

## The journey from housing to home: MBTA Communities Zoning

In a previous article in this series that described the impacts of zoning (The Legacy of Zoning, Monday February 12, 2024), it was stated that not only can zoning be used as a tool to restrict access to housing for certain population, but that it can also be used to relax the grip of “exclusionary” zoning. One such example of zoning being used to provide better access to housing is the MBTA Communities Law. Massachusetts passed this amendment to the state’s Zoning Act in 2021 to allow for more multi-family housing, especially in communities that host either rapid transit or commuter rail facilities, as well as in city and towns that are adjacent to those host communities.

This law requires communities to enact zoning near those transit facilities and allows multi-family zoning in other designated areas, as selected by the community. The areas must allow for at least 15 units of housing per acre and they must be allowed without a requirement for a special permit from either the Planning Board or the Zoning Board. Instead, the law allows communities to put a set of design standards in place that a developer must adhere to before an actual building permit can be obtained.

In order to visualize 15 units of housing per acre, it may help to take a look at the Foundry at 126 Merrimac St. or the River’s Edge Condominiums at 129 Merrimac St. Both developments (in Newburyport) consist of approximately 15 housing units per acre. In contrast, the new developments at the train station in Newburyport are approximately 38 units per acre.

By allowing more density in specific areas of a city or town, the community will be able to have more housing choices for those who have been unable to afford single-family homes. Multi-family housing will support the construction of apartments and condos that are often preferred by seniors looking to downsize within their hometown or by young people who are not ready to buy a house. The requirement to build near a transit hub will encourage more people to live near public transportation and will decrease dependence on cars.

You will be hearing more from your local governments regarding MBTA Communities since Amesbury, Newbury, Newburyport, Salisbury and West Newbury are all required to comply with the law. There will be opportunities to comment on the proposed zoning in your local community at Planning Board public hearings before the zoning is voted on at either a town meeting or a city council meeting.

The Housing Choice Coalition supports the passage of the MBTA Communities within each of these cities and towns. More housing choice means a more diverse and welcoming environment. We believe it will open our doors to those who have historically been denied access to the employment, good schools and natural resources that we have to offer.

Please join us at our March 21 meeting to learn more about this important legislation. At this meeting, Rick Taintor, chair of the Newburyport Planning Board, will review the details about the MBTA Communities Law. Registration for that meeting can be found here:

<https://bit.ly/4bdPiii> .

For more information about the Greater Newburyport Housing Choice Coalition, go to <https://bit.ly/3HHVotS> or contact us at [jmeers@ywcaneburyport.org](mailto:jmeers@ywcaneburyport.org) for more information.

We are excited for you to join us on this journey from housing to home.

*My name is Judy Tymon and I am the coordinator for the Greater Newburyport Housing Choice Coalition.*