

# First Milton, now Needham: Another town is set to vote on controversial MBTA housing plan

Opponents of Needham's zoning plan filed signatures this week to force a referendum

By [Andrew Brinker](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 22, 2024, 25 minutes ago



Needham Town Meeting recently approved a plan to zone for housing near the town's Commuter Rail stations. Opponents this week filed signatures to force a referendum early next year. KEITH BEDFORD

There's a new front line emerging in the fight over who decides what gets built where in Massachusetts: Needham.

Residents of the western suburb of 32,000 will head to the polls to vote on a new housing plan that complies with the state's [controversial MBTA Communities law](#). After Town Meeting last month [approved a plan](#) that would put taller, denser housing near Commuter Rail stations,

opponents this week submitted enough signatures to force a referendum on the measure, likely to take place in January.

It will be the second such referendum over a town's plan to meet the requirements of the MBTA Communities Act, which aims to ease the state's deepening housing crisis by mandating that communities with access to the MBTA make it easier to build multifamily housing. The first [came in Milton earlier this year](#), when voters soundly rejected the town's plan, setting off [a legal battle with Attorney General Andrea Campbell](#) that has yet to be resolved in the Supreme Judicial Court.

In Needham's case, voters will weigh in on a plan crafted over the course of two years that would steer taller, denser housing into mostly commercial sections of town. Town Meeting approved that plan, which was the more ambitious of two options presented to the town, by a 118-90 margin in October.

Town Clerk Louise Miller said Friday that her office had certified well over the 3,750 signatures opponents of the housing plan needed to force a referendum. It is tentatively scheduled for January 14.

The law requires Needham to have a plan in place by year's end, after which it could be considered out of compliance, risking [access to state grants](#) and perhaps legal action. At least 100 communities in Eastern Massachusetts have approved MBTA Communities plans, many without incident, though dozens have yet to ahead of the Dec. 31 deadline.

Heidi Frail, a select board member who helped craft the zoning, said the plan was designed to make good on goals laid out in town reports that outlined a need for more multifamily housing in Needham.

"We've been talking about housing in Needham in a long time," she said. This plan would finally put some of what we've been discussing into motion. It's a move toward the future."

Two MBTA Communities plans were put forward to Town Meeting last month, and members ultimately backed the broader, more ambitious version, allowing multifamily housing development up to four-and-a-half stories in key commercial and industrial areas near the commuter rail, like the commercial district on Chestnut Street, and modest density by-right,

meaning developers could build projects within those parameters without special approval from the town zoning board.



An apartment building under construction in Needham in 2017. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF FILE

If voters approve the plan it would theoretically make room for 3,296 units of housing, well over the 1,784 required of the town under the law. But Frail said those numbers likely overestimate how much housing would be built. Many of the rezoned parcels are commercial properties owned by families with no plans to sell, she said, and others have long-term leases. Any redevelopment would likely happen over the course of years or a decade or more.

But opponents of the zoning, who began organizing earlier this year as a group called Needham Residents for Thoughtful Zoning, believe the plan goes too far, and that it would lead to rampant overdevelopment, more traffic, and overcrowded schools.

They began gathering signatures to trigger a referendum immediately after Town Meeting approved the zoning last month. The group's leader, Ken Buckley, could not comment Friday. The group's website says that they believe the town's assessment of the impact of the zoning is incorrect.

“We believe that rezoning should be envisioned, designed and vetted together with Needham citizens, not by a ‘one-size-fits-all’ edict from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts,” [the site says](#). “If Needham wants to build more housing, we have the ability already to rezone and incentivize for what is best for Needham.”

Proponents of the plan see the referendum as a significant challenge. Voters will be asked to weigh in on complicated zoning language that took years to develop, and making sure the plan is broadly and accurately understood will take a big effort, they said. It may also be fuel division, much as it did in Milton where a fierce campaign [left political wounds that have yet to heal](#).

“It’s a daunting task to run an education campaign for the entire town, with people who have varying amounts of time to spend focusing on these issues,” said Frail. “So I’m disappointed that it’s gone to a referendum, but I hope that people understand just how consequential this is for the town and its future, and will take the time to review the plan and really understand it.”



Passersby walk through the shopping district of Needham Center in 2017. KEITH BEDFORD

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**DotDay**

11/22/24 - 5:41PM

Governor Healey is forcing town's to bend to her will by withholding state money. I can't wait to see Healey's reaction when Trump withholds federal money until Massachusetts complies with illegal immigration round up. What's good for the goose is good for the gander, Maura.

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