

ADRIAN WALKER

Milton must lose its fight against inclusive housing

The town's vote to ignore the MBTA Communities law has emboldened other municipalities which might be tempted to reject creating zoning districts for multi-family housing

By [Adrian Walker](#) Globe Columnist, Updated March 5, 2024, 5:56 p.m.



Milton voted last month to ignore the state law promoting the construction of new housing in MBTA-adjacent cities and towns. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

For someone whose district lies miles away, Lydia Edwards has strong feelings right now about the town of Milton.

Edwards chairs the Senate Housing Committee and watched in disgust as Milton voted last month to ignore the state law promoting the construction of new housing in MBTA-adjacent cities and towns.

Milton's bold move has prompted threats to withhold state funding and a lawsuit by Attorney General Andrea Campbell. It has also emboldened other municipalities which might be tempted to reject the three year-old law.

"The state has to crush Milton," Edwards declared in a telephone interview. "It's zoning today, but what if it's gun laws tomorrow? You can decide you just don't feel like (following laws)? You don't get to choose what laws you will follow."

The law in question — the MBTA Communities law — requires cities and towns served by the MBTA to establish zoning districts where multi-family housing can be built. The legislation, which passed the State House with enthusiastic bipartisan support, was intended to help spur the construction of affordable housing that can help ease the state's housing crisis.

The hope was that this shift would also spur increased home ownership among people of color, making a dent in the dramatic racial wealth gap.

Now, towns that have shunned multi-family housing for years are grumbling as the reality of implementing the new policy begins to sink in. Winthrop, Wrentham, and Rockport are all frequently mentioned as communities seriously tempted to follow Milton's lead in defying the state.

Which is crazy — because, as Edwards points out, cities and towns can't simply decide to opt out of laws. Nor should they be able to.

But housing has always been an issue fraught with controversy — the original, ultimate NIMBY issue. No one ever says they oppose affordable housing, or more housing for families, or new housing that will attract new neighbors who don't look like them. But cities and towns have a long well-documented history of insisting such housing belongs somewhere else.

Campbell's suit against Milton makes reference to the long and depressingly ineffectual history of housing policy in Massachusetts — one law after another, passed over decades, that called for voluntary housing policies that many cities and towns just never bothered to enact. So this latest law was intended to actually force some change.

But now it is being framed by opponents as a heavy-handed attempt by “overlords” to meddle in local decisions. Which is utterly ridiculous, as Edwards points out. There’s nothing novel about state government making housing or zoning policy.

The law does give the state some options for dealing with communities that try to get around the law. Already Campbell and Governor Maura Healey have announced that Milton stands to lose some state money if it doesn’t get its act together. But the amount in question is relatively small potatoes, which has emboldened some communities to float the idea that the state can just keep its cash, while they keep their exclusionary policies.

But that isn’t a tradeoff they have a right to make.

In an interview Tuesday, Campbell stressed that most of the 117 cities and towns affected by the law are working to fulfill its requirements.

“Milton is an outlier,” she told me. But she said she is ready to do battle with other communities should it become necessary.

“If they choose to follow Milton’s lead, we’ll use every tool in our toolbox to bring them into compliance.”

Campbell pointed out that most zoning laws in the state have been passed with the intention of shutting people out. This law is intended to create more inclusive communities.

But clearly more inclusion isn’t what everyone wants. In a sense, this dispute is typical of Massachusetts — so progressive in its self-image, not so much when it comes to deciding who can live next door.

People in Milton might not like hearing that. But the reality is that given the chance to vote for greater equity, they rejected it.

“You look like you’re scared of outsiders and scared of change,” Edwards said. “Is that what you really want to look like?”

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