

EDITORIAL

# Three Cheers for New Housing Rules

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Secretary Mike Kennealy and his team at the Department of Housing and Community Development have seemingly pulled off a notable feat: finding a way to push Boston's suburbs to allow more development without pushing so hard as to violate Massachusetts' sacred values of local democracy.

DHCD issued [a package of draft regulations](#) last week implementing a less-discussed part of January's Housing Choice law that requires as-of-right multifamily zoning near MBTA stations. The details are complex, but experts' initial reads suggest that [the regulations should generate significant redevelopment opportunities](#) throughout Eastern Massachusetts, particularly at smaller scales.

Massachusetts' towns and cities have spent the last 30 years ratcheting down the number of units that can be built in their communities, to the point that many of the town centers that people profess to love couldn't be rebuilt today due to the "paper wall" of zoning restrictions that researchers have so eloquently and exhaustively described over the last few years.

In response developers have sought the path of least resistance, building on the outskirts of communities, surrounding their projects with conservation easements and generally looking to make new multifamily development easy to ignore. Others, including not a few advocates, have instead fantasized about California-style state mandates directing towns to add more housing with the flick of the governor's pen. But neither approach serves our state well. The former has been unable to produce enough housing, let alone in the types of settings that let people drive less and bike, walk and ride transit more. And the latter flies in the face of political realities.

Like it or not, our commonwealth is founded on top of a centuries-old tradition of local democratic control over a wide range of issues, particularly land use. And while this structure may be better adapted to figuring out who is responsible when a cow grazes on the wrong field than solving a complex, region-wide housing crisis, a democracy cannot be forced to do something at gunpoint. Attempts to do so typically fail.

In this case, the Baker administration has struck an admirable balance between respecting municipal autonomy and making clear that everyone in this commonwealth must pull together to fix one of our most stubborn and glaring problems. Towns and cities can design their own solutions to adding more density, and even opt out – if they can stomach giving up a handful of key state infrastructure grants.

Kennealy and his team have also shown admirable foresight in closing off many opportunities for municipal mendacity. The regulations are clearly designed to eliminate many common tricks wealthier suburbs use to keep out housing for the working people of this commonwealth.

So, bravo to the legislators who fought for this provision to be included in Housing Choice, bravo to the state officials who threaded this difficult needle and bravo for the local advocates who now get a chance to shape a denser, fairer and more climate-friendly future for our state.