

# Communities Already Own a Key Tool to Help Alleviate Housing Crisis: Municipal Property - Banker & Tradesman

*Banker & Tradesman*



Jonathan Ford

Municipalities throughout New England have long struggled to create opportunities to help alleviate the region's severe housing crisis, without realizing potential solutions may already be within their control.

Most, if not all, communities have undeveloped parcels of land and underutilized – or even abandoned – buildings under municipal government ownership. The time has come to leverage these properties and existing structures to transform them into their highest and best use as a wide range of affordable and attainable housing stock welcoming to a diverse population.

Local governments play an important role in setting the table for building housing on surplus municipal property. A crucial early step for planners is to undertake an inventory of available government real estate and commission feasibility studies to determine which assets would be appropriate for housing construction, infill development or retrofit. Let's face it, not all properties are a good location for housing, especially those in isolated areas away from existing neighborhood centers and public transportation and sites with high-value natural systems such as wetlands, forest and wildlife habitat.

When it comes to actual redevelopment of municipal properties, a best practice for communities considering housing would be to embrace the design principles and concepts of New Urbanism.

According to The Congress for The New Urbanism, "New Urbanism is a planning and development approach based on the principles of how cities and towns had been built for the last several centuries: walkable blocks and streets, housing and shopping in close proximity, and accessible public spaces. In other words: New Urbanism focuses on human-scaled urban design." In New England, this often means modeling the best characteristics of our walkable, well-loved places that were built over 100 years ago.

## **Ideal for 'Missing Middle' Homes**

The combination of undervalued municipal owned assets and New Urbanist urban design principles also lends itself to "missing middle" housing approaches. The "missing middle"

represents a much-needed blend of diverse housing options, including starter homes, duplexes, multi-unit mixed-use buildings, townhouses, cottage courts, accessory units, and even modern takes on the iconic three-decker.

Applying high-quality design principles allows communities to meet a wide range of housing needs across the affordability spectrum, all while achieving a “just right” density to maximize the number of homes within existing neighborhood context.

Sounds an awful lot like our beloved historic New England villages and downtown areas, doesn't it? This community-centric, medium-density design concept thrived for hundreds of years and is primed for a major comeback in the 21st century – but with a new twist.

Today we have the need – and the know-how – to develop “clean and green” housing that is environmentally sustainable and resilient. On redevelopment sites, design practices such as native landscapes and green stormwater infrastructure can create a net environmental benefit. Further, as we breathe new life into abandoned buildings, advancements in materials, insulation, windows, appliances and air filtration are creating spaces that are healthier than anything imaginable when these structures were first constructed.

### **Strong Team Needed to Help**

While municipalities are a key player in this process, make no mistake, they are generally not equipped to be developers or landlords, nor should they be.

To convert vacant parcels of land or empty buildings into vibrant housing, it is imperative that a strong team of specialized partners collaborate to develop realistic visions and design concepts. These teams should include architects, environmental professionals, designers, financial institutions, local officials, citizens, traffic engineers, landscape architects and housing advocates. Municipalities are increasingly playing a leadership role on these teams, creating visions for specific sites using extensive public feedback then releasing RFPs for development partners to implement the vision.

We don't have to look far within our own region here on Cape Cod and the Islands to find stellar examples of adaptive reuse of municipal buildings and new housing constructed on municipal-owned parcels of land.

LeClair Village in Mashpee is a community of 39 affordable homes, in three buildings, being built on town-owned property.

Meshacket Commons in Edgartown includes 36 rental units and four townhouse ownership opportunities on municipal property.

North Eastham Village Center in Eastham is being developed to create a multigenerational walkable neighborhood on three parcels of town-owned property including a former golf driving range.

The time has come for municipal leaders to look within for solutions to their community housing crisis. They may realize that the vacant lot or closed school building they drive by every day could be part of the answer they've long been looking for to create new and attainable housing options.

*Jonathan Ford is a senior associate for community design at Horsley Witten Group, a full-service environmental consulting firm headquartered in Sandwich.*