

OPINION

After Milton's MBTA housing defeat, the way forward is with persuasion, not mandates

It's incumbent on proponents of new housing construction in established communities to reflect on what it was about the zoning proposal that so alienated voters.

By **Howard Husock** Updated February 23, 2024, 12:52 p.m.



A volunteer from "Residents for Thoughtful Zoning" handed out flyers on Feb. 9 to encourage Milton voters to vote "no" on Question 1, a vote that would have forced the town to comply with a state MBTA Communities Act. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

It's difficult to avoid seeing [Milton's referendum defeat](#) of a proposed zoning law to permit higher-density housing construction as a signal setback for the state's effort to pressure towns to make housing more affordable. There's no getting around the importance of that effort. High housing prices not only burden current Bay State residents but act as a barrier to newcomers and their talent the state economy needs to thrive.

Instead, it's incumbent on proponents — including Governor Maura Healey — of new housing construction in established communities to reflect on what it was about the proposal in Milton that so alienated voters, even after local Town Meeting approval, and to find a better way to persuade residents, rather than mandating construction or punishing the town.

Both [the state law](#) requiring MBTA communities to authorize new, higher-density housing and the language of Milton's zoning proposal in the [Town Meeting warrant](#) seem almost designed to evoke a backlash. “The Multi-Family Zoning Requirement for MBTA Communities” is a classic, one-size-fits-all. Each of the 177 MBTA district cities and towns is mandated to create a district with a minimum gross density of 15 units per acre. It's not obvious why that's the magic number. Some towns have far more open space than others; for others, it looms as a high bar, as it did in Milton.

The wording of Milton's proposal was similarly off-putting, proposing, for the East Milton district, for instance, “high-quality, multi-family and mixed-use development.” The combination of “multi-family” and 15 units per acre inevitably evokes the image of large apartment buildings in a low-rise town.

Similarly, the Town Meeting warrant language promised not incremental but dramatic change, framed as the most through-going zoning review in 100 years and intended to increase the town's housing stock by 25 percent. It is neither fair nor accurate, but the combination of “multi-family” and “affordability” evokes fears of public housing-style structures with their attendant problems, such as those in Dorchester's [Franklin Field development](#), which recently prompted a state lawsuit over mice and mold. Moreover, this should not be framed in racial terms: [16 percent of Milton's residents are Black, and 15 percent are Asian American, Latino, or multiracial.](#)

There's another way to get residents in MBTA communities onboard: build on the tradition of two- to four-family homes already found in Milton, as well as other MBTA communities such as Brookline and Newton. [State data](#) show that 13 percent of current Milton housing is 2- to 4-family homes. Some of the zoning proposal actually pointed in that direction, emphasizing "lower density, high quality multi-family housing that helps preserve the existing physical context of the one- and two-unit neighborhoods adjacent to Blue Hills."

Imagine a zoning proposal calling for an incremental increase in owner-occupied two- to four-family homes. Imagine further that it's sold not as affordable housing but as "starter housing" for teachers, police, and firefighters, as well as young adults raised in Milton who'd like to stay in town or move back. Or for older homeowners facing high property tax bills who'd like to sell and downsize but stay in town. Persuasion, not mandate, is the right path forward. Emphasize benefits, not burdens.

Would a "zoning proposal to encourage starter homes" guarantee 15 units per acre? Perhaps not. But meeting the need for new housing should not be tied to a formula. New housing, even that not targeted or limited to specific income groups, helps to meet demand broadly. So, too, with the state focus on transit-oriented development. There remain those who prefer a yard and a driveway. Better to relax zoning and see what builders think buyers want. These may include small homes not near the T. In the 1950s, Brookline permitted construction of a subdivision of small, single-family homes in the part of the town farthest from transit; [local police and firefighters welcomed the chance to move to Buttonwood Village](#) and stay in their hometown.

The failure of the Milton referendum should not prompt the [governor to punish Milton through local aid cuts or other sanctions](#). Better for local officials to sit down with opponents to discuss what sort of new housing might be attractive for their community. Invite builders to that conversation. As one "no" voter told [Channel 25](#): "I think the town wants zoning of some kind ... just not this zoning."

Housing advocates should take the Milton defeat as a lesson from which they can learn.

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Need It.”

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