

OPINION

## On second thought, T zoning proposal needs a redo

*It seeks to squeeze too much housing into densely populated communities*



by **CHARLOTTE KAHN**

March 28, 2022



Housing in densely populated Chelsea.

**LAST SUMMER**, a traffic snarl on the Massachusetts Turnpike sent me south to Route 20. Driving west, I found myself in a desolate landscape more akin to deindustrialized Ohio than prosperous eastern Massachusetts. It threw me back to the late 1970s, when Boston contained 20,000 vacant house lots and 140,000 fewer residents than today.

I pulled over and looked up home prices. They were about half the cost of those in communities not that many miles to the east. Dismayed and angry, I felt like an unwitting accomplice to an injustice — both to people struggling with high housing costs in Greater Boston and people struggling to make ends meet in its long shadow. Could no one remedy this mismatch? Where was Gov. Charlie Baker? Not since the administration of governor Michael Dukakis, I realized, has Massachusetts had a clear and equitable plan for growth statewide.

Through that lens, I recently began to review the draft guidelines for a sweeping new law intended to reduce the state's housing shortage through high-density zoning, hoping that it would redress the state's East-West imbalance.

On the contrary, the draft guidelines reinforce that divide at a dystopian scale, overstuffing dense and congested cities in eastern Massachusetts while continuing to discount the growth potential of cities and towns to the west. The guidelines reminded me of the proverbial man who looks for his keys under a streetlamp because that's where the light is.

Released for public comment by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development and Department of Housing and Community Development in mid-December, the guidelines seem at first to be standard-

fare transit-oriented development.

The guidelines define the 175 municipalities in Eastern Massachusetts containing a T, commuter rail, or bus station, or adjacency to one, as “MBTA communities.” Each MBTA community (Boston is exempt) is required to create a high-density zoning district to allow, as of right, for dense multi-family housing “suitable for families” within a half mile of a train or bus station.

The high-density zoning districts must contain at least 50 acres (the size of Boston Common) within a one-mile diameter circle (500 acres) around a transit or bus station, of which 25 acres (the size of the Public Garden) must be contiguous. So far, so good.

Within these high-density zoning districts, developers and owners must be allowed, as of right, to build multi-family housing units at prescribed unit densities of not less than 15 units per acre based on an average 15 percent of each municipality’s current housing units. Higher percentages apply to communities with a higher degree of transit intensity (more stations).

Most news coverage about the guidelines has focused on the 79 communities required to zone for the minimum 15 units per acre, or 750 units. While it’s certainly fair to require all towns to participate, the guidelines’ take-it-or-leave-it strictures (lack of compliance results in ineligibility for some state funding programs) may lead some towns to decline if they are forced to choose between high density housing districts and an historic district or settled neighborhood next to a train station. Stations built through MBTA expansion, on the other hand, are often located at a town’s edge. More flexibility in locating the high-density zoning districts would probably result in greater participation and more housing.

A much more significant problem, however, is the massive scale of zoning targets for cities.

Every student of city planning and Boston history knows the story of Charles River Park. In the late 1950s, the city of Boston razed the vibrant West End neighborhood and evicted working-class families to make way for 2,300 luxury high rise units on 45 acres. In a [recent piece](#) for *Commonwealth*, Peter Dreier, former Boston housing chief and now professor of urban and environmental policy, called Charles River Park a debacle of “development over planning.” If the draft guidelines are adopted as is, cities in Eastern Massachusetts may repeat that debacle, albeit piecemeal.

The core of the problem is this: The guidelines calculate numerical targets for high-density zoning districts in specific cities based solely on the their number of housing units. By ignoring current densities, recent transit-oriented housing development, population characteristics, climate vulnerability, and infrastructure capacity, the guidelines become a blunt instrument, resulting in zoning targets at densities up to almost six times the number of units in Charles River Park (2,300 units) on virtually the same footprint. ( If cities got credit for current densities and existing unrestricted multi-family housing development, the targets would be much smaller.)

To reduce heights, municipalities have the option of expanding their minimum 50-acre high density zoning district to the full 500-acres in a half-mile radius surrounding a transit station. Communities with multiple stations can also create more 50-acre districts. But that extends as-of-right high-density zoning to larger areas, eviscerating a

municipality's planning authority in key locations. Even spread out, these are big numbers, especially given that some cities on the list are already the densest among their peers nationally.

