

The Boston Globe: A Worthy Strategy for Affordable Housing

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A Worthy Strategy for Affordable Housing
By MATTHEW HINDMAN

WHEN JOHN WINTHROP led the Puritans across the Atlantic, he dreamed of filling the new Massachusetts Bay Colony with numerous small, autonomous, self-governing villages.

Much to his chagrin, he succeeded -- and independent-minded town deputies proved a recurring headache during his many terms as the colony's governor.

As Winthrop declared in a famous address to the Commonwealth's General Court, these local officials transformed a virtue into a vice: Too much self-government at the local level made it impossible to achieve the goals that all colonists shared.

Nearly four centuries later, the state's housing crisis has taught us all to share Winthrop's exasperation. The state Legislature is currently considering a major rewrite of affordable housing laws, and House leaders have begun polling members in preparation for a vote on the floor.

Unfortunately, legislators are pursuing incremental approaches to housing that leave the root problem untouched. Powerful town and village governments, and their "Not In My Back Yard" attitude toward development, are the real reason the Boston-area housing market is a colossal mess. To remedy the excesses of local governments, legislators must create a new regional authority to manage the Boston area's housing growth.

Few doubt the seriousness of the state's housing problem. The median sale price of a single-family home in the Greater Boston area doubled between 1998 and 2002. Because of the out-of-control housing market, thousands of families can't find housing, businesses can't attract top talent, and highly skilled young people are leaving the state in droves.

Legislators want to tweak housing laws by offering cities and towns more carrot and less stick. The most stringent provisions of Chapter 40B, the state's "antisnob zoning" law, would be loosened slightly. At the same time, the bill would give new regulatory tools and greater autonomy to those communities willing to absorb additional growth.

A far more effective approach is for the state to create a new regional government responsible for these issues. A new metropolitan government for the Greater Boston area could rise above the parochial concerns that have dominated past development and ensure that the inevitable headaches of growth are fairly distributed among all of our cities and towns.

The basic governmental process for this new regional government would be straightforward. The regional government would decide on the region's housing needs, and then parcel out an equitable share of the required growth to each city and suburb. Local authorities would create a plan to meet those goals, while the regional government could step in if individual communities prove unable or unwilling to meet their obligations.

The best-known example of how such a metropolitan-area government can work in practice comes from Portland, Ore. Years ago, I had the opportunity to get a worm's-eye view of the Portland area's metro government in action, as a cub staffer working for Oregon governor John Kitzhaber. While deliberations were at times contentious, all parties recognized that metro's overarching, cooperative structure allowed city governments under its jurisdiction more, not less, control over their destinies.

Undoubtedly, many cities and suburbs would oppose implementing such a plan in Massachusetts and fight to retain their current prerogatives. But other states have accomplished similar shifts. New Hampshire, North Carolina, and Utah all have long histories of sprawling, locally controlled development -- and yet each in recent years has been forced to adopt more centralized growth-management strategies.

Those lawmakers inclined toward halfway solutions should consider again just how ridiculous our situation has become. In 2002 the state ranked 47th in the country in multifamily housing starts -- in roughly the same category as Wyoming and North Dakota, large rural states with less than 10 percent of Massachusetts's population.

We are justly proud that our strong town and village governments were important incubators of America's democratic

culture. But in order to address our housing crisis, we desperately need more democracy at the regional level.</p><p>After all, we can't enjoy the Commonwealth's proud traditions if we can't afford to live here.

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