

The Berkshire Eagle (Pittsfield, MA)

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We need to grow smart

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. 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, homes 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. 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.

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 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.

Massachusetts cities and towns are governed by state laws that are 36 years old. 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. Beacon Hill is considering zoning reform legislation 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.

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Zoning with public health in mind

In light of your Oct. 25 op-ed "We need to grow smart," by Andre **Leroux**, readers should know that public health is contingent upon good planning and intelligent zoning. Over a century ago, zoning emerged in response to public health concerns. Our needs have since changed, and our outdated zoning codes are too often working against us.

The Tri-Town Health Department working in concert with the Lee, Lenox, and Stockbridge Board of Selectmen, town administrators and managers, and Boards of Health, by utilizing Mass in Motion grant funding, have endorsed the Built Environment and Community Design Resolution. This voluntary resolution marries intelligent planning and zoning without compromising negative public health outcomes and encourages these types of projects to promote physical activity and healthy eating. We need to ensure that future generations have access to the kind of neighborhoods we would all wish to live in: places with walkable streets and open spaces for recreation, better access to healthy food stores and equitable housing options.

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