

READERS SAY

Here's why readers say their town shouldn't comply with MBTA Communities Act

Nearly 1,500 readers voted. Here's why they disagree with the MBTA Communities Act, which requires 177 cities and towns to rezone for multifamily housing.



John Keohane, a volunteer from "Residents for Thoughtful Zoning, hands out flyers on February 9, 2024 while going door-to-door to encourage Milton voters to vote “no” on Question 1. If passed, the vote would force the town to comply with a state law known as the MBTA Communities act, which requires municipalities served by the T to zone for a certain amount of multifamily housing. *(Erin Clark/Globe Staff)*

By **Annie Jonas**

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Housing affordability in Massachusetts is top of mind for many residents as home and rent prices **sky-rocket** amid a **housing shortage**. But a state law enacting local zoning

changes to spur the development of more housing has some residents calling it a ‘gross overreach.’

The **MBTA Communities Act** requires 177 cities and towns to have a zoning ordinance or bylaw that provides for multi-family housing. The law was signed by former Governor Charlie Baker in 2021 and was passed by broad bipartisan majorities in the Legislature.



What is the MBTA Communities Act? More towns move to block multi-family zoning.

A new study says how much you need to make to live ‘comfortably’ in Boston. It’s a lot.

But as 130 towns approach their end-of-2024 deadline to approve new zoning rules, tensions between towns and the state – and between opponents and proponents of the law – are amping up.

Communities served by MBTA rapid transit (such as the subway, trolley, or Silver Line buses) were required to submit a zoning ordinance or bylaw to the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC) for approval by December 31, 2023. Of the 12 communities subject to that deadline, only **Milton** has failed to submit a zoning ordinance or bylaw.

Most of the remaining communities covered by the law (those served by commuter rail, bus, or ferry, or which are adjacent to such a community) must submit their

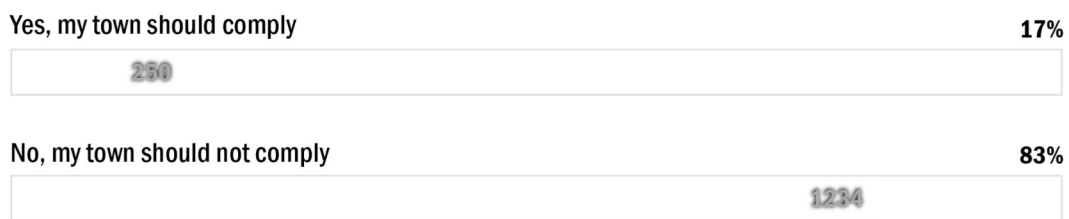
zoning ordinance or bylaw to EOHLIC for approval by December 31, 2024. Certain smaller adjacent communities are allowed until December 31, 2025.

The vast majority of the 177 towns and cities are in interim compliance with the law as of June 7, according to the **EOHLC's tracker**. Those that haven't complied, such as Milton, automatically **lose certain state funding**. Attorney General Andrea Campbell filed a **lawsuit** against the town for missing its deadline of Dec. 31, 2023, with the backing of Gov. Maura Healey.

What do Boston.com readers have to say about the law?

We asked our readers if they think their town should comply with the law. More than 1,480 readers responded to our poll, with the vast majority (83%) saying their town should not comply with the law. Just 17% of the 1,484 respondents said yes, their town should comply with the law.

The MBTA Communities Act requires commuting towns to expand their zoning for multi-family housing. Should your town comply?



Many opponents of the law called it a one-size-fits-all approach that doesn't work for every town.

“Every town and city has its own unique housing strategy and needs. While acknowledging that there is a housing shortage, the solutions should not be dictated by the state,” Boston.com reader Barbara S. from Lowell said.

Others said their town’s infrastructure simply can’t handle the potential increase in population that denser housing could create. Readers from Winthrop were often especially worried about what rezoning for multi-family housing would mean for the town’s already stretched-thin infrastructure and small square mileage.

“Winthrop is a peninsula with only two ways in and out. This town cannot afford further development. It is unsafe. We are a special community because of our location and only two ways in and out of the town,” Boston.com reader Amy B. from Winthrop said.

Other critics said they fear rezoning for multi-family housing would change the character of their small town for the worse.

But proponents of the law said the state’s housing shortage can only be addressed by making it easier to build more housing, which rezoning for multi-family housing aims to do.

“We have a housing crisis, and this is a very modest law that requires nothing but rezoning areas that should be rezoned,” David from Somerville said.

Many in support of the law said there is a common fear – and misconception– that the law will cause a boom in construction or a rapid increase in the town’s population.