The targets call for 4,501 units in Lawrence, 4,552 in Everett, 6,135 in Revere, 6,522 in Lowell, 7,356 in Lynn, 7,461 in Brockton, 9,067 in Somerville, 11,572 in Quincy, 12,642 in Worcester, and 13,477 in Cambridge.

Upzoning to those densities — whether in minimum 50-acre or expansive 500-acre zoning districts — will allow for and even encourage a lot of demolition, the displacement of residents and small businesses, and — unless a few developers buy up and control very large parcels — piecemeal redevelopment with no planning oversight other than zoning and site plan review. High-density family housing can support a lot of amenities, but if civic, recreational, cultural, commercial, and green spaces aren't part of the plan, it's just overcrowding — a lesson learned again and again.

Inexplicably and unconscionably, the guidelines are silent on affordability. They are also silent on energy-efficiency and climate mitigation, as if the state agencies involved had turned their backs on other departments working on the state's response to climate change. A gift to developers, the guidelines' only apparent goal is housing production — with no protection for current residents and no responsibility for achieving a livable, sustainable, and affordable result.

Not surprisingly, then, application of the guidelines to real places with real differences produces perverse and inequitable results, as if the calculations had been assigned to an “AI” app with insufficient “I.”

A few examples:

**Chelsea**, the Commonwealth's smallest city at 2 1/2 square miles, contains 40,787 residents. With a density of 18,456 residents per square mile, Chelsea is tied with Cambridge as the state's second densest city. An environmental justice community with an elevation of 10 feet, Chelsea faces mounting risks from climate change such as sea-level rise and the urban heat-island effect. And Chelsea already contains numerous well planned multi-family developments within walking distance of its commuter rail station — the goal of the new housing law. Yet the draft guidelines require Chelsea to create a high-density zoning district within a half mile of its transit station and allow, as of right, 3,639 multi-family housing units.

**Foxborough**, by contrast, has a land area of 20 square miles, a population of 18,618, and a density of 890 residents per square mile. While its residential center is compact, the town contains a large economic development zone in which sits Gillette Stadium, with its own train from South Station and a huge parking lot that sits empty on weekdays (the MBTA shelved a pilot for daily service when COVID struck). While Foxborough regularly hosts 65,000 fans at its stadium and thousands in its large hotels and restaurants, the guidelines classify Foxborough as rural based on a percentage of its current residential units, requiring it to zone for the minimum 750 multi-family units.

**Worcester** is the Commonwealth's second most populous city and its geographical center. Its population of 206,518 in a land area of 38 square miles results in a density of 5,371 residents per square mile — less than half of Boston's and less than a-third of Cambridge's. With a reassuring elevation of 480 feet, a revitalized city center, a regional

transit authority with electric vehicle bus service in addition to commuter rail, numerous higher education and cultural institutions, and housing costs about half that of Boston, Worcester is poised to play a larger role in the life of the Commonwealth as the coast grapples with sea-level rise. Regardless, the guidelines require Worcester to zone for fewer units than Cambridge.

**Devens**, the decommissioned Fort Devens, is owned by MassDevelopment. Adjacent to three MBTA communities, including one on commuter rail, its 4,000 acres are equivalent to eighty 50-acre high-density zoning districts.

Devens has the potential to become a well planned new community with tens of thousands of residents akin to Reston, Virginia, which was built on 6,000 acres and which *Money Magazine* ranked in 2018 as Virginia’s best place to live. Yet Devens does not appear in the draft guidelines.

**Leominster** has a population of 43,782, about the same size as Chelsea in a land area of 29 square miles, 10 times larger than Chelsea. Leominster’s density of 1,519 residents per square mile is a fraction of Chelsea’s 18,456, in part because Leominster contains the 4,300-acre Leominster State Forest with hiking trails and swimming ponds.

Leominster’s median home price last month was \$350,000 compared to Chelsea’s \$475,000. Yet the guidelines require Leominster to zone for fewer units than Chelsea.

