

Master planner writes that MBTA Zoning Law creates positive impacts on public health

For anyone who is a newcomer to housing issues, reading the press about so called “MBTA Zoning” in Massachusetts might suggest the state’s extreme need for affordable housing is a recent issue. But there’s actually a long story that brought us to this point, one that goes back more than 50 years. I’ve personally watched it unfold for more than two decades as a community planning professional.

Whether good, bad or ugly, the debate routinely focuses on the appropriate roles of state and local government. Who should be leading the development of housing policy and implementation? Looking at where we are today, one thing is clear: We have not done enough.

It’s worth looking back to when the seeds were planted for this tension between the Commonwealth and municipalities. In 1969, Massachusetts adopted the Regional Planning Law, generally referred to as “Chapter 40B.” This law is most famous for granting developers the ability to propose residential development that circumvents local zoning rules provided a minimum percentage of the homes are deed restricted to certain levels of affordability, determined by household income.



During its early years, Chapter 40B did not receive a lot of attention. It was not until the late 1990s that the tension escalated. One recurring objection was that the state had overstepped its bounds and should leave local land use decisions to local laws. In the wake of considerable pushback, Massachusetts began to develop other incentives for municipalities that sincerely wanted to offer greater housing diversity. These incentives, like Chapter 40B, continue to be successful. But again, it’s not enough.

The latest response from the Commonwealth to the growing housing crisis is MBTA Zoning. This legislation sets up a system of mandates for local zoning that would allow for different densities of

housing, depending on a municipality's proximity to public transportation. I won't take time to explain the technical requirements of MBTA Zoning, as those have been covered in innumerable articles. But what I do find striking in the public discourse is the lack of focus on the core premise of this legislation — locating housing closer to transit. While I do believe in the value of debating the merits of different zoning tools or, more broadly, the appropriate roles of state and local government, these debates are serving to take our collective “eye off the ball.”

The most unsettling challenge of our time is climate change. Unfortunately, this issue has a built-in disadvantage — disconnect — when it comes to public policy. It's been extremely difficult to wrap our brains around the idea that the collective actions of several billion people simply going about their daily lives can actually alter the planet's climate. But unfortunately, that's pretty much what has happened.

For many people, the impacts we've been warned about in some “far off distant future” have been hard to visualize or even believe. Now we are seeing them firsthand, manifesting as crumbling shorelines, crippling drought, heat waves, the spread of disease, deadly floods and more. What was once an abstract scientific discussion has become tangible. Predictions are now reality, and it's time to keep our eye on the ball.

The range of issues that needs to be addressed in order to right the ship on climate change is dizzying. Truly putting this planet back on course for the foreseeable future will involve making changes to how we eat, travel, dress and communicate. It will require corporations to shift from profit models to models of prosperity. It will require nations to reconsider how they measure economic success and require individuals to rethink the concepts of race and class. And yes, it will require us to rethink how we build communities, where future generations choose to live, and how we all get “from point A to point B.”

These ideas are, emphatically, not a call to end suburbia or marginalize rural communities. As a reminder, community planning is my career and I see amazing opportunities across the spectrum of cities and towns to help us solve these challenges. It's also not a call to start building high-rise apartments in every city and town in Massachusetts. Protecting natural resources is the foundation of addressing climate change, and woven into every aspect of sound planning practice. What I'm calling for is a collective “check-in” on the underlying premise of MBTA Zoning and viewing this legislation through a different lens.

The MBTA Zoning legislation rests on the fundamental understanding that providing people with good homes and an opportunity to drive less creates positive impacts in public health, community vitality and economic prosperity. It is a policy that responds directly to the challenge of climate change by reducing the carbon footprint of residents and providing more efficient access to the services needed to respond to climate-related risks, especially for more vulnerable populations.

Climate change is here. Viewing the housing issue through this lens, we may be inspired to stop arguing whether the MBTA Zoning Law is an undue burden and realize it's probably the least we can do.

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