“[The law] will simply allow for greater density in some areas and (in a huge majority of those areas) the cost of acquiring land, razing existing buildings, and the construction of new housing will be prohibitively high. Bottom line, very little is likely to change from compliance,” Wayne O. from Needham said.

Indeed, a **review** by *The Boston Globe* found that towns are cleverly designing rezoning plans that will likely produce far less new housing than the law anticipates.

Others said adding housing should help bring down home and rent prices.

“The housing stock statewide must increase so that demand does not outstrip supply. This will help alleviate the rising costs for prospective home buyers as well as those who are trying to rent,” Conor from Cambridge said.

Below, readers share their thoughts on the contentious MBTA Communities Act.

Responses have been lightly edited for grammar and clarity.

The MBTA Communities Act requires 177 cities and towns to rezone for multi-family housing. Should your town comply?

No, my town should not comply

“This law has NO provision to force developers to build affordable or low income housing. Simply building housing will not drive down cost. All this does is enrich builders, developers, and the real estate industry. Additionally, many municipalities lack the infrastructure to support density on this scale.”

– *J.T., Rockland*

“This new mandate is a gross overreach on the part of the state. It is a one size fits all cookie-cutter solution that does not take into account what are unique constraints in each community. This is a developer’s dream dressed up in sheep’s clothing; it is poorly conceived and recklessly oblivious to what will amount to an increase in pollution and small town congestion.”

– *Alicia H., Marblehead*

“I agree that we need more housing – who doesn’t? The problem is that the MBTA-CA is too rigid for communities to add in a responsible and thoughtful way for specific towns. Some towns get around that by doing paper zoning, which won’t help at all.”

– *K.J., Milton*

“Local zoning should stay local, communities should not be forced to give up zoning rights and change character. Our taxes are very high but still not enough to provide all essential services. School cannot accommodate more students. We don’t have the road infrastructure to accommodate more traffic. I moved to my town due to it’s rural character and would like it to stay that way.”

– *Maureen, Halifax*

“Threatening to withhold much-needed state funding, from a state with some of the highest taxes in the country, is unfair. There needs to be better engagement with the communities and efforts by the state, if they want to add housing, to help bring it about in a way that makes the most sense for its existing residents.”

– A.R., *Medway*

“Traffic is already too high, and there is too much congestion. We don’t need more density. The T cannot handle it and neither can the roads. Density should be added outside of the 495 belt, not inside I-95. This is too much of an imposition for already cramped communities.”

– Frank, *Newton*

“Towns should remain in control of their towns. This is a HUGE unacceptable overreach by the government.”

– Maura, *Middleton*

Yes, my town should comply

“Massachusetts is losing incredible talent and young people because of the housing affordability crisis. This continuing trend will decrease our state GDP and discourage corporations to come in with new jobs. Young people are key to the economy all around. Massachusetts has to remain competitive in all aspects (not just healthcare or education) and it starts with young people being able to live within their means and buy homes.”

– Louide X., *Medford*

“It is xenophobic, racially charged, and just plain wrong not to rezone some land for multi-family housing.”

– Cathy, *Boxford*

“My town has repeatedly scuttled efforts to add housing for frivolous reasons. I don’t perceive a threat to my already skyrocketing property value. If anything, it would be nice to have a larger tax base, since costs in Ashland are rapidly rising. The downtown area gets almost no foot traffic, yet voters are staunchly opposed to adding housing in that area.

In my view as a transplant, Massachusetts has a serious issue with the power of municipalities to obstruct or complicate everything from sidewalks to liquor licenses. The result is an ugly patchwork of regulations and quality of infrastructure. I am totally in favor of using the T as leverage to gain compliance.”

– Lucien, Ashland

“If we are to bring the cost of housing down, supply has to be allowed to meet demand. Zoning restrictions on height and density now prevent that from happening, so those laws need to change. Bottom line, to end the housing crisis we need to make it easier to build.”

– Michael, Somerville

“Many ‘townies’ will complain about damage to ‘the character of the town’ or ‘Ipswich becoming a city,’ but these same people live in what were, at one time, developments that the townies that pre-dated them didn’t want. We also live in a time where these people, typically older, want children and grandchildren to move closer to home, but home prices prevent this. Requiring new zoning, particularly in a state that is experiencing extreme housing shortfalls and price increases, means that a new generation will be able to move to the same towns as the previous generations, not priced out as towns become accessible to only those with \$200k+ incomes.”

– Matt, Ipswich

Boston.com occasionally interacts with readers by conducting informal polls and surveys. These results should be read as an unscientific gauge of readers’ opinion.

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