

EDITORIAL

Zoning Reforms Don't Eliminate Local Control

Apr 3, 2022 | [Reprints](#) | [Print](#)

A fallacy is spreading through some tony Boston suburbs that the state's new "MBTA Communities" and other proposed transit-oriented zoning requirements take away towns' ability to govern development within their borders.

Newton City Councilor Chris Laredo expressed it best in comments at a public meeting some weeks ago, when he said the zoning reforms would gut Newton's ability to "manage and control what gets built here."

If what Laredo means is that the law would prevent Newton from practically shutting down multifamily development in the city and micromanaging the small number of projects that actually get built, that is true. The "MBTA Communities" law and a similar, stronger pair of bills currently before the legislature ([H.1448/S.871](#)) simply reinforce the common-sense notion that no town can haul up the drawbridges and declare themselves "full." They're based on the very real fact that Massachusetts is [short hundreds of thousands of homes to adequately and affordably house the number of people who will be living here by 2030](#) – a sum no one community is physically able to shoulder alone.

But let us assume that Laredo and his peers have good intentions and are worried that complying means they won't be able to put in reasonable guardrails making sure that new housing works with its surroundings. Here, he and others are wrong.

The "paper walls" towns built to keep most multifamily projects out have seemingly let their planning muscles atrophy. Laredo and others appear to have forgotten that tried-and-true zoning tools – that would be both legal and necessary under MBTA Communities reform and the H.1448/S.871 package – exist to manage growth.

Form-based zoning and design guidelines can make sure buildings get built that fit local character, for example. Intelligent planning can make sure new buildings go in next to transit, grocery stores and other regular destinations that help reduce car trips by residents of new developments while providing ready customers to beloved local retailers. Separated bike lanes and dedicated bus lanes can build

transportation networks that don't rely on cars to function.

Massachusetts, and particularly Greater Boston's suburbs, need to densify. It's a moral imperative – not doing so condemns millions of Bay Staters to crowded, insufficient and outrageously expensive housing. It's an environmental imperative, because sprawl is the number-one source of greenhouse gas emissions in this state. It's an economic imperative, as our nearly-worst-in-the-nation housing costs threaten to drive legions of jobs and job-seekers away. And it's a mathematical imperative. There are, quite literally, not enough homes to shelter everyone who needs one.

But if rich towns and cities like Newton and Arlington are going to declare themselves too good to pull their weight in solving a housing crisis that bedevils the ordinary, working people of Massachusetts, as seems distressingly possible, the legislature must step in and pass H.1448/S.871. Allowing the MBTA Communities reforms to be optional violates the very organizing principal of Massachusetts – a commonwealth – and directly endangers the economy and environment we all depend on.

Letters to the editor of 300 words or less may be submitted via email at editorial@thewarrengroup.com with the subject line "Letter to the Editor," or mailed to the offices of The Warren Group. Submission is not a guarantee of publication.

The Warren Group | 2 Corporation Way, Suite 250 | Peabody, MA 01960 | 617-428-5100 |

www.thewarrengroup.com

Copyright © The Warren Group | All Rights Reserved | **Privacy Policy**