**Westminster**, at the very end of the Fitchburg line, has a land area of 36 square miles and density of 220 residents per square mile. In 2016, it completed a \$52 million state-of-the-art turnaround for the Fitchburg commuter rail line that includes a 500-space parking lot with a now-underutilized shuttle to Gardner, a deindustrialized small city. Surrounded by fields and with a lake nearby, the parking lot is used by fewer than 60 cars a day. The guidelines classify Westminster as rural and require it to zone for just 750 units.

Everyone knows Einstein’s definition of insanity — “Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” Well, shoehorning housing units into already dense cities along Greater Boston’s climate-vulnerable hub-and-spoke transportation system and reinforcing its stranglehold on job growth — with the traffic congestion, high housing costs, and infrastructure stressors that come with it — while two-thirds of the state languishes from lack of investment and jobs may not be the best path forward.



A parking lot at the end of the Fitchburg line.

Fortunately, in the two years since passage of the high-density multi-family housing law, much in the Massachusetts policy-making landscape has changed.

COVID lockdowns revealed new opportunities for remote and hybrid work. A racial reckoning highlighted long-simmering inequities that must be redressed. New climate research detailed the speed and scope of sea-level rise, spurring the MBTA to analyze risks to its tracks and stations. New federal funding flowed into state coffers. And in January, Gov. Charlie Baker greenlighted a plan for high-speed East-West rail — Congressman Richard Neal’s “highest priority” — opening a new chapter on Massachusetts’ future growth.

High-speed East-West rail from Boston to Worcester, Springfield, and Pittsfield, with links to Amtrak's new Valley Flyer service in the Pioneer Valley and regional bus networks linking to commuter rail, will open access to empty and underutilized buildings and parcels of vacant land in the once-proud industrial cities and towns of central and western Massachusetts. Many are already home to immigrants and to households of all shapes, sizes, and stripes priced out of Greater Boston. With new federal funding, the Commonwealth could protect current residents from gentrification while investing in communities' revitalization and potential for growth.

Sure, not everyone can or wants to consider moving out of Greater Boston, but making that an attractive, affordable proposition — and creating a whole state plan for economic development — could change Massachusetts' housing dynamics considerably.

The bottom line is that the draft guidelines as written are myopic, inequitable, and counterproductive. They warrant much greater scrutiny than they have received. However, the public comment period ends on March 31. Cities and towns then have until May 2 to submit plans for how they intend to comply with the guidelines or lose access to a range of state funding programs. To achieve the best results for all of the people and municipalities of the Commonwealth, those deadlines should be extended.

*Charlotte Kahn is the former director of Boston Urban Gardeners, the Boston Persistent Poverty Project, and the Boston Indicators Project at the Boston Foundation.*

### **A community by community breakdown:**

In total, 175 MBTA communities are subject to the new requirements of Section 3A of the Zoning Act. While served by the MBTA, Boston is exempted from the Zoning Act, including section 3A

All communities served by the MBTA need to zone to allow for multifamily housing by-right, with a greater obligation for communities with higher levels of transit service

\* MBTA communities with a unit capacity lower than 750 units are noted as having a unit capacity of 750. This is the fewest number of multi-family units needed to meet the gross density requirement of 15 units per acre (i.e. 50 acres x 15 units per acre).

Municipality	MBTA Community Type	2020 Housing Units (Census PL-94)	Minimum multifamily district unit capacity requirement
Abington	commuter rail	6,811	1,022
Acton	commuter rail	9,219	1,383
Amesbury	MBTA adjacent	7,889	789
Andover	commuter rail	13,541	2,031
Arlington	subway or light rail	20,461	5,115
Ashburnham	MBTA adjacent	2,730	750*
Ashby	MBTA adjacent	1,243	750*
Ashland	commuter rail	7,495	1,124
Attleboro	commuter rail	19,097	2,865
Auburn	MBTA adjacent	6,999	750
Ayer	commuter rail	3,807	750*
Bedford	bus	5,444	1,089
Bellingham	MBTA adjacent	6,749	750*
Belmont	bus	10,882	2,176
Berkley	MBTA adjacent	2,360	750*
Beverly	bus	17,887	3,577
Billerica	bus	15,485	3,097
Bourne	MBTA adjacent	11,140	1,114
Boxborough	MBTA adjacent	2,362	750*
Boxford	MBTA adjacent	2,818	750
Braintree	subway or light rail	15,077	3,769
Bridgewater	commuter rail	9,342	1,401
Brockton	bus	37,304	7,461
Brookline	subway or light rail	27,961	6,990
Burlington	bus	10,431	2,086
Cambridge	subway or light rail	53,907	13,477
Canton	bus	9,930	1,986
Carlisle	MBTA adjacent	1,897	750*
Carver	MBTA adjacent	4,701	750*
Chelmsford	MBTA adjacent	14,769	1,477
Chelsea	subway or light rail	14,554	3,639

