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OPINION

HOUSING MATTERS

Fresh Ideas To Help Build Our Housing Future

Seeded In Report Card, They Offer Great Potential For Massachusetts

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SPECIAL TO BANKER & TRADESMAN

“Housing ‘crunch’ now a crisis,” the Boston Globe headline read. “Massachusetts legislators have an answer.”



SUSAN GITTELMAN

The state Legislative Joint Committee on Urban Affairs had just published a report: 260,000 families were in unsafe or unsanitary housing, and 20,000 were on waiting lists for state-aided housing.

“The supply of public housing in Massachusetts is grossly inadequate ... depriving citizens of a basic right,” the report concluded.

That was in May – of 1970.

Almost half a century later, the latest Greater Boston Housing Report Card was issued last month, and it’s painfully evident that we have not found an answer to the housing crisis.

“... despite whatever progress the region has made in housing production, affordability is a greater problem than ever,” the report, issued by The Boston Foundation, Northeastern University and The Warren Group, summed it up.

We are lucky to have had the Report Card as an exceptional yardstick to track our housing progress and setbacks for 15 years. For example, this year it notes a 12 percent

increase in the number of new housing construction permits in 2017 over 2016.

In particular, the city of Boston has set aggressive goals, including creating 53,000 additional units of housing by 2030. It is ahead of schedule – but as the report notes, many communities on the periphery are not doing their part.

“The troubling news in this report is that not enough of this activity is taking place outside the city of Boston: in the surrounding cities and towns, actually fewer permits are being issued overall.”

In addition, “outlying Boston neighborhoods and communities just outside Boston like Somerville have seen their home prices explode – and not only in the priciest communities and neighborhoods,” the report said, with prices in Roxbury increasing 70 percent and in East Boston 52 percent between 2010 and 2015.

It Takes A Village

Overall, we are very fortunate to be living in Greater Boston. It is true that this longstanding housing crunch hasn’t destabilized our region. But in this time of globalization and massive acceleration, the consequences of doing nothing are dangerous. Prospective new Boston residents and workers must weigh oppressive housing costs against their desires to move here and share what Boston has to offer.

And look no further than what is happening in San Francisco, a city often compared to Boston. There you see the stark-

est of divisions between the haves and have-nots, where the median house price is \$1.4 million and the homeless population is exploding.

Back in Boston and armed with the data, we can chart a different path.

One new model proposed by Barry Bluestone and James Huessey – the authors of the Report Card – is the “21st Century Village” concept, an idea that bridges the needs of neighborhoods and our anchor academic institutions in creating a diverse housing supply, a modern interpretation of classic New England town centers.

And there is leadership emerging. Just this month, the Metropolitan Mayors Coalition of Greater Boston, which represents 14 urban and suburban communities of Greater Boston, announced a new regional housing partnership. The partnership will work on housing production, diversity, cost, location, design and increasing housing stability.

Then just days later the Baker Administration announced a major initiative to address some of the obstacles that have long hindered housing production. Debuting a “Housing Choice Initiative,” Gov. Charlie Baker chose a number of tools to slay the housing-shortage dragon and set a goal of adding 135,000 homes in the commonwealth over eight years.

To incentivize municipalities to roll up their sleeves, he has made a commitment of \$10 million to communities that help

him achieve his goal. He will be establishing a Housing Choice Designation program that would reward communities that produce new and environmentally sustainable housing with capital grants and priority access to infrastructure funding programs like MassWorks.

And, perhaps most ambitiously, the Baker administration will file legislation to

allow willing communities to reduce the requirements for local zoning changes from a two-thirds, “supermajority” vote to a simple majority vote. This simple act has the potential to knock down one of the highest regulatory hurdles serving as a barrier to building new homes in all communities around the state.

We have the data at hand and some fresh

ideas to avoid a future we don’t want. We are inspired by the innovative leadership at hand, and it will take all of us, united, to make it happen. ■

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