

LOCAL NEWS

Dracut Town Meeting soundly rejects MBTA Communities multifamily zoning



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DRACUT — Voters sent a loud message to Beacon Hill and Town Hall Monday night, overwhelmingly defeating a motion to reconsider their vote last November that nixed the MBTA Communities law.

Dracut will soon be breaking that state law and will likely remain in violation for a considerable period of time. It is not the only community in Eastern Massachusetts in the situation, but most of the 177 communities covered by it have complied. Tewksbury is the only other community in Greater Lowell that has not.

“The issue is now dead,” Selectman Tony Archinski said after the meeting.

Town Meeting started at 8:20 p.m. — 80 minutes later than its scheduled 7 p.m. start — because it took that long for more than 800 voters to check in. The delayed start angered some of the crowd, whose demands to open the meeting grew increasingly raucous.

The crowd remained boisterous during the meeting, sometimes being sharply gaveled into order by new Town Moderator Brian Flaherty. Flaherty, who teaches social studies at Central Catholic High School, opened the meeting with a reflection on Dracut's role in the Revolutionary War.

Eight residents spoke on Article 27, taken out of order by a vote at the beginning of the meeting. Otherwise, it would have been one of the last articles considered, likely further agitating opponents of the MBTA law. Six spoke against reconsideration, while two spoke in favor.

Liz Foster, who has attended numerous Board of Selectmen meetings since November to speak on the issue, assailed selectmen for bringing a rejected warrant article back before Town Meeting unchanged in any way.

Foster expressed frustration that the town was being asked to vote on the same thing just a few months later. Her feelings were echoed by other speakers, some of whom saw dark motives behind the event, which one speaker called a "violation of human rights."

The town had to submit a plan for compliance by Jan. 15, so selectmen decided to send the state the original plan, which had involved two years of work. The board hoped in the intervening months that state courts would provide greater clarity on the constitutionality of the law. They hoped clarity would help overcome the seven-vote deficit that defeated the article in November.

The vote to reconsider needed a two-thirds (66%) majority to pass. With 669 voters opposed to reconsideration and 156 in favor, the reconsideration motion died.

A motion was then made to send the article back to the Board of Selectmen to determine what options the town might have to present to the state. Town Counsel Dave De Luca advised the state would see refusal "as a negative action."

Selectmen Chair Josh Taylor told voters that a "yes" vote would allow the board to "consider all the options" available to the town, including filing suit for an exemption.

Opponents of the law have urged the town to sue for an exemption for several months. But Monday night, they defeated the motion that might have allowed that. George Boag urged voters, "Drive a stake through this thing's heart. Vote no."

The state has said it will penalize towns that fail to comply with the law and reject grant applications, and it may consider legal action against the town. About 60% of Dracut's budget is funded by the state.

The discussion on the article to reconsider lasted 70 minutes. When Town Meeting returned to the beginning of the warrant, some articles were quickly dispensed with, but others took some time.

They included the following items:

- Approved the \$132.29 million annual budget on a vote of 591-126.
- Approved the Community Preservation Act funds to acquire at a cost of \$750,000 41 acres of open space known as the Brox Wood Lot at 461 Methuen Road on a vote of 414-304.
- Approved permitting licensed firearm owners to legally carry their personal firearms within municipal buildings, except schools and school events held on school property, on a vote of 304-114.

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