Municipality	MBTA Community Type	2020 Housing Units (Census PL-94)	Minimum multifamily district unit capacity requirement
Cohasset	commuter rail	3,341	750*
Concord	commuter rail	7,295	1,094
Danvers	bus	11,763	2,353
Dedham	bus	10,459	2,092
Dover	MBTA adjacent	2,046	750*
Dracut	MBTA adjacent	12,325	1,233
Duxbury	MBTA adjacent	6,274	750*
East Bridgewater	MBTA adjacent	5,211	750*
Easton	MBTA adjacent	9,132	913
Essex	MBTA adjacent	1,662	750*
Everett	subway or light rail	18,208	4,552
Fitchburg	commuter rail	17,452	2,618
Foxborough	MBTA adjacent	7,682	768
Framingham	commuter rail	29,033	4,355
Franklin	commuter rail	12,551	1,883
Freetown	MBTA adjacent	3,485	750*
Georgetown	MBTA adjacent	3,159	750*
Gloucester	commuter rail	15,133	2,270
Grafton	commuter rail	7,760	1,164
Groton	MBTA adjacent	4,153	750*
Groveland	MBTA adjacent	2,596	750*
Halifax	commuter rail	3,107	750*
Hamilton	commuter rail	2,925	750*
Hanover	MBTA adjacent	5,268	750
Hanson	commuter rail	3,960	750*
Harvard	MBTA adjacent	2,251	750*
Haverhill	commuter rail	27,927	4,189
Hingham	bus	9,930	1,986
Holbrook	bus	4,414	883
Holden	MBTA adjacent	7,439	750*
Holliston	MBTA adjacent	5,562	750*

Municipality	MBTA Community Type	2020 Housing Units (Census PL-94)	Minimum multifamily district unit capacity requirement
Hopkinton	commuter rail	6,645	997
Hull	bus	5,856	1,171
Ipswich	commuter rail	6,476	971
Kingston	commuter rail	5,364	805
Lakeville	commuter rail	4,624	750*
Lancaster	MBTA adjacent	2,788	750*
Lawrence	commuter rail	30,008	4,501
Leicester	MBTA adjacent	4,371	750*
Leominster	commuter rail	18,732	2,810
Lexington	bus	12,310	2,462
Lincoln	bus	2,771	750*
Littleton	commuter rail	3,889	750*
Lowell	commuter rail	43,482	6,522
Lunenburg	MBTA adjacent	4,805	750*
Lynn	bus	36,782	7,356
Lynnfield	MBTA adjacent	4,773	750*
Malden	subway or light rail	27,721	6,930
Manchester	commuter rail	2,433	750*
Mansfield	commuter rail	9,282	1,392
Marblehead	bus	8,965	1,793
Marlborough	MBTA adjacent	17,547	1,755
Marshfield	MBTA adjacent	11,575	1,158
Maynard	MBTA adjacent	4,741	750*
Medfield	MBTA adjacent	4,450	750*
Medford	subway or light rail	25,770	6,443
Medway	MBTA adjacent	4,826	750*
Melrose	subway or light rail	12,614	3,154
Merrimac	MBTA adjacent	2,761	750
Methuen	MBTA adjacent	20,194	2,019
Middleborough	commuter rail	9,808	1,471
Middleton	MBTA adjacent	3,359	750*



