



Voters reject MBTA zoning changes at fiery Town Meeting

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Applause erupted as Town Meeting rejected Article 36 — the controversial zoning proposal aimed at complying with a state mandate — on a 377-410 vote.

In doing so, Marblehead joined Wakefield, Milton, Marshfield, Wrentham and Holden in pushing back against the state's Dec. 31 deadline to adopt zoning changes under the MBTA Communities Act.

Later in the meeting, tensions boiled over when resident Angus McQuilken made a motion to reconsider the zoning article after many opponents had left. As Town Moderator Jack Attridge entertained the motion, some of those remaining yelled, "Sham! Sham! Sham!"

Even after the motion to reconsider failed, disenchantment with the proceedings lingered. Apparently misinterpreting Attridge's invitation to run for moderator in a subsequent election, resident Tom Peach approached the stage with an audience microphone, seemingly intent on taking over the meeting immediately. When Attridge resisted, Peach threw the mic and his voting clicker on the stage before storming out in protest.

Many argued for Marblehead to punt the Article 36 decision to December, giving the town the opportunity to learn from the lawsuit brought by the Attorney General against Milton, so other cities and towns affected by the MBTA Communities Act would be able to take the outcome into consideration. The case before the Supreme Judicial Court, the state's highest court, is expected to be heard in October, leaving little time before the Dec. 31 deadline.

Before the vote on the main motion, resident William Ayer argued the law is "actively being challenged" in court and waiting to see the outcome "costs us very little."

However, Finance Director Aleesha Benjamin spoke at length about state grants Marblehead could lose if it voted no.

The Planning Board's proposal sought to zone 58.4 acres to allow approximately 897 multifamily units across three districts, surpassing the state mandate. These districts included following:



Resident Tom Peach throws a microphone on stage in anger at Town Meeting Tuesday night. CURRENT PHOTO / LEIGH BLANDER



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— Tioga Way (29.8 acres, 483 units at 17.3 units per acre).

— Pleasant Street (20.6 acres, 295 units at 14.3 units per acre).

— Broughton Road (8.0 acres, 119 units at 14.9 units per acre).

Supporter Nick Ward said the zoning would “bring more choice” for seniors and families, aligning with being “pro-family, pro-schools.”

Critics voiced concerns about impacts on infrastructure, schools and Marblehead’s character. Planning Board Chair Bob Schaeffner noted 300+ existing units would count toward the zoning, reducing potential new construction.

Fair Housing Committee veteran Dirk Isbrandtsen argued there is “virtually no threat” if the zoning passes, saying Marblehead has responsibly managed development. “We should not be afraid to vote yes on this,” Isbrandtsen said.

However, appeals to Marblehead independence appeared to resonate with voters who felt the state has no right to dictate local decisions.

The immediate consequences for towns like Marblehead are uncertain. Benjamin pointed out that the state pulled grants from Milton just two weeks after it rejected the zoning act.

After the initial votes were tallied, Attridge remarked, “I’m sure we’ll be back before the end of the year,” an apparent reference to the prospect of a special town meeting to again consider a plan to comply with the act.

When asked what should happen next, Article 36 opponent John DiPiano wrote in an email to the *Current*, “What I think should now happen is that our representative, Jenny Armini, should be proposing an emergency amendment to c. 40A so that towns can opt in or opt out without the threat of reprisal.”

This is a developing story. Stay with the *Current* for updates.

Leigh Blander and Kris Olson contributed to this article.



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