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## HOUSING MATTERS

# In Favor of the Good

## Simple Majority Rule on Housing an Important Step Forward

BY SUSAN GITTELMAN

SPECIAL TO BANKER & TRADESMAN



It is no badge of honor that Boston continues to be the third-most expensive rental market in the country.

In our area, home values have little relationship to area wages and employ-

ers and entrepreneurs are hamstrung in attracting workers who have choices to move to attractive and less costly housing markets.

Housing production in Massachusetts is almost 40 percent below the national average. But new housing happens at the local level, and therein lies the problem.

Local zoning rules now make it difficult to create apartments, townhouses and mixed-use buildings, even though there is strong demand. Housing advocates and the most bullish public officials have struggled for years to do something about that.

But something has emerged late in this legislative session that holds promise.

A housing bill advocated by the Baker administration and tweaked in committee earlier this year would offer cities and towns the option of passing certain critical types of housing zoning amendments by a simple majority at town meeting, rather than the two-thirds “supermajority,” currently required. That higher level of support has been an effective obstacle to development of new housing.

“An Act to Promote Housing Choices” would make it easier to allow homes on smaller lots; reduce parking requirements; introduce mixed use-zoning, multifamily projects and starter homes; allow clustered developments with shared open space; permit accessory, or “in-law” apartments in homes; and increase density in general.

Debate since spring has lacked a clear consensus within the housing community about how

ambitious this bill should be. While some felt the voluntary nature of its implementation was a profound weakness, others saw it as a logical opening for willing municipalities to encourage growth.

We need to learn from this experience. According to the Massachusetts Housing Partnership, the state is already about 38,000 homes short of demand, and that is expected to grow as Baby Boomers leave the workforce and are replaced by new worker-residents. Letting the perfect be the enemy of the good is a classic choice that dooms us to the status quo.

**An Act to Promote Housing Choices may not be a perfect solution, but it has real potential to seed investment in our financial future.**

### Reforms Need Timely Action

A champion for housing, state Rep. Kevin Honan, and others are continuing to bring the bill up in what is known as informal session, before the Legislature goes home at year’s end.

Legislative leaders are hoping they won’t have to start over next year, but using the informal session has its risks – under current rules, any single member could derail a vote. In part because of significant, broad-based interest in the bill including from the business community, however, momentum is growing. This is timely because communities begin having town meetings in March.

Brookline voted almost 10 years ago on a relatively modest zoning change to increase housing. It would have allowed accessory dwellings, individual rental units, in homes. Town officials worked to build support but lost by only a few votes, just short of the two-thirds majority needed.

It was a difficult defeat, and now Brookline is preparing again for a vote on an accessory dwelling unit proposal this coming May. That will happen only if the Housing Choice bill becomes law, offering a good chance for passage at the upcoming town meeting.

Some call the town of Acton a poster child for change, it having tried for several years to rezone a neighborhood known as Kelly’s Corner to allow mixed use and new housing. The vote never achieved the approval of two-thirds of Town Meeting voters, but this time it could be enacted if a simple majority vote for it at town meeting.

Arlington is working on proposed bylaw amendments to allow more multifamily housing for town meeting in April. They have maps, analyses of potential housing sites, a master plan, and a package of locally vetted recommendations to produce housing. The last time Arlington tried to change zoning for housing was 2012, when accessory housing units were up for a vote. It required a two-thirds majority – and fell short.

Among those supporting this bill is the broadly representative Massachusetts Municipal Association, which has endorsed the bill precisely because it allows those communities that want more housing to achieve their goals.

Clark Ziegler, executive director of the Massachusetts Housing Partnership, testified early this year that the bill “starts to bridge the divide between restrictive land use regulations adopted under home rule and the economic interests of the commonwealth as a whole.”

An Act to Promote Housing Choices may not be a perfect solution, but it has real potential to seed investment in our financial future. And that is one thing on which we should not compromise. ◀

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