

# Healey administration bars Milton from state grants after defiant housing vote. It's about more than money.

By [Andrew Brinker](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 21, 2024, 6:50 p.m.



Milton residents voted last week against a controversial plan that would open key sections of the town to more housing development. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Facing [an insurgent opposition to the state's new housing law](#), Governor Maura Healey's administration came down Wednesday on Milton, trying to head off broader momentum sparked by the town's recent rejection of a controversial housing plan.

State officials told Milton in a letter that the town is now barred from receiving some significant state grants after voters last week rejected a plan to comply with the MBTA Communities Act, one of the state's most powerful tools for digging out of the housing crisis.

The Milton results have emboldened opponents in other suburbs around Greater Boston that face deadlines this year to write state-mandated land-use rules to allow new apartments and condominiums near transit stations.

“Milton is setting an example that it’s OK to not comply with state law,” said Rachel Heller, chief executive of the housing advocacy group Citizens’ Housing and Planning Association. “Now we are going to see a concerted effort from the state to enforce the law so that other communities don’t start looking at noncompliance as a real option.”

State Housing Secretary Ed Augustus, in his letter to Milton’s town manager, repeated a message the state has expressed over and over in recent weeks: communities that defy the law will face consequences. This time, Augustus confirmed the state will revoke a key \$140,000 grant awarded last month to help restore a sea wall. (The Globe first reported last week that the grant would be revoked.)

Milton has received \$1.7 million from discretionary state grants since 2021, town officials have said, for myriad municipal projects such as street improvements and school programs. The town’s defiance of the law will count against its bids for many competitive grants, Augustus said.

“The law is clear — compliance with the MBTA Communities Law is mandatory,” Augustus wrote. “At this time, Milton is the only rapid transit community in Massachusetts that is not in compliance. If we do not all come together to build more housing, we will not be able to overcome our affordability crisis. We need every community to do their part.”

It was at least the fourth time someone in state government has warned Milton about consequences of defying the law in recent weeks, an indication of how important a successful rollout of MBTA Communities is for Healey. The administration is hoping to not only push Milton to comply, but also the more than 150 communities that have yet to consider the state-mandated zoning.

It’s unclear whether the state will deploy perhaps its strongest tool for enforcing the law: legal action by Attorney General Andrea Campbell. Campbell publicly threatened to sue Milton and

other communities that defy the law in the buildup to the vote last week, though she has not indicated if she will follow through.



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Augustus' letter comes a week after the conclusion of the highly contentious campaign over Milton's plan to comply with MBTA Communities, which requires cities and towns served by the T to zone for more housing. Town Meeting had overwhelmingly approved Milton's plan to create six zones across town allowing multifamily housing, but 54 percent of residents voted against it.

The vote leaves Milton in limbo. The No campaign did not present an alternative plan, so the town is back to square one. The planning board is expected to discuss MBTA Communities on Thursday, though the deadline to have a new zoning plan considered at the next Town Meeting in May has already passed.

The Healey administration, housing advocates say, is trying to walk a delicate line. MBTA Communities is central to the state's broader pitch on housing: that in order to solve the shortage of homes, some residents will have to accept denser housing in their neighborhoods.

On the one hand, by not punishing Milton, proponents fear other towns would see it as a sign that they do not need to draft new zoning of their own. But coming out too aggressively could provoke an even bigger backlash.

Striking the right balance will be a challenge. Denny Swenson, a leader of the No campaign in Milton, said after the election that "the idea of Big Government telling municipal government what to do" was enough to motivate some residents to vote against the plan. The Healey administration had sent messages to residents urging them to vote Yes, and Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll even made an appearance at a Yes campaign rally.

That sentiment has reached some other communities as well, where some residents and local officials who cheered on the No campaign now see Milton's vote as a rallying cry against what they see as government overreach. In the wake of the vote, some opponents are cranking up pressure on their local officials, sending letters citing Milton as an example and showing up in large numbers to public meetings and shrugging off the prospect of losing state funds.

"If Milton can say no, so can we," one North Shore opponent group wrote on Facebook this week.

But the Healey administration has also left the door open for working with Milton on an amicable solution. In his letter, Augustus said he wanted to meet with the Yes and No campaigns "to discuss a path forward."

"The administration is hopeful that we can work together on a new plan that will bring the town into compliance," he wrote.

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