

With high costs and little new housing, Lexington becomes first town to meet ambitious new zoning law

By [Andrew Brinker](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated April 13, 2023, 4:58 p.m.



Pedestrians cross busy Mass. Ave. in downtown Lexington. THE BOSTON GLOBE/GLOBE FREELANCE

Lexington, one of the most expensive housing markets in Massachusetts, this week became the first town in the state to pass zoning that aims to comply with a new law that calls for denser development in communities served by the MBTA — a sign that even

some in wealthy communities are buying into Beacon Hill’s plan to address sky-high housing costs.

Lexington’s Town Meeting voted, 107-63, on Wednesday night to approve [a series of new zones](#) that would allow multifamily housing to be built by right — or without onerous special permitting. The vote came more than a year and a half before Lexington’s deadline to submit new zoning to the state under the MBTA Communities law, which [mandates cities and towns served by the MBTA zone for multifamily housing](#). The Department of Housing and Community Development will now determine if they satisfy the state guidelines.

The vote, although contested by a strong contingent of dissenting Town Meeting members, was in part a response to the pain that more and more Lexington residents are feeling as a result of the town’s escalating housing costs, officials there said.

“Folks have realized that there’s nowhere in Lexington for their kids to live if they want to move back after college,” said Planning Board chair Bob Peters. “And we also have residents who have hit retirement age and want to downsize, but can’t find anywhere in town to do that. The answer we have in front of us is to build more multifamily housing.”

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The zoning changes will allow for that multifamily housing in a dozen new stretches of town, most of which are commercial areas. Depending on the location, developers will be

able to construct residential buildings that range from three to six stories tall, and if the developer designates part of the first floor for retail or commercial use, they'll be able to build higher than the zoning would otherwise allow. Town officials say the zones are designed in a way that will preserve Lexington's historical districts.

The new rules actually go further than [the state guidelines](#), rezoning 227 acres of land instead of the required roughly 80 acres. Under the final MBTA Communities rules, Lexington needed to zone for an additional 1,231 units of multifamily housing. Since 2012, building permits have been issued for 825 units of new housing in Lexington, according to [The Boston Foundation's Greater Boston Housing Report Card](#). Of those, only two were for multifamily units. The town's new rules would allow for many more.

Allowing for apartments and condos at this scale will be a big shift for a town in which single-family homes make up well over 70 percent of the total housing stock, though town officials believe the majority of Lexington's growth from the zoning will play out over the course of a decade. They also say it's a change that's desperately needed. Last year, the median-priced home there sold for \$1.5 million, according to data from the Warren Group, a real estate analysis firm, and more than 41 percent of Lexington households spend at least 30 percent of their income on housing, according to the housing report card.

"We have a housing crisis," said Abby McCabe, the town's planning director. "This is our residents deciding to do something about it."

Passing the new rules was not smooth sailing. Some residents called for the town to flout MBTA Communities entirely, and others started a petition to lower maximum building heights from what was originally proposed.

An amendment to lower the building heights put forth by the Planning Board and reduce the size of the multifamily zones was presented during Town Meeting deliberations, and failed by just six votes.

Another wrinkle: The zoning rules passed Lexington Town Meeting with roughly 60 percent of the vote. Prior to the 2021 passage of the Housing Choice law, pushed for years by then-Governor Charlie Baker, which lowered the threshold to pass zoning changes at the town level from two-thirds to a simple majority, that would've been a failing vote.

But Lexington's new zoning signals that, while some communities have balked at the MBTA Communities law or even said outright that they won't follow along, others — even wealthy towns that have historically built very little — are working to meet the requirements.

“We think these changes are going to make our town a better place to live,” said Peters.

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