



Opinion

Commentary: Newton's tarnished image

By Bob Engler

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A mid-year report card of the city's attempts to live up to its rhetoric about the need for more affordable housing would show a failing grade, based on the following facts:

1. Newton claimed it had reached a threshold under 40B that 1.5 percent of its land area was dedicated to affordable housing and went to housing appeals to prove it.
2. The recent decision of the Housing Appeals Committee denying Newton's claim showed the city to be 17 acres shy of the 1.5 percent land area minimum – very significant acreage in this context. In non-legal terms about the HAC decision, “it wasn't even close.”
3. The mayor is on record for wanting to promote 800 more affordable housing units (the number needed to reach the 40B threshold of 10 percent of the housing stock), yet the city has not supported several recent affordable housing proposals, which would have reduced that number by at least half.
4. The mayor has commissioned a housing study (due next year) to find ways to produce more affordable housing, yet he continued to allow the law department to pursue a failed course of action to stop affordable housing developments by claiming the 1.5 percent “safe harbor.”
5. There is absolutely zero chance the recommendations coming from this study, or any strategies put forth by the 40B opponents, will address the growing need for affordable housing in the city and the region without a strong reliance on current and future 40B proposals.
6. Other than the low-income housing tax credit program – which has provided Newton with a limited number of units – there are no longer any federal or state subsidy programs to increase the affordable housing stock in any significant way.
7. The illegal accessory apartments throughout the city most likely provide more (unregistered) affordable housing than has been provided through housing subsidy programs since the public housing and Section 8 programs stopped providing new units.
8. The city's zoning bylaws are outdated, exclusionary in their effect, and a major reason why affordable housing cannot be produced in any meaningful way under existing zoning, even the inclusionary bylaw.
9. The private housing market cannot provide housing for households earning less than the area median income (and even above the median income) in Newton; consequently, the children of Newton residents cannot find housing to start their families here like their parents did and seniors cannot afford to remain here. It costs \$300,000 to \$500,000, on average, to construct a new multifamily housing unit in Newton (not even considering new single-family homes), yet households earning the median income in the Boston area can only afford half that amount.
10. Chapter 40B is not “broken” as anti-development advocates would have you believe; what is “broken” is the collective will of elected officials to change current zoning bylaws and support new family housing (with children!) by focusing on citywide needs and not the anti-growth shouts of a vocal minority of neighbors on whatever street, intersection, backyard is being affected – a difficult task for such an overly large elected body to accomplish...
11. Chapter 40B was not intended to solve all the housing problems in the state, nor to serve all low- and moderate- and below-market income levels; it was created as one affordable housing tool among others (most of which have disappeared) to deal with a serious problem which still exists. It is still a viable and necessary option because 40A laws (zoning) across eastern Massachusetts provides almost no land zoned for multifamily use.
12. If we accept one of the fundamental principles of the city's Comprehensive Plan – that economic diversity is essential to the fiscal, financial and social health of the city - then we better start doing something about it to improve our failing grade.

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