Housing costs and housing affordability are on everyone’s mind in Massachusetts.

Whether you are trying to put down roots, hire an employee, or stay more closely connected with grandchildren on something other than Skype, you know that we desperately need a lot of new places to live in the commonwealth. The biggest obstacle to that goal is obsolete local zoning.

It is a problem we haven’t been able to solve. But in the legislative session that just ended, more progress was made than ever before. To its credit, the Massachusetts Senate passed a zoning reform bill. It went to the House, but time ran out at the session’s end.

The Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance, composed of nine organizations including the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, worked hard to get this ambitious legislation bill to the finish line. They’re now in the earliest stages of assembling a bill for the new legislative session that begins in January.

A major impetus for the legislation that passed in the Senate was the “Housing Crisis: Special Senate Committee on Housing Report,” issued in March of this year, which is a well-researched, participatory effort of varied interests to discuss housing and address concerns.

The Senate bill offered changes to state statutes on planning, permitting and zoning, and included modernized tools for cities and towns. It went beyond zoning, with steps to promote housing production by incentivizing communities to plan for sustainable growth and target new housing near transit and the like.

In the Senate process, new ideas were introduced, some well-known and some more novel. Every community, with a few exceptions, would have designated an area where multifamily housing was allowed by right. Another provision would have allowed, across the state, so-called accessory dwelling units, such as a parent-in-law apartment in a basement, as of right. And another would have fostered so-called cluster development.

A unifying principle in the legislation was to promote more energy efficient and environmentally sustainable development, including a rejection of conventional, large-lot approaches to housing development, with the transportation and employment challenges that kind of growth it presents.

In Support Of 40B

Not part of the discussion, at least not directly, was a hot-button issue that comes to the forefront whenever housing and zoning reform are discussed – Chapter 40B, the commonwealth’s affordable-housing law. That law allows proposed developments that include affordable housing to override certain local regulations if less than 10 percent of the community’s year-round housing stock is affordable as defined under federal guidelines.

Chapter 40B has been on the books for more than 40 years, and over time it has been amended and made more workable by subsequent adjustments that recognize communities that approve affordable housing. There are those who believe that Chap-
Chapter 40B should be part of the debate relating to the zoning legislation. That would not be the prudent course.

Unlike any other tool developed to date, Chapter 40B is proven, creating tens of thousands of multifamily homes. Nothing has matched it in terms of effectiveness and staying power. Massachusetts voters upheld the law in a statewide referendum in a recent election. In many communities Chapter 40B is the only permitting pathway to create the types of housing that combat sprawl.

The new zoning reform legislation will complement Chapter 40B, and it is sorely needed. “A shocking number of communities have not built any multifamily housing in the last few years,” said Andre Leroux, executive director of the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance. He says the Senate bill was a good start and believes the various parties are close enough that a good bill can be passed in the next session.

Barry Bluestone of the Dukakis Center for Urban & Regional Policy at Northeastern University, a specialist on housing matters, sees progress. He said that in 2012, 308 of the 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts issued no permits for multifamily at all. But by 2015 the number of communities that didn’t approve any multifamily developments was down to 121.

“So I think what is going on,” he said, “is town officials are telling people not that the hoards will invade, which people worry about, but that with the aging population in many of these communities you have a significant number of older folks who are ready to give up single-family homes but want to stay in the community.”

The new housing that gets built makes Massachusetts more affordable, more accessible and indeed more desirable for all of us and our families. This legislative effort has terrific potential, and coupled with a strong commitment to Chapter 40B, its time has come.

Susan Gittelman is the executive director of B’nai B’rith Housing, a nonprofit, affordable housing developer working in Andover, Sudbury and Swampscott.