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SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT

Development and Environmentalism Shouldn't Be Enemies

Dense, Walkable Communities Are Better for Climate, Groundwater, Open Space

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SPECIAL TO BANKER & TRADESMAN



It's a scene that plays out repeatedly in town hall or city council meeting rooms across Massachusetts and beyond – an angry group of comfortably housed residents gather to vehemently oppose the adoption of new zoning that will increase housing diversity in the community.

I have been attending these meetings for 20 years across New England in my role as a consultant and, in truth, I have seen terrible zoning proposals for affordable housing where residents had many reasons to be concerned. Unfortunately, I have attended a much larger number of meetings where residents wage a campaign to defeat zoning proposals that would truly help fill a critical need in the community with no need for concern.

The playbook used by the opponents is time-tested, with carefully scripted public comments about traffic, noise, impact on services, untenable burdens on local schools, adverse effects on quality of life and the occasional “dog whistle” about the choices, behaviors of people who live in affordable housing – and environmental impacts.

There is no such thing as new development that does not degrade the undeveloped land where it's built, and nearby water resources will always feel some effects. And any discussion of housing needs to include serious consideration of environmental impacts. But if we listen more closely to grandstanding at public hearings, we often find the assertions brought by opponents are fraught with misinformation and bad assumptions.

There Is a Better Way

Meeting the need for more affordable housing doesn't have to be this way. There are smart, proven techniques to create and expand housing choices that respect the capacity of natural systems, design “places” instead of “projects” and elevate the needs of our most vulnerable populations.

At this point in our region's history, we need to act. The lack of housing affordable to the majority of would-be homebuyers has reached the crisis stage in most communities and we are quickly perpetuating an already strong trend of socio-economic inequality.

Fortunately, there are developers, architects, designers, scientists and planners in our region who know how to take this issue head on. They have the technical expertise to work with municipalities and developers to strike the right balance between housing creation and environ-

mental protection. But to do so, there needs to be a concerted effort to ease often insurmountable local regulatory requirements.

Thanks in part to 2021's MBTA Communities zoning reform, towns and cities are realizing they need to reexamine existing zoning bylaws that discourage density but allow the outdated “sprawl” type of zoning that has significantly contributed to the region's housing crisis. It is imperative that multi-family housing, at a variety of scales, be permissible in areas with ad-

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equated infrastructure such as sewer systems and close proximity to employment, services, schools, shopping, recreation and public transportation. The basic tenets of the decades-old “smart growth” philosophy still ring true today – mixed-land use, open space conservation, compact design and transportation accessibility.

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Regardless of whether public transportation is present, this approach should be embraced by every community and the scale can be tailored to specific local housing needs, infrastructure capacity and natural resource limitations. For instance, a multi-family development in a Boston-area suburb like Newton will look much different in size, scope and architecture than a project in a small Cape Cod town like Falmouth.

Density Is Sustainability

Creating dense, well-designed, walkable communities not unlike the downtowns and village centers of yore goes hand-in-hand with environmental consciousness and sustainability. In addition to construction that would incorporate energy-efficient and climate-resilient structures,

these communities are less automobile-dependent. Furthermore, more centralized wastewater solutions, even at the neighborhood scale, can produce far less groundwater contamination than the single-family, on-site septic system model that has dominated so many communities for decades.

Step one in this process is for communities to acknowledge there are serious housing needs and serious environmental concerns facing us all. We all must play a part in the solution. Step two is to embrace the idea that we are fully capable of addressing both of these issues together with careful planning and high-quality design. Lastly, we must all accept that addressing these issues will change some parts of our communities forever.

Previous generations set the stage for dra-

matic transformation in our communities so that many of us could have access to amazing housing opportunities. It's time for us all to think about the needs of future generations and set the stage for their prosperity. The next time you learn there is a zoning proposal to increase housing diversity in your community, I urge you to get involved and learn the facts.

We can provide the housing desperately needed for the social and economic well-being of this region. We can do it in a way that improves the health of our ecosystems and the climate outlook for future generations. We can do this. ◀

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