

HOUSING MATTERS

New Report Shows If and How Communities Encourage Multifamily Housing

Survey of 100 Greater Boston Towns Could Point Way to Solutions

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Affordable housing is in short supply in Massachusetts, especially in the Greater Boston area. The kind of housing stock that working- and middle-class families can pay for hasn't kept up with population growth and demand, and that's why it's some of the most expensive in the country.

Despite countless studies proposing countless solutions, the problem has been persistent and is getting worse.

Housing experts and advocates are frustrated because they don't know how to create more multifamily housing. Apartments and condominiums can make the biggest dent in the inadequate supply, yet the rules for what can be built and where are determined not by the state, not by regional agencies, not by counties, but by independent cities and towns. All 351 of them.

That makes it difficult to determine what policies work and what don't, which handicaps builders looking for places to add housing.

No one has a comprehensive grasp of what rules apply where and what the results have been. Even within a single town, local planning departments that have set policies intended to encourage housing production may not know what actually gets built if they are not in close touch with other departments.

That's about to change.

Two Years in the Making

At a presentation at the State House on June 4, a report by the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance, "State of Multi-family Housing in Greater Boston," will be released at an event cohosted by Sen. Brendan Crighton and Rep. Kevin Honan, co-chairs of the Joint Committee on Housing.

Organizations that supported the research include

the Citizens' Housing and Planning Association, Home Builders & Remodelers Association of Massachusetts, Massachusetts Association of Realtors, Massachusetts Housing Partnership, MassHousing and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council.

The report's chief researcher, Amy Dain, spent almost two years collecting the information. Dain has both a specialty and a passion for housing and is a self-described workaholic – she admits to loading her children in the car for "adventures" to distant communities to visit, say, an interesting new cluster housing development. Dain undertook similar work in 2006 for the Pioneer and Rappaport institutes, assessing multiple zoning types: single-family, multifamily, cluster/flexible and inclusionary.

The research evaluated every plan that affected housing development in the last 10 years, including master plans, housing production plans and those governing village centers. Dain found one or more plans in 75 of the 100 communities she surveyed.

She assembled a list of the biggest barriers to multifamily housing development, generated a list of 50 questions for local officials about zoning and then followed up relentlessly to turn a patchwork understanding of the rules into a detailed, comprehensible picture. She said she found some surprising zoning tendencies.

"A lot of them were not only barriers to development but also preventing good design and environmental practices, promoting more use of cars and

By gathering all these rules in one place and looking at which communities have grown their housing supplies and which have not, it should help shape policies that target the right kind of housing right where we need it.

The study noted that "... despite the persistence of debates about land-use regulation, analysts have lacked systematic data on the issue: each of Massachusetts' 351 municipalities writes its own land-use regulations, and it is no easy task to compare them across localities."

The report being released this week focuses specifically on regulations that restrict or promote multifamily housing. It reviewed 100 cities and towns in the Greater Boston area, where the problem is most acute and where about half the state's population lives.

"It's hard to know what policies are needed if we don't know what's happening in cities and towns around the state," said Andre Leroux, executive director of the Massachusetts Smart Growth Partnership, which led the effort. "Do we need to have stronger incentives for communities to rezone for multifamily – or do we need regulations? You can't understand and change what you don't measure."

using up land," she said.

The report is in two sections. One is a framework of regulatory barriers to multifamily production, such as requirements for parking or large lot sizes. The second focuses on policies designed to encourage multifamily housing, including the areas where more is beginning to be built: town centers, but also former office and industrial parks and along transportation thoroughfares.

This report won't change governance. But, by gathering all these rules in one place and looking at which communities have grown their housing supplies and which have not, it should help shape policies that target the right kind of housing right where we need it.

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