The Navajo Housing Authority (NHA) undertook the ambitious task of creating a sustainable planning framework for the Navajo Nation, the largest tribal membership and land base in the United States, that includes 5 agencies, 24 regions, and 110 chapters. The goal was to lay out a framework for 34,000 housing units that will satisfy the need for sustainable and cultural housing on the Navajo Nation. This effort included site planning meetings with each agency, followed by planning sessions with each region and its respective chapters.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

- Understanding the importance of directly engaging the community at the grassroots level can help gain insight into a community’s needs and culture.
- Using “smart growth” planning strategies must be modified for a rural context with limited infrastructure, remote sites, and a traditional rural culture that values very low densities.

**BEST PRACTICES**

- Community-based planning methodologies were developed to directly engage the community through on-site workshops and charrettes.
- Tribal professionals, housing authority staff, and students were all involved in the engagement process.
- Regional planning must achieve sustainable goals that are specific to culture and climate.
Relative to the United States overall, housing on the Navajo Nation is generally smaller and in very poor condition, with overcrowding and limited access to utilities. The Navajo Nation population is relatively young, poor, and under-employed. A number of factors affect housing needs on the Navajo Nation, including geographic dispersal across the reservation, affordability of housing, existing housing conditions, and inventory. The 2009 Navajo Housing Authority (NHA) Housing Needs Assessment estimates a total need for 34,000 new and replacement units of housing and a need to expand 8,500 existing homes to accommodate growing families. Some 60 percent of Navajo Nation housing structures are single-family homes, 17 percent are mobile homes, and 11 percent are traditional hoozhans. The remaining 12 percent are made up of multifamily attached housing units and a variety of other unit types. It is estimated that five percent of all children on the reservation live in housing classified simply as “available shelter,” which is defined as non-standard housing of the lowest quality. Because available shelter is comparable to tents or shacks and is not suitable shelter in extreme weather, this situation indicates a dire housing need.

The Navajo Nation has the largest land area of any tribe in the United States: more than 24 million square miles in four states—Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico—and a population of approximately 300,000 tribal members. A major goal was to help the Navajo Housing Authority (NHA) identify appropriate land for new housing while offering sustainable planning approaches for housing patterns and designs that would align with Navajo culture, regional climate, and community needs. Each chapter is required to have Chapter Land Use Plans (CLUPs) identifying land for various uses. Through the planning process, the planning team determined that these CLUPs do not identify enough land to accommodate a projected need of 34,000 new housing units.
In the Navajo (Dine') way of life, the concept of “Hózhóogo naasháa doo,” “walking in beauty,” is an ancient term describing a sustainable way of life, “steeped in the land, water, air, sun, and seasons.” As described in the NHA Planning Manual, “the Dine’ are meant to live off the land in beauty, harmony, happiness, and in the “Hozho” way of life, in balance with the natural environment.” The planning effort sought to bring this way of thinking into dialogue with tribal members in the development of a sustainable framework for designing new communities on Navajo land. There was a challenge in this process, however, given the history of the Navajo as rural people living as sheepherders in small, remote, multigenerational family clusters. Although this rural lifestyle remains the preferred way of life for many Navajo, it can conflict with other sustainability goals, such as walkable, more compact communities, less reliance on automobiles, and mitigating costly infrastructure and services to remote communities. Many Navajo now live in highly urbanized contexts, either in communities on the Navajo Nation, or off reservation in urban areas. To reach this Dine’ diaspora, planners will have to address both the traditional and the urban Navajo.

The master planning effort began in January 2011 at a meeting of NHA leadership, led by Chief Executive Officer Anea Yazzie and was further developed in a visioning workshop led by the Sustainable Native Communities Collaborative (SNCC) in the summer of 2011. In December 2011, SNCC led an Enterprise Green Communities Charrette with NHA leadership to begin work on a sustainability standard for new housing developments. In 2012, with technical support from the U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Sustainable Construction in Indian Country (SCinIC) Initiative, a request for proposal was issued to develop a planning manual. Swaback Partners, pllc, that was selected for the project, which was completed in the spring of 2013.

The planning process was organized in three phases.

Phase one: Site reconnaissance and evaluation.
Phase two: Programming confirmation and refinement.
Phase three: Prototypical plans and sustainable community master plans.

The planning team engaged the community representatives at each phase. Extensive planning workshops and site visits took place across the entire Navajo Nation, with day-long charrettes in each of the 24 regions. These planning meetings were instrumental in getting direct, hands-on input from tribal members. Following these planning meetings, NHA requested individual meetings with each of the 110 chapters to understand their individual community needs. The process was also an opportunity to gain a better understanding of specific regional needs across Navajo Nation and how new developments across the reservation could be better coordinated and better linked to serve the communities.
Definition of Appropriate Housing Typologies:
The planning process identified five different types of housing: (1) single-family detached, (2) single-family attached, (3) multi generational homes, (4) apartments, and (5) senior living. Concepts for these building types will be developed as potential prototypes for development.

Design of Demonstration Projects:
The NHA is now planning to develop a series of demonstration projects on a larger scale to test the larger planning goals and sustainability strategies for implementation across the nation, in the build-out of a projected need for 34,000 homes.

HUD Sustainable Construction in Indian Country Initiative (SCinIC):
The HUD SCinIC technical assistance team was part of the planning process, which led to new policy recommendations that the NHA will use to carry out the goals of the master plan as well as the larger goals of fostering more sustainable communities on the Navajo Nation. The following recommendations were approved by the NHA board and are being implemented as policy:

- Develop an interdisciplinary NHA Design Review Committee to develop a Navajo Sustainability Standard and guide the design/planning process.
- Base the Navajo Sustainability Standard on the national Enterprise Green Communities Criteria and implement a modified version of this standard immediately on all planned projects.
- Revise the NHA request for proposal/request for qualifications selection process for design professionals to reflect sustainable/cultural goals.
- Adopt a community-based design/planning process for all new development and new housing types.