

LOCAL NEWS

Tewksbury Town Meeting soundly rejects MBTA Communities article



By **PETER CURRIER** | pcurrier@lowellsun.com | Lowell Sun

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TEWKSBURY — Voters packed the Tewksbury Memorial High School gymnasium Wednesday evening, where they soundly rejected the proposed MBTA Communities zoning overlay with less than eight months until the state's Dec. 31 deadline to pass the zoning.

The lopsided 565-142 vote came after years of debate and discussion over how the town should approach the zoning requirement, which mandated that Tewksbury develop zoning that could theoretically handle at least 1,214 units of housing.

The zone in question, named "Main A" by the Planning Board, would have been overlaid onto the existing zoning onto an 84-acre area of Main Street, between Shawsheen Street and Jon Ryan's Pub. In an approach that is being taken by some towns through this process, the Planning Board developed the zone in a way that they said would make it very unlikely the area would actually be significantly redeveloped into housing.

Most of those who spoke on the article, both for and against, were elected officials. State Rep. Dave Robertson, who voted for the law in 2022, said it was intended to help address the high cost of housing while giving the 177 affected communities control over where that zoning actually goes, and how it is implemented.

“I think the creation of a zone, along with what you all decide here this evening, to set as a set of guidelines is a good idea to prevent someone in your neighborhood from selling their property and building a gigantic five- or six-story building that would ruin your neighborhood character,” said Robertson. “I think it is better to contain it to all one area.”

Planning Board Chair Stephen Johnson said the district was designed so that it would be extremely unlikely for 1,214 new units to be built.

“The only way that 1,214 units could ever be built is if every single parcel comprising this zone were to be leveled, and all of the over 50 businesses in existence there today cease to exist,” said Johnson, before reading off a list of every single business in that zone. “There is no feasible way to add 1,214 units without using every one of the parcels that those businesses currently exist on.”

Those arguments in favor of the zoning, however, did not sway the voters. Select Board member Mark Kratman rose in opposition to the article, and asked rhetorically whether the residents would be pushing for this kind of zoning without a state mandate.

“They tell you that you just need to zone it, but if you zone it, they will come,” said Kratman. “If you build a third of it, the traffic is going to be horrendous. It is already horrendous.”

Tewksbury School Committee member Rich Russo also spoke against the article, arguing that the potential infrastructure strains if the housing units are built would not be worth it.

“At the very least, this will detract from the charm and the character that so many people seek out when looking to move away from the city and find a suburb to call home,” said Russo. “While some feel that the intentions behind the MBTA act may be noble, and that we must comply or the town will be sued, and the state will take away grant eligibility, I say we must stand up and tell the state they are overreaching, and that Tewksbury chooses to exercise caution and prudence in our decision-making process.”

Select Board member James Mackey said he does not support the MBTA Communities law, but advocated for the town to pass it, because the two years of consideration of the zoning resulted in “the least impactful situation for Tewksbury.”

“We found a place ... where it is highly unlikely that 1,200 units get built,” said Mackey, arguing that it would likely only be 300 to 400 units that get built.

If Tewksbury does not somehow change course now that the zoning was voted down at Town Meeting, the town is on track to be out of compliance after the Dec. 31 deadline. Some communities that had a deadline of Dec. 31, 2023, most famously Milton, are currently being sued by the state for noncompliance.

The MBTA Communities article was the only one discussed during the second night of Town Meeting. The first night, on Monday, was a more typical and quiet Town Meeting session, where a far lower turnout of voters passed the town’s \$168 million budget for fiscal 2025. They also voted to approve an article to allocate \$5.6 million from the town’s stabilization fund to make improvements to school buildings, namely the Wynn Middle School and Heath Brook Elementary School.

The voters on the first night also approved an article to establish a stabilization fund for Shawsheen Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School. The same article is being considered in the other sending communities for the regional school, which include Wilmington, Billerica, Burlington and Bedford. A majority of the five towns need to approve the stabilization fund for it to go into effect.

The voters rejected an article to implement a bylaw that would require property owners to clear their sidewalks of snow within 24 hours of the end of a snowstorm, with some expressing concerns over senior citizens’ ability to comply, and because snowplows often push snow off the street and into driveways and sidewalks.