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Opinion/Guest column: Bridgewater uses MBTA Communities Act to advantage

Jeff Davis Worcester Telegram & Gazette

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With so much attention focused on municipalities opposing the MBTA Communities Act, the Town of Bridgewater must be recognized for embracing the law to reimagine its town center and create much-needed attainable housing stock.

Located approximately 25 miles south of Boston with a commuter rail stop on the Middleborough-Lakeville line and a state university campus bordering its town center, Bridgewater has become an increasingly desirable suburb. Unfortunately, rapidly rising home prices — along with a housing shortage — are unwanted byproducts of the town's popularity.

Thanks to its visionary director of community and economic development, Bob Rulli, Bridgewater was quick to realize that the MBTA Communities Act could be a catalyst for accelerating the transformation of its town center into a multiuse central business district with increased density for housing. Utilizing a grant from the Massachusetts Housing Partnership, the town engaged with the Horsley Witten Group to provide technical assistance and help it meet state compliance standards.

The result: Bridgewater's "Vision to Reality" initiative is a holistic plan to revitalize the community's town center, focusing on enhancing the town's Central Square and the nearby Campus Plaza, a 1970s-vintage strip mall. The plan prioritizes transit-oriented development by leveraging the MBTA Communities Act's requirement for zoning reforms that encourage higher-density housing near public transportation.

A key component of Bridgewater's vision involves advocating for the relocation of the town's MBTA commuter rail platform to a more centralized location, which will better support new housing units within a half-mile radius of the station in a bustling town center district.

These changes are expected to benefit the community in several ways. Expanded housing

options will address a critical housing shortage while maintaining Bridgewater's historic charm.

Additionally, the plan aligns with modern planning practices by incorporating a form-based zoning code, which emphasizes the relationships between development and public spaces to create functional environments capable of accommodating mixed-use buildings, fostering walkability, and ensuring cohesive community design. Form-based code development also offers additional benefits such as an expedited approval process and predictable development results.

Another important dimension of this initiative is the mutually advantageous "town and gown" relationship between Bridgewater and Bridgewater State University. The university's proximity offers synergistic benefits, with new development enhancing student housing opportunities, attracting faculty and staff, and promoting greater economic activity in the town center. Coming soon, a new technology innovation center, the Bridgewater State University Cyber Range, will offer degree programs in cybersecurity, another example of growth that will surely benefit from improved transit access and housing options.

Economic benefits flow from this initiative. With the incentive to redevelop underutilized town center properties, Bridgewater will see an expanded tax base and new revenue streams, including permit and application fees. Mixed-use development will also attract both residents and businesses, creating a vibrant town center that serves as a hub for social, cultural and economic activity.

In a time when sustainability is paramount, Bridgewater's emphasis on transit-oriented development underscores its commitment to the environment. Improved access to mass transit will reduce vehicle emissions, creating an accessible community but with a reduced carbon footprint.

Bridgewater has also ensured proposed improvements remain community-driven. Public workshops and informational sessions have allowed residents, local business owners and university representatives to weigh in, ensuring the project reflects the community's priorities and values.

That's not to say the approval process for Bridgewater's planning initiative was without opposition or NIMBYism. Some residents expressed concern about potential traffic problems, changes to the town's character and attracting "those people" to town. However, due in large part to an extensive community engagement process characterized by

transparent dialogue, the overwhelming benefits of the project were finally recognized with a 7-1 Town Council vote in favor of the new zoning initiatives.

As Massachusetts contends with a housing crisis, Bridgewater offers a blueprint for success for municipalities served by or adjacent to public transit. By embracing the MBTA Communities Act as an opportunity rather than a burden, the town is not only addressing housing challenges but also positioning itself as a model of smart, sustainable growth. The MBTA Communities Act has the potential to transform towns and cities across the commonwealth, creating dynamic and inclusive communities. It's time for other municipalities in Massachusetts to follow Bridgewater's lead. *Jeff Davis is a senior planner at Horsley Witten Group, a Sandwich-based environmental consulting firm that, among other services, provides comprehensive planning to municipalities.*