

Resource Guide: Providing Testimony in Support of MBTA Communities Law Rezoning

What is the MBTA Communities Law and why is it beneficial to your town or city?

THE PROBLEM: Massachusetts has a severe shortage of homes. Current estimates place that shortage at over 108,000 homes with that number potentially rising to over 400,000 by 2040. This shortage has created a housing market where bidding wars are common and prices skyrocket as people from all income levels compete against each other for the few homes that are available. Single family homes are climbing out of reach for many. The median price for a single family home statewide in May 2023 was \$616,450, up from \$405,000 just five years ago. Simply put, we are not building enough homes to ensure that home prices are affordable to the average resident.

A SOLUTION: The MBTA Communities Law, passed in January 2021, addresses Massachusetts' skyrocketing housing costs by changing zoning near transit stops served by the MBTA to allow the building of multi-family housing as of right. 177 communities in total (12 on rapid transit, 71 on commuter rail, 59 adjacent towns and 35 small adjacent towns) have the opportunity to solve their local housing crises by rezoning an area in their town for the variety of home types, such as duplexes, triple deckers, town homes, and small apartment buildings, that are desperately needed. Please refer to "Frequently asked questions about MBTA Communities Law."

Elevator Pitch for MBTA Communities Law Rezoning

Buying and renting a home has gotten so expensive in Massachusetts because cities and towns across the state have used local zoning codes to prevent enough homes from being built. The MBTA Communities Law directly addresses this by having cities and towns served by the MBTA create a zoning district near transit where multi-family housing is allowed by right. This will tangibly benefit your community in three important ways:

- 1. More affordable and diverse housing options:** Increasing the supply of homes will help moderate prices by balancing out the current mismatch between the current supply and the demand. We need more abundant and diverse homes to welcome our children who want to move back to their hometowns, our seniors can downsize in town, our service workers, teachers and civil servants can find affordable homes where they work.
- 2. Stronger local economy:** More homes means new residents that can frequent local businesses and increase foot traffic in our town centers. New housing will make it easier to find and retain local workers.

3. **Climate Friendly neighborhoods:** Neighborhoods of multi-family housing built near public transportation are better for the environment and lower your town's carbon footprint because 1) they preserve green space by focusing new development in already populated areas 2) create less car dependent, walkable and transit oriented places, and consume less energy on a per capita basis.

General Talking Points on MBTA Communities Law

- **Provide homes for all:** More supply means more homes for all people of all incomes. Right now, finding housing is like a game of musical chairs with those who are wealthier able to bid up for housing (rentals and homeownership). Scarce housing supply is making housing even more expensive. Without new homes, people buy up the housing we already have, driving up the cost to live there.
- **More diverse housing options provide homes for people at all stages of life:** Zoning for “missing middle housing” that includes duplexes, town houses, triple deckers and small apartments provides more diverse and affordable housing options for empty nesters to downsize and young people to find their first apartment or house.
- **More equitable housing and addressing systemic inequalities:** For over 100 years, local exclusionary zoning codes that promote single family housing, have been used to intentionally exclude minorities and low income families from many towns and cities in Massachusetts. Rezoning through the MBTA Communities law gives towns and cities the chance to change laws that have driven the racial wealth gap and perpetuate de facto segregation.
- **Promote economic development:** Currently service workers, civil servants and teachers are challenged to find affordable housing in the towns/cities where they work. Workers in search of housing far from the communities where they work may not be able to retain their jobs with unsustainable commutes. Rezoning for multi-family housing allows businesses to retain employees and will benefit from the increase in foot traffic and local customers. Multi-family housing also nets more tax revenue per acre than single family homes.
- **Social benefits of walkable, transit accessible multi-family neighborhoods:** People who don't or can't drive still remain connected to their towns. Creating walkable neighborhoods can increase the level of social capital and social trust in a place where neighbors learn to know each other.

- **Environmental sustainability in an age of climate change:** More housing closer to the places we go to every day (local shops, jobs, school, restaurants, parks, etc) encourage eco-friendly practices like walking, biking and commuting via transit. Reduced reliance on cars and living in gently dense, more compact and energy efficient housing helps in our effort to confront the climate crisis by lowering our carbon emissions.
- **Prevent unsustainable sprawl:** If homes can't be built near transit in MBTA communities, more housing will be needed on the outskirts of town and in distant suburbs. Developments with 50, 100 or more homes, usually single-family, are getting built all around the Boston area such as in Hopkinton, Wrentham and Boxborough to accommodate our growing population. These new homes cause more destruction as more trees are cut down, open spaces are paved over and new infrastructure such as roads, sewage, water and gas lines are built.

A list of common talking points is included below, but for more specific [messaging please refer to this document](#).

Public Comment Template

Introduction: Greet the hosting body and introduce yourself. Include as much personal information as you would like here. In addition to your name, this could be your occupation and how long you have lived in the community.

