

Lexington Slashes MBTA Zoning After Development Boom

James Sanna

Lexington officials took steps Monday to dramatically rein in its expansive MBTA Communities zoning districts in the face of [significantly more development proposals](#) than first anticipated.

Town Meeting members voted nearly unanimously Monday night to [cut the town's zoning capacity](#) under the law from nearly 13,500 units to just 2,411, including 1,097 in projects already proposed in the last year. The size of the district, in pure acreage terms, was cut roughly in half.

Once heralded as the poster child for the MBTA Communities law's potential, the move puts Lexington back in the [ranks of other wealthy Boston suburbs](#) that have rejected ambitious efforts to add new homes within their borders.

A group of residents had triggered a special town meeting via petition to rein in the town's MBTA Communities zoning after developers proposed a total of 10 projects of varying sizes across the town. Town officials and residents alike described the vote Monday as a

“compromise,” however, that was intended to “slow” development to give officials time to plan for more development.

“We do need to increase the amount of housing in the Boston area. However, when we realized how much would be created, we saw the town needed to do more planning to accommodate that kind of growth. We need to be able to slow down the growth to be able to provide services for this new development,” said Carol Sacerdote, one of the five petitioners.

Sacerdote characterized the level of developer interest as “intense,” but several Town Meeting members suggested an openness to re-expanding the town’s zoning capacity at an unspecified point in the future.

“These projects arrived at a pace the Planning Board didn’t anticipate,” Planning Board Chair Michael Schanbacher told Town Meeting.

The motion had the support of most key town bodies like the Select Board and the committee overseeing Lexington’s affordable housing trust fund.

One group that remained staunchly opposed: Merchants and others on the town committee with jurisdiction over Lexington Center, who hoped that housing developments in the neighborhood would lift the area’s sagging fortunes. The measure approved Monday also killed a

zoning district intended to promote housing development there.

“We don’t want to be left out,” committee chair Jerry Michelson, owner of the town’s well-known shoe store, told Town Meeting.

Schanbacher, too, warned that Monday’s measure would harm the town center and its businesses.

The Town Meeting vote lets all 10 projects submitted under Lexington’s original MBTA Communities zoning continue as planned, and preserves some development rights for another handful of property owners who’ve filed preliminary subdivision applications.

But it also adds new dimensional restrictions that could make some sites uneconomical to build on.

Future projects will only be able to cover 28 percent of their lots, parking included, and have a maximum floor-area ratio of 0.48. Density will be capped at 20 units per acre for all-residential projects and 25 units per acre for mixed-use buildings.

Height will be cut off at 40 feet or 3 stories for residential buildings and 50 feet or 4 stories for mixed-use ones.

In addition, town officials also removed two large retail parcels holding a Stop & Shop and a Walgreens from one of the MBTA districts.

A representative of the town's affordable housing trust committee warned Town Meeting members that Monday's vote could make it uneconomical for developers to build under the town's requirement that projects with 14 or more units set aside 15 percent of their homes as affordable housing.

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