



Residential construction in Waltham, MA. (Photo by Amy Dain)

HOUSING / OPINION

Where should new multi-family housing go?

The tendency will be to isolate it, but that may not be the best approach



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WHERE SHOULD new multifamily housing go? This is a fundamental question facing 175 communities across eastern Massachusetts as they work to implement a new law intended to address the region’s housing shortage. The MBTA Communities law requires cities and towns served by Greater Boston’s public transit agency, the MBTA, to enact zoning that allows multifamily housing near transit.

If history is any indication, communities will seek to locate this new multi-family housing away from existing residential neighborhoods when possible. In recent decades, the largest portion of new housing in Greater Boston has been built in isolated areas on municipal and metropolitan peripheries. As an example, the town of Wellesley approved the construction of a 262-unit complex called The Nines on a spit of land separated from the rest of town, tucked between Routes 95 and 9 and the Charles River. The towns of Needham and Stoneham permitted similar “across the interstate” developments, and other examples abound.

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The next largest portion of residential permitting has come in commercial areas. As “smart growth” caught on in the new millennium, most cities and towns added one or two small- or medium-sized multifamily buildings to their historic downtowns and centers, their Main Streets. These properties are very close to residential neighborhoods, but not right in them. Zoning for mixed-use developments along decaying strip mall corridors has also been gaining support.

Thus, we see projects on Newton's Needham Street, Bedford's Great Road, Salem's Highland Avenue, Swampscott's Vinnin Square, and many other less-than-loved "stroads."

For many communities, preserving the status quo of existing neighborhoods has been an explicit priority, even as the housing crunch has intensified. A few years ago, the city of Weymouth rezoned a commercial corridor for mixed-use multifamily housing, drawing the zoning district surgically to avoid development near existing residential neighborhoods. Wellesley's 2018 Draft Unified Plan explains that participants in public meetings saw commercial, office, and industrial areas as the most acceptable locations for multifamily housing; not residential districts. In fact, my review of local master plans across 100 cities and towns showed no movement to upzone residential neighborhoods, other than by allowing accessory dwelling units (also called in-law apartments), which appear to have relatively popular support.

Given the political resistance to changing residential neighborhoods, developing housing in other areas is not without merit. The Metropolitan Area Planning Council, the regional planning agency, recently analyzed more than 3,000 strip malls and shopping centers across Greater Boston, and estimated that such sites could accommodate 124,000 new homes. Between those areas and various office parks and industrial lands, Greater Boston could raise enough residential towers and townhouses to end bidding wars, giving renters and buyers the upper hand, without changing existing residential neighborhoods.

However, the strategy of rezoning exclusively commercial and industrial areas assumes that the only goal is housing production. Metropolitan growth policy also needs to consider transportation, the environment, local economies, quality of life, and equity.

The transit-oriented development paradigm at the heart of the new MBTA Communities zoning law imagines a region defined by a network of walkable, dense hubs that are well-connected by roads, walkways, bike lanes, bus lanes, train

lines, and ferry routes. Under this scenario, people will spend less time in traffic; convenient region-wide mobility will be accessible to all residents, including those without cars; carbon emissions will go down; more people will have access to the region's best opportunities; and our collective well-being and resilience will improve.

One of Greater Boston's most prominent strengths is that it was built as a network of urban villages well connected by trains and streetcars before automobiles began dominating urban design. The framework for the vision of well-connected "great neighborhoods" is already on the ground. The metropolitan area is crisscrossed with village centers and downtowns that contain pharmacies, libraries, restaurants, cafes, civic institutions, schools, playgrounds, public greens, quirky shops, and transit stops.

If we write off as unchangeable all residential neighborhoods adjacent to these great hubs, then we make it harder to achieve the combined goals of an abundance of housing and sustainable, equitable settlement patterns. There is much demand in Greater Boston for "missing middle" housing that fits between single family-houses-with-yards and bigger apartment/condo complexes. For development of smaller scale multifamily housing to serve many people and make a difference in the market, it has to be allowed in more places.

Creating more housing in the Boston area will involve a combination of strategies, including significantly more building on main streets and the currently car-oriented corridors that radiate out from them; continued building on some isolated parcels on municipal edges; and incremental increases in density near connected, walkable hubs—i.e., in existing residential neighborhoods. Significant development on isolated parcels and strip mall corridors should be accompanied by infrastructure redesign to create connected, walkable hubs.

As they consider different development scenarios that meet the requirements of the MBTA Communities zoning law, leaders and residents will need to weigh the politics and pros and cons of dense zoning in commercial and industrial areas,

against zoning for small-scale multifamily housing in neighborhoods. Their deliberations will be part of a larger national debate about how regions should grow.

Many people will be anxious about the possibility of multifamily development next to their homes. They'll worry about traffic and parking, property values, architecture, noise, privacy, and all sorts of things. But we could just as well associate new housing with the chocolate chip cookies the future residents might bake for block parties, the leadership they might take on local issues, and the purple pansies they might plant out front in big happy planters. We could think of the joy, stability, and safety that new neighbors will gain in, and contribute to, our neighborhoods.

Humans are perhaps wired to protect against threats more than to revel in visions of possibility, but we are also well equipped to plan ahead, together. We should plan for a just and sustainable future with abundant housing in wonderful, connected neighborhoods—and reform local zoning accordingly.

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