

After fierce debate, Milton voters overturn state-mandated housing plan

Referendum shooting down town's MBTA zoning plan could reverberate across Eastern Mass.

By [Andrew Brinker](#) and [Ava Berger](#) Globe Staff and Globe Correspondent, Updated February 14, 2024, 11:11 p.m.



Yes and No signs near the Cunningham Park Community Center in Milton on February 14. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

MILTON — In a vote that could set up a legal standoff with state officials and reverberate across Eastern Massachusetts, Milton voters on Wednesday rejected a [land-use plan](#) that would have opened the town up to more multifamily development.

After weeks of fervent campaigning and political tension, Milton residents voted by a substantial margin to overturn the town's state-mandated zoning plan, according to results released by the Town Clerk Wednesday night. "No" carried about 54 percent of the nearly 9,500 votes cast.

The vote represents a setback to the Healey administration's efforts to dig out of the state's housing crisis, and could crystalize local resistance to a broader vision of compelling communities to build more. It could also prompt legal action from the state if the town does not find a way to comply with the MBTA Communities Act, which requires communities served by the T to zone for multifamily housing.

But the town of 28,000 was sharply divided, and even up until polls closed Wednesday night, it was unclear which way the vote might go. At polling places all day, volunteers on both sides held dueling "YES!" and "VOTE NO" signs, while residents themselves appeared split.

Outside Cunningham Hall in East Milton Wednesday morning, Greg Fall, 66, said his Granite Avenue neighborhood — one area zoned for denser housing — was being "unfairly burdened" by the town's plan.

"They are trying to make everything fit under [state] law," said Fall. "But each community is unique."

Yet Phil Mathews said he was voting yes because he felt the town must do its part to tackle Greater Boston's housing crisis.

"I understand the angst with change," the 72-year-old Mathews said. "But a lot of other communities are dealing with this. We're sharing the burden."

East Milton emerged as a key battleground in the election. A large portion of the new zoning was clustered there and poll workers there said they were shocked by the turnout Wednesday, with lines winding out the door when voting opened. That translated to large margins in those precincts, which powered "No" to victory.

The result could have ramifications well beyond Milton. The vote has emerged as a key test of compliance with what is the state's most ambitious housing law in decades — MBTA Communities requires [177 municipalities served by the T](#) to permit more multifamily housing. A "no" vote could also test state officials' willingness to enforce the law aggressively.

In a statement after the results came in, Attorney General Andrea Campbell said was "disappointed that a select group of Milton residents chose to be part of the problem rather

than the solution to our housing affordability crisis.”

“My office has made it clear that compliance with the law is mandatory,” Campbell said.

“When a municipality elects to evade its responsibility to comply with the law, we will meet our responsibility to enforce the law.”

The Healey administration, too, blasted the vote, saying Milton is now noncompliant with the law and will begin to lose grant funding from the state.

“There is no greater priority than making housing more affordable,” Gov. Maura Healey said.

“Today’s vote is disappointing, but we will continue to make the case for every community to embrace the opportunity that comes with creating more housing and making it more affordable for all.”

Backers of the “No” campaign say they want to work with the state to comply with the law, but with a different zoning plan that makes more sense for Milton and minimizes the impact on its neighborhoods. Denny Swenson, an organizer of the “No” campaign, said the results show that residents don’t want to be told what to do by Beacon Hill.

“People showed up to vote because they really thought we could come up with something better for the town,” he said. “The idea of big government telling municipal government what to do, I think that was a big driver to the polls.”

The legal mandate to rezone has inflamed residents in a number of communities, but so far nowhere as Milton.



Voters enter the Cunningham School gymnasium in Milton Wednesday to vote on a referendum on a state-mandated zoning plan that could enable as much as 2,400 new homes in the town. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Like many affluent Boston suburbs, Milton has long made it difficult to build multifamily developments, with zoning designed to protect and encourage neighborhoods of single-family homes. But Milton is among a dozen municipalities in the first wave of re-zonings required under the state law and were supposed to be done by the end of 2023. After months of public hearings and debate, [Town Meeting in December approved a plan](#) to encourage multifamily developments in six areas around town — around the Mattapan Trolley Station, the Eliot Street Corridor along the Neponset River, East Milton Square, and Granite Avenue — enough to permit at least 2,461 new units.

But opponents challenged the measure, and collected more than enough signatures to put the rezoning plan up for a [townwide vote](#).

That kicked off an intense campaign. Volunteers on each side went door-to-door. Hundreds of YES! or VOTE NO lawn signs dotted winter lawns and information cards cluttered mailboxes. Partisans have hollered at each other in all capital letters on the Internet. Lt. Gov. Kim Driscoll appeared at a rally for the “Yes” campaign, and Healey’s campaign committee on Monday sent an email urging residents to vote yes.

On Election Day, voters came to the polls with a wide range of concerns. John Lee, 44, said he voted for the measure, noting that he can barely afford to live in town.

“Milton has a lot of single-family homes and multifamily housing would be great for other people,” Lee said.

But Natalie Matushevsky, 42, voted no, saying it’s already a struggle to drive to get to work in Boston on Interstate 93, and adding more dense housing would “just cause traffic.”

“I don’t want to be sitting in traffic for the next three years,” she said.

As results came in Wednesday night, organizers of the Yes campaign watched at a house party on Deerfield Drive near Blue Hills Reservation, and saw favorable margins for their side in western and northern parts of Milton gradually overtaken by huge numbers of “No” votes from the eastern part of town — where turnout was notably higher.

Now, they say, they hope to craft a new plan that can work for all corners of Milton.

“Obviously this is not the outcome that we were hoping for,” said Matt Morong, one of the organizers of Yes for Milton. “We are ready to work with the no side, but we need them to present a zoning plan that complies with state law.”

How exactly that will happen after such a hard-fought battle was not immediately clear on Wednesday night.

As Ian Grigorio, 47, who runs a community Facebook page, put it, Wednesday marked the biggest vote Milton has faced in his lifetime.

“The town is very divided,” he said. “Both sides have passion.”



Voting commenced at at the Cunningham Park Community Center in Milton on Wednesday. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Andrew Brinker can be reached at andrew.brinker@globe.com. Follow him [@andrewnbrinker](https://twitter.com/andrewnbrinker). Ava Berger can be reached at ava.berger@globe.com. Follow her [@Ava_Berger_](https://twitter.com/Ava_Berger_).

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