

# Eldridge and Leroux: Time to get smart about growth

**By Jamie Eldridge and Andre Leroux**

**The MetroWest Daily News**

Posted Nov 06, 2011 @ 12:08 AM

Our state's clunky zoning law has become a threat to the prosperity and health of our cities and towns. The last time the Massachusetts Legislature tackled comprehensive land use and zoning legislation was 1975. At that point, the country's average home price was \$42,600. A gallon of gas hovered around 50 cents and the average cost of a new car was slightly more than \$4,000.

Nearly four decades later, Massachusetts families face new challenges. Today, home prices are out of reach for many workers and seniors, and force families to move further away from jobs to seek affordable places to live. Drivers waste hours in traffic congestion, family budgets strain to pay increasing gas costs, and health problems like asthma, diabetes, and stress have increased. With the recession, local governments are finding it hard to pay for the infrastructure and services that their sprawling growth requires. Meanwhile, many businesses in strip malls and main streets alike are languishing for a lack of foot traffic.

Needless to say, times have changed and so must the way we build our communities. More and more families want to live, work, and play in the same place, and there is incredible unmet demand for vibrant places that can anchor our ever more complicated personal and community lives. We need statewide zoning reform to help unlock this potential for growth.

Zoning law establishes the "rules of the game" for the development and preservation of our communities. Zoning determines what type of buildings we build, what they can be used for, what they look like, and where they are located. More than any other type of law, zoning determines where roads and infrastructure will be built and where government services will need to be delivered.

Despite the importance of planning and zoning laws, Massachusetts cities and towns are governed by state laws that are 36 years old. Times have changed, but the antiquated state laws that determine the rules of development and conservation are the same as they were when driving and housing costs were a more reasonable part of the average family budget.

The idea of reform isn't new on Beacon Hill, but the need for action is greater than ever:

- First, we can't afford the wasteful patterns of development that our current zoning system promotes. We simply don't have enough money to build extensive new roads, water pipes, and other infrastructure anymore when we need to repair what we have.

- Second, families need different types of homes as they age, but typical zoning produces few affordable housing choices for seniors, young people, and multi-generational families.

- Third, zoning laws have too many loopholes and too little predictability. This handcuffs our economy and our competitiveness.

- Finally, our environment is changing and we must build in ways that preserve our ability to resist disasters and preserve the natural resources that support life.

Together, these challenges paint a grim picture that must be addressed promptly through comprehensive zoning reform. The good news is that we have the chance to really do something about it.

Senator Jamie Eldridge has proposed zoning reform legislation that is currently before the Committee on Municipalities and Regional Government. The bill promotes walkable communities, growth in sensible areas, and encourages prompt and predictable permitting decisions. It can help communities create a rich mix of housing, jobs, and recreation choices. The bill has support from a broad range of groups such as the Massachusetts Public Health Association, Citizens' Housing and Planning Association, Environmental League of Massachusetts, and the state chapter of the American Planning Association, to name a few.

We can improve the quality of life in our communities when residents, businesses, and their local officials have the modern tools-and the commonsense rules-to grow smart.

After 36 years and counting, it's time to step up and solve this quiet crisis.

*Jamie Eldridge of Acton is state senator for the Middlesex & Worcester district. You can contact him at James.Eldridge@MASenate.gov. Andre Leroux is the executive director of the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance. He can be contacted at andre@ma-smartgrowth.org.*

Copyright 2011 The MetroWest Daily News. Some rights reserved

Read more: <http://www.metrowestdailynews.com/opinion/x916008766/Eldridge-and-Leroux-Time-to-get-smart-about-growth#ixzz1dhytJVcj>