“Good evening. My name is _____. I am a resident of (your town/city) and live at (state your address and ward/precinct if you know it.”

State why you care about your town's rezoning plan to comply with MBTA Communities law. Personal stories are also effective in public testimonies! We encourage you to speak about your life experiences and why you believe it is important that your town rezone for more housing. “My kids can't afford to move back to our town.” “I want to stay in my town but there are no other housing options for me except the large single family home where I raised my family.” “My son's teacher can't afford to rent in our town anymore and had to quit her job.”

Think of 1 - 2 key messages you want to get across to lawmakers. Reviewing the talking points above and the “seen in the news” section in this guide will provide information to choose your main messages such as:

- Reducing housing costs
- Investing in the local economy
- Increasing housing choices

- Addressing systemic inequalities
- Creating a sustainable future

Conclusion: Reiterate your support for rezoning and ask legislators to support it as well. Keep it short and sweet. Appeal to your audience personally and ask them for their support.

Tips for effective public statements:

1. **Make it personal:** Elected representatives will know the specifics of the rezoning, but they won't know YOUR story. Talk about what compels you to take time out of your day to come and testify.
2. **Practice your speech and time yourself:** Your allotted time will go by quickly. Make sure to practice and time the delivery of your speech. You can adjust the speed of your delivery or cut/add more material as needed.
3. **Remember that your voice counts:** You don't have to be a housing policy expert to share your thoughts with your elected officials. It doesn't matter how long you have lived in your town, your age, your homeownership/renter status. Your story matters and your voice counts on key issues in your town or city.

Seen In The News:

[Housing is in short supply: Here's why that matters](#) - WGBH

"Communities that used to be considered affordable are no longer viable options for those on the lower rungs of the income ladder."

[100 years of choking housing supply](#) - The Boston Globe

"For price increase for existing homes to slow, more new homes of all types must be built over the course of many years. And for more to be built, the state needs to clear away obstacles for the people seeking to build them - whether those are financial obstacles erected by the market or legal ones imposed by recalcitrant cities and towns."

[Zoning has played a major role in racial segregation](#) - Commonwealth Magazine

"Density restrictions, such as zoning districts that only allow for detached single-family houses on medium or large parcels, essentially make it illegal to build anything but very expensive owner-occupied housing. That same historical legacy that has left Black households with lower income, less wealth and more limited access to mortgage credit means that they type of zoning acts as an invisible barrier effectively blocking Black and others of color families from many communities."

[Why Sprawl could be the next big climate change battle](#) - NPR

As sprawl became the default, it increased reliance on cars... Experts say tackling climate change will mean reshaping neighborhoods with a new focus on public transit, biking and walkability.

Sample Public Testimonies

Example #1:

Good evening. My name is _____ and I live in ward 6 here in Newton, at _____ Street. I grew up in Newton and my wife and I have lived in Newton ourselves for over 20 years. I am enthusiastically in favor of the MBTA Communities Law and Village Rezoning plan. In fact, I don't think they go far enough to support needed growth.

I love seeing the signs around Newton with slogans like "Save our Villages." But I worry that we have differing opinions of what our village centers need.

As a kid, I would take the T downtown to meet friends, to my first college internships, and as an adult to jobs downtown. Fond memories of walking into the Highlands for a pasta dinner at Cantin Abbruzzi or a treat from The Ice Cream Factory encourage us as parents to provide the same experiences to our kids. I'm deeply grateful for movie nights at Hyde, bike laps around the new Newton Highlands playground, and walks through Cold Spring Park, Webster Woods, Dolan Pond, and the other numerous parks and greenspaces around our city.

How lucky am I, are all of us, that we get to live in Newton?

I support more development in general and the MBTA Communities Law in particular for three key reasons:

First, more development, especially around our village centers, means more kids get to enjoy what I did and my children still do. And it means more foot traffic to more of the shops, restaurants, dry cleaners, nail salons, barber shops, and orthodontics practices that make our village centers so much fun. Put simply: our village centers thrive with more people, and people will thrive spending more time in our village centers.

Second is that this is a regional effort. If Newton alone were being asked to shoulder the burden of increasing housing then I'd be skeptical. But for the first time in my memory, a regional problem across the greater Boston area is being solved with a solution that spans the region.

But finally, and most importantly, it changes the default conversation. If you'd asked me even a year ago I would have been in favor of more housing growth...as long as addressed all the complexities and potential downsides up front. But over the past few months I realized we hold "pro development" to a different standard than "no development". We make "no development" our default, as if stopping development could somehow freeze the Newton of today (or the

Newton of 20 years ago). But it won't. Without more people, more families, and more development our city and villages will increasingly struggle. And without places to live, Massachusetts will continue to lose residents.

Will there be challenges to the MBTA Communities Law and the new zoning plan? Of course! But there will be challenges to not following the MBTA Communities Law, not to mention plenty of challenges to our continued slow rate of growth. But I have full confidence Newton can overcome them as a community.

Thank you.