feel comfortable walking in their neighborhood at night and knew of friends or neighbors who had crimes committed against them. Eastside residents tended to focus on the safety of areas in and around parks, while Westside residents more often mentioned crime related to nightlife patrons in their neighborhood.
- There was a commonality across the City of concerns about safety related to homelessness and transients, burglaries, muggings and property crime.
- Participants had mixed views of the performance of the Sheriff Deputies and their job performance with most rating it as either “fair” (meaning “average” or “below average”) or “poor” (**Figure 6**). It was perceived that deputies are not doing much to deter crime in the City and do not have as strong of a presence as residents would like. Several mentioned that they thought the deputies could be doing a better job, but the City had reduced their budget.

Figure 6: Ratings of the Job Performance of West Hollywood Sheriff’s Deputies

	East	Central	West	LGBTQ+ ¹	Total
Excellent	1	0	0	0	1
Pretty good	4	1	1	0	6
Fair	3	4	5	3	15
Poor	2	3	2	5	12
Don’t know	0	2	2	0	4

¹ One participant in the LGBTQ+ group temporarily left the room during this exercise.

- Not all participants were aware that the City contracts with the Sheriff's Department to provide law enforcement services.
- Assessments of the job performance of deputies often centered on participants' own personal interactions with deputies, customer service and/or response times, or perceptions that deputies do not treat all areas of the City equally and overprioritize the Westside area nears bars/nightlife. Few mentioned something broader such as crime statistics or citywide performance data as the reason for their assessment.

No participants in the LGBTQ+ session mentioned that their rating of deputies is specific to their experience as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, however a couple of participants in other sessions indicated that their historical impressions of the Sheriff's Department treatment of LGBTQ+ people had a bearing on their rating.

- Nearly all participants knew of the Block-by-Block Security Ambassadors, even if many did not know them by that name and referred to them as something more colloquial, such as "the bike patrols" or "the blue shirt guys."
- Participants mostly did not think the Ambassador program is making the City safer. While some participants thought the formation of the Ambassador program was well-intentioned and the presence of Ambassadors is better than nothing, the much more common sentiment was that Ambassadors did little to make them safer. Ambassadors were nearly universally considered to be poorly trained for responding to criminal activity or safety incidents. Also, because the Ambassadors are unarmed and do not have the power to arrest or write tickets, nearly all residents considered them ineffective in addressing safety incidents as they are happening. Several participants mentioned that they perceive the Ambassadors' only role is to call the Sheriff's Department when an incident happens, which the residents could be doing themselves.
- More positive evaluations of the Ambassadors came from a few residents who mentioned that they deter homeless individuals from camping out on sidewalks or other inappropriate places (although some participants described that activity as "harassing homeless people"). And one participant mentioned that she asks Ambassadors to walk with her on blocks she does not feel safe, while another said she feels more comfortable at Plummer Park knowing the Ambassadors are often there.

ENGAGEMENT WITH CITY GOVERNMENT

- Less than half of participants had directly engaged with the City to shape City policy or make change, beyond voting. This may have been at least partially a factor of the recruitment criteria which intentionally sought out residents who do not frequently express their opinions to City government. Those who had engaged had done so on a variety of issues including trying to impact a particular development project, safety concerns, billboards, e-scooter issues, and others.
- There were mixed feelings about the quality of those interactions with the City. In some cases, residents felt the Council and staff were responsive to their needs and concerns, while others felt like they did not get a suitable response or resolution.

- When specifically probed, just a handful of participants felt that any groups are ignored or underserved by the City. Different groups were mentioned by a few participants including homeless individuals or those with mental illness, children, residents east of Fairfax, lower-income people, and members of the Russian community.
- About a quarter of participants are satisfied with how the City reaches out to tell them about what is happening. They primarily get flyers and bulletins, emails, or visit the City's website.
- Nearly all participants had visited the City's website at some point, but not all felt they could easily find the information they were looking for. Participants had sought out a range of information including renter protections during the pandemic, parking rules and enforcement, road closures, public transit schedules, and information on City events.
- Notably, many said they would like to get emails from the City containing news and information, but did not know if they are on a City email list or how to get added to it (and several thought they should be on the City's informational email distribution list because they had provided their email address to the City for other purposes). Mailers and social media were also commonly mentioned as desired ways to get information from the City.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- There were persistent comments during the sessions that residents are concerned about the loss of local small businesses and an overabundance of national chain businesses. They felt that was emblematic of West Hollywood losing its local flavor and becoming more homogenous with other cities.
- Several participants mentioned that they see vacant storefronts, which they viewed as emblematic of a struggling local economy. Some wanted the City to prioritize efforts to bring businesses to these empty locations, with a greater emphasis on this issue among Center City and Westside participants than others.
- Participants also largely described the economy in West Hollywood using more negative words and phrases (**Figure 7** on the following page). The most common descriptions of the local economy were "expensive" and a variation on "inflation," reflecting concerns about the increasing cost of living in the City and elsewhere. For some, the City's minimum wage ordinance had driven up the costs of daily activities and essentials. Participants also frequently described the economy with terms that showed they feel it is on a downswing, such as "struggling," "declining," and "on the brink." Some participants also felt more positively about the local economy with words such as "recovering," "thriving" or "flourishing."

Figure 7: Words and Phrases Used to Describe Economy in West Hollywood

Positive	Neutral	Negative
Recovering x2	Average	Expensive x5
Thriving x2	Boom or bust	Inflated/Inflation x4
Balanced	Room for improvement	Disparate/Disparity x2
Flourishing	Standard	(Problems with) Minimum Wage x2
Growing	Unsure	Struggling x2
		Challenges
		Cost of living
		Declining
		Depressed
		Exclusive
		On the brink
		Poor
		Recession
		Untenable
		Vacancies

- Most participants felt that they can get whatever they need within the boundaries of West Hollywood, but some felt there was an overemphasis on restaurants, bars, and other nightlife businesses, not enough local businesses for basics such as hardware stores or bookstores, and a lack of affordable options for groceries.
- A few participants were willing to have the City use tax dollars to subsidize the operations of local “mom and pop” businesses to keep them open.

FUTURE VISIONS FOR WEST HOLLYWOOD

- When asked to look ahead five years, some residents thought about many of the goals they are focused on for the present, such as homelessness and safety. But several also factored in more about where they expect to be in their life stage at that time. This meant thinking about things like senior programs and services or expecting to be able to buy a home at that time. Others thought about aspects of City life that may not have been as top-of-mind today, such as transparency and responsiveness of City government, arts and cultural programs, or being prepared for an expected increase in the population.

- The major themes that participants provided regarding their visions for the City in five years mostly touched on three primary ideas: safety, affordability, and diversity and inclusiveness (**Figure 8**). There was also a common use of the word “thriving” to describe the vision that participants have for the future of West Hollywood.

Figure 8: Summary of Themes of Visions for West Hollywood in Five Years

Theme	# of Mentions
Safe, safety	13
Affordable, affordable housing	11
Diverse, equitable, inclusive, welcoming	10
Thriving, fabulous	8
Clean	7
Responsive, well-functioning City	5
Community, collectiveness, compassion	5
Arts, culture, community events	4
LGBTQ+ Center	3
Progressive	2
Address homelessness	2
Active bars, clubs and restaurants	2
Bike lanes	1
Community gardens	1
Futuristic technology	1
Green	1