

Critics' successes in election could cool interest in Newton's plan for more housing

By [John Hilliard](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 22, 2023, 6:47 p.m.



Newton's plans to revitalize its village centers with additional housing could be in jeopardy. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

NEWTON — For the past couple of years, as the region grappled with a housing crisis, Newton officials pitched a plan that could allow the construction of more multifamily homes and inject new life into the city's vital village centers.

The plan seeks to meet requirements of a state law mandating more multifamily housing in communities served by the MBTA. [But Newton's effort went further](#) — proposing 13 locations across the city, including many in its small-town-style village centers and adjacent residential areas.

Beginning in 2021, officials held community events and solicited feedback from thousands of participants, which helped shape the proposal, according to Deborah Crossley, a longtime city councilor who leads the Zoning & Planning Committee.

“We need housing, we need customers,” Crossley said. “When you do a little bit of density in those village centers, it gives you a way to invest in those village centers and bring them back to life in a really meaningful way.”

Now, however, support for the city’s plan may be cooling. In the Nov. 7 local election, five newcomers won City Council seats after being backed by groups critical of the development plans.

David Micley, one of the new councilors, supports a zoning change to abide by the state law. But he is concerned about a broader plan to rezone more of the city for multifamily housing, he said. Residents, he believes, want the city to take more time before deciding whether to loosen rules in other parts of Newton.

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“The [issue] that was at the forefront of a lot of people’s minds was, ‘How do we think about development and growth going forward?’ ” Micley said. “Residents want to move at a moderate and reasonable pace.”

In [January 2021, then-governor Charlie Baker signed a law](#) requiring 177 communities, including Newton, to pass zoning that would make it easier to build multifamily housing near T stops. In Newton, a plan to comply with the state would include a half-dozen locations, like village centers in West Newton and Waban.

The city has proposed a broader rezoning plan that also includes seven more village centers, like Auburndale and Nonantum. In those areas, the proposed zoning would include changes like allowing new buildings up to 4½ stories tall along commercial streets, with shorter buildings closer to residential areas.

The city has until Dec. 31 to approve a plan intended to meet the law's requirements — or, as some urge, go beyond the mandate to spur more housing in other areas.

Greg Vasil, chief executive officer and president of the Greater Boston Real Estate Board, said what Newton does in terms of rezoning for multifamily housing will be felt around the area.

“Newton has so much public transit access to the city. It's vital,” Vasil said. “It'd be great for them to do more.”

The debate in Newton comes as communities like Brookline, Salem, and Lexington have approved measures to spur more multifamily housing in response to the law.

Housing is an especially acute issue in Newton, where the median price of a single-family home was about \$1.6 million last year, according to real estate analytics firm the Warren Group.

Tamara Small, CEO of the Commercial Real Estate Development Association, also known as NAIOP Massachusetts, said she was disappointed Newton has yet to approve a plan.

“NAIOP is pleased to see communities like Lexington, Arlington, and Brookline who have gone above and beyond what is required by law to address one of the most significant challenges facing Massachusetts — a dire shortage of housing for all income levels,” Small said in a statement.

On Election Day, seven of the council's 24 seats were contested, and five challengers endorsed by at least one of the groups opposed to the broader proposed rezoning won their races. They unseated three incumbents, including Crossley, who has been a leading proponent of the rezoning.

Development and housing have long been lightning rods in the city's politics, and the results have elicited strong feelings on both sides of the debate.

Carolyn Kraft of the village of Thompsonville opposes the rezoning, and argued the MBTA's service failures should be addressed before the state compels communities to encourage development around T stations.

“It’s more of an opportunity for the developers to make money,” Kraft said.

Amy Dain, a housing advocate and member of the city’s Planning and Development Board, supports the city’s efforts to comply with the state law. But she said the state needs to play a greater role in housing development.

“The experience from Newton, and from a hundred years of zoning history, shows that state leadership in zoning reform is needed,” Dain said.

The new city councilors won’t take office until January. But the existing council appears to have little interest in the full rezoning plan: [only five members signaled their support](#) for the proposal in an informal hand count during a rezoning discussion on Nov. 15.

A rezoning plan requires only a simple majority vote of the 24-member board.

City councilors met again Monday night and continued discussions about the proposed broader rezoning, but didn’t take a vote. They are scheduled to continue the discussion on Wednesday, according to Mayor Ruthanne Fuller.

During the Monday meeting, as city councilors discussed modifications for specific properties under the plan, a smattering of residents watched from the gallery.

Among them was Arrianna Proia, of Nonantum village, who said she supports following the state requirement but believes the city shouldn’t go further yet.

“I think the residents have spoken,” Proia said of the election results. “They said that the brakes need to be pumped on this, and that we need to go back to the drawing board.”

Suzanne Sankar, who supports the city’s broader plan, said she hopes councilors will ultimately approve it. Despite the election’s outcome, she believes it will spur advocates to press for more multifamily housing.

“I think that election was a wakeup call for people who want positive housing and zoning reform here,” Sankar said.

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