



The State of Zoning for Multi-Family Housing

In 100 Cities and Towns in Greater Boston

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1

Very little land is zoned for multi-family housing.



Very little land in Greater Boston is zoned for multi-family housing.

In theory, this is not a constraint because developers can build up. But, In practice, municipalities highly restrict density with requirements related to setbacks, height, and dwelling units per acre. Often, this makes it hard to build up OR out.

1
Land Zoned

Interpretation of local plans, in aggregate:
Where to put multi-family housing?

Residential areas?
No, but maybe with *extreme* caution, someday

City/town/village centers?
Let's do this, carefully

Commercial corridors?
Maybe yes, but it's hard to do well

Office parks?
Hmm, perhaps

Industrial districts?
Yes, we're on it!

The limited land area zoned for multi-family housing tends to be concentrated in certain types of districts within each municipality.

There is most consensus about putting multi-family housing in formerly industrial lands that are away from single family residential neighborhoods. Also, there is an emerging consensus that the city or town center can include some multi-family housing. .

2

We are moving to a system of project-by-project decision-making.



We are moving away from “by right” zoning to a system of project-by-project decision-making.

Decades ago, municipalities zoned by right—if a developer met certain requirements, the project was allowed to proceed. Over the last 30 years, the region has been moving to a special permit system that is discretionary. Most proposed developments must prove that it will be a benefit to the community.

In the last 15 years, the system has become even more ad hoc, discretionary and political.



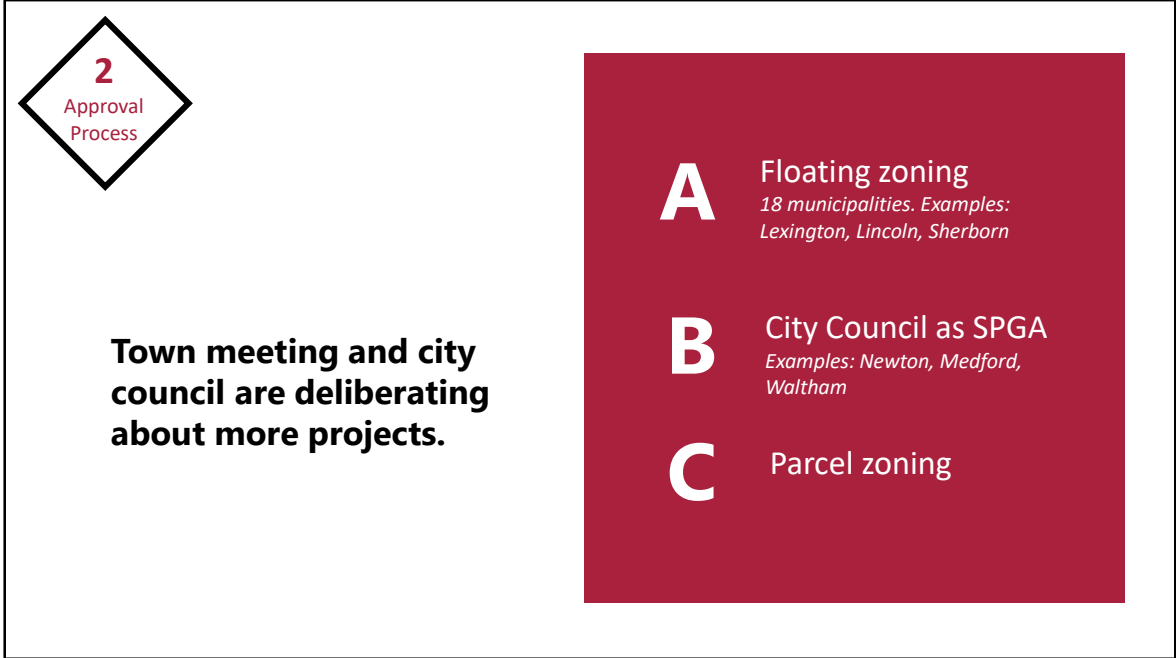
Most multi-family projects require special permits, which are discretionary.

From 2015-2017, percent of multifamily units permitted...

By Special Permit:	57%
40B:	15%
By Right:	14%
Friendly 40B:	7%
By Use Variance:	7%

The study asked planners and building inspectors how many multi-family units the city or town permitted from 2015 to 2017, and if the projects were allowed as-of-right, by special permit, or by 40B.

63% of the units that began construction during the time were approved by a discretionary process--by special permit, or by use variance. Only 14% were approved by right.



Across the region, town meetings and city councils are deliberating about more projects. They are doing this through three mechanisms.

First, with floating zoning, where a zone is created but not put on a map. There are “floating zones” in 18 of 100 municipalities, such as Lexington, Lincoln, and Sherborn.

Second, City Councils are often designated as the authority for granting special permits for multi-family projects. For example, Newton, Medford, and Waltham.

Third, there is a movement towards parcel zoning, where town meeting or city council adopts zoning for a single parcel, under single ownership. Like a single parking lot in Newtonville that became a zoning district.

3

The most widespread trend in zoning for multi-family housing has been to adopt *mixed use zoning*.



Mixed use zoning in city/town centers helps to make centers interesting, lively and walkable. 83 of 100 cities and towns have adopted mixed use zoning, mostly in the last two decades. This is a big accomplishment.

Housing is also going into new “lifestyle” shopping centers. There are many examples, here are a few:

- Burlington’s Third Avenue
- The Launch at Hingham Shipyard
- Lynnfield’s MarketStreet

One caution: as the market for commercial space wanes, requiring that each new building have retail on the street level becomes problematic.

4

Municipalities are allowing incremental development in village centers; and more on the municipal peripheries.



Approximately half of the cities and towns permitted multi-family projects, usually mixed use, in a historic center in the last two decades. They generally have added tens of units, but a few municipalities such as Quincy, Walpole, and Malden added hundreds.

The biggest areas of growth, however, are on municipal borders, often in industrial lands, away from single family neighborhoods, and often in areas where a car is essential.

Ideally, we would locate dense development in city/town centers and near transit. We should also try to make development at the edges more walkable, more vibrant and better connected to other places.



Four Fab Findings:

- 1 Zone more land for multi-family housing, [up and out](#)
- 2 Reform [approval process](#), for flexibility and predictability
- 3 Allow multi-family housing next to [mixed use](#) hubs
- 4 Allow more housing in [centers](#) (and near transit), and plan connected growth nodes on the [edges](#)

So, ending on a light note, here are Four Fab Findings from this 123-page report on multi-family zoning in Greater Boston. To download the executive summary and/or the full report, go to this page on the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance website:

<https://tinyurl.com/yxex2jeo>