Municipality	MBTA Community Type	2020 Housing Units (Census PL-94)	Minimum multifamily district unit capacity requirement
Millbury	MBTA adjacent	5,987	750*
Millis	MBTA adjacent	3,412	750
Milton	subway or light rail	9,844	2,461
Nahant	bus	1,680	750*
Natick	commuter rail	15,680	2,352
Needham	bus	11,891	2,378
Newbury	commuter rail	3,072	750
Newburyport	commuter rail	8,615	1,292
Newton	subway or light rail	33,320	8,330
Norfolk	commuter rail	3,601	750*
North Andover	commuter rail	11,914	1,787
North Attleborough	MBTA adjacent	12,551	1,255
North Reading	MBTA adjacent	5,875	750*
Northborough	MBTA adjacent	5,897	750*
Northbridge	MBTA adjacent	6,691	750*
Norton	MBTA adjacent	6,971	750*
Norwell	MBTA adjacent	3,805	750
Norwood	bus	13,634	2,727
Paxton	MBTA adjacent	1,689	750*
Peabody	bus	23,191	4,638
Pembroke	MBTA adjacent	7,007	750*
Plymouth	commuter rail	28,074	4,211
Plympton	MBTA adjacent	1,068	750*
Princeton	MBTA adjacent	1,383	750*
Quincy	subway or light rail	47,009	11,752
Randolph	bus	12,901	2,580
Raynham	MBTA adjacent	5,749	750
Reading	bus	9,952	1,990
Rehoboth	MBTA adjacent	4,611	750*
Revere	subway or light rail	24,539	6,135
Rochester	MBTA adjacent	2,105	750*

Municipality	MBTA Community Type	2020 Housing Units (Census PL-94)	Minimum multifamily district unit capacity requirement
Rockland	MBTA adjacent	7,263	750
Rockport	commuter rail	4,380	750*
Rowley	commuter rail	2,405	750*
Salem	bus	20,349	4,070
Salisbury	MBTA adjacent	5,305	750*
Saugus	bus	11,303	2,261
Scituate	commuter rail	8,260	1,239
Seekonk	MBTA adjacent	6,057	750*
Sharon	commuter rail	6,581	987
Sherborn	MBTA adjacent	1,562	750*
Shirley	commuter rail	2,599	750
Shrewsbury	commuter rail	14,966	2,245
Somerville	subway or light rail	36,269	9,067
Southborough	commuter rail	3,763	750*
Sterling	MBTA adjacent	3,117	750*
Stoneham	bus	10,159	2,032
Stoughton	commuter rail	11,739	1,761
Stow	MBTA adjacent	2,770	750*
Hanover	MBTA adjacent	5,268	750
Sutton	MBTA adjacent	3,612	750*
Swampscott	bus	6,362	1,272
Taunton	MBTA adjacent	24,965	2,497
Tewksbury	MBTA adjacent	12,139	1,214
Topsfield	MBTA adjacent	2,358	750*
Townsend	MBTA adjacent	3,566	750*
Tyngsborough	MBTA adjacent	4,669	750
Upton	MBTA adjacent	2,995	750*
Wakefield	bus	11,305	2,261
Walpole	bus	10,042	2,008
Waltham	bus	26,545	5,309
Wareham	MBTA adjacent	12,967	1,297

Municipality	MBTA Community Type	2020 Housing Units (Census PL-94)	Minimum multifamily district unit capacity requirement
Watertown	bus	17,010	3,402
Wayland	MBTA adjacent	5,296	750*
Wellesley	subway or light rail	9,282	2,321
Wenham	commuter rail	1,460	750*
West Boylston	MBTA adjacent	3,052	750*
West Bridgewater	MBTA adjacent	2,898	750*
West Newbury	MBTA adjacent	1,740	750*
Westborough	commuter rail	8,334	1,250
Westford	MBTA adjacent	9,237	924
Westminster	commuter rail	3,301	750*
Weston	subway or light rail	4,043	1,011
Westwood	bus	5,801	1,160
Weymouth	bus	25,419	5,084
Whitman	commuter rail	5,984	898
Wilmington	bus	8,320	1,664
Winchester	bus	8,135	1,627
Winthrop	subway or light rail	8,821	2,205
Woburn	bus	17,540	3,508
Worcester	commuter rail	84,281	12,642
Wrentham	MBTA adjacent	4,620	750