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How can Gov. Healey make Mass. less pricey? Housing advocates weigh in

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Gary Higgins / Boston Business Journal

Hundreds of housing units are being built next to the MBTA's North Quincy red line station. But housing advocates are pushing for more new homes, including those next to public transit.

Homeowners and renters alike know how expensive it is to live in the Boston area. High interest rates have helped keep prices in check, but expensive new construction and a tight inventory continue to boost costs.

The Boston area ranked 12th nationally last year with a median single-family home price of \$685,600, and fourth in condominium prices with \$564,800, according to the National Association of Realtors. It's third in median rent, at \$2,990 a month for a one-bedroom apartment, according to Zumper's latest data in February.

The Boston Business Journal asked local housing and affordability advocates what Gov. Maura Healey's administration should

prioritize.

One initiative is the MBTA Communities Act, which requires municipalities with a station, including commuter rail, or abutting a community with one to create zoning for denser, multifamily housing districts next to those transit stops. Former Gov. Charlie Baker put the law into place, and now, Healey's office, along with Attorney General Andrea Campbell, are working to enforce it in those 177 cities and towns.

Several advocates cited that program, as well as the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, a state bill that would help housing tenants buy their housing unit, including through a requirement that they be notified of the sale and given a chance to match other offers.

Karen Frederick, CEO of Community Teamwork:

"The need for 'affordable' housing is great across Massachusetts, but the growing need for deeply affordable or low-threshold housing has never been greater. By focusing on new housing development, which provides both affordable and deeply affordable housing units, Gov. Healey can address the housing crisis that is growing in every community across the Commonwealth.

Deeply affordable housing can help reduce homelessness by providing stable housing for those who may be otherwise living on the streets. In addition, we would ask Gov. Healey to also continue to support the RAFT (Rental Assistance for Families in Transition) Program and other housing and rental assistance programs as a

priority, which have helped to keep families in their homes during the pandemic and beyond."

Rachel Heller, CEO of Citizens' Housing and Planning Association:

"For the commonwealth to thrive, we need to stabilize home prices and rents. Creating 200,000 new homes, 40,000 of which are affordable for people with moderate incomes and 20,000 affordable for people with low incomes, will provide opportunities for people to live in communities they choose, foster vibrant neighborhoods, and support a healthy economy. With a mix of new rental, homeownership, and permanent supportive housing, we'll meet people's diverse needs, help close the racial homeownership gap, and open opportunities for residents to achieve stability and economic mobility.

Adding to zoning changes implemented under Gov. Baker, the Healey administration can have a meaningful impact by implementing the MBTA Communities multifamily zoning law; passing a housing bond bill that increases investments in affordable housing production, preservation, and public housing; and approving a budget with increases to state rental voucher programs that bring rents to levels that people with low incomes can afford."

Jesse Kanson-Benanav, executive director, Abundant Housing MA:

"Massachusetts has a severe shortage of homes. We do not build enough new homes to ensure that all current and future residents have access to affordable and accessible housing. This shortage is exacerbated by exclusionary zoning used by many communities to limit anything but luxury single-family homes from being built

within their borders. Not only does this drive our housing affordability crisis, but it also perpetuates racial and class segregation.

If we are serious about a Massachusetts for everyone, we need to significantly reform our zoning system to ensure that a variety of home types — from three-deckers to accessory dwelling units to transit-accessible multifamily housing — can be built in more cities and towns from Pittsfield to Provincetown. An Act to Promote Yes In My Back Yard is a comprehensive zoning reform bill that will give us the tools we need to build the homes we all need, ensure they are affordable, and build access and opportunities for more families in Massachusetts."

Karen E. Kelleher, executive director, Local Initiatives Support Corp. (LISC) Boston:

"It is well-documented that intentional, racist housing policies helped create segregation, disinvestment and racial wealth and ownership gaps. It will take intentional housing policy to reverse these discriminatory impacts. To that end, Gov. Healey should convene diverse leaders to develop an ambitious housing plan that centers racial equity.

While she challenges us to fundamentally redesign housing policies and programs in this way, some new strategies are already on the table, including right to counsel in eviction cases; a proposed law empowering municipalities to fund affordability via real estate transfer fees, and another allowing them to adopt the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act. She can also support developers of color to build the new housing that MBTA communities will incentivize, putting both financial opportunity

and decisions regarding who will purchase or rent those homes, in their hands."

Kendra Lara, Boston city councilor and chair of the committee on housing and community development:

"Healey's administration is taking a promising first step by developing a cabinet-level housing office. This shows that they are committed to providing the necessary institutional support and funding to address the state-wide housing crisis. By working with cities, this office can encourage the development of affordable housing, reimagine zoning laws, and pass legislation that strengthens tenant protections such as just-cause eviction and right-to-council while enabling cities to make localized decisions on rent control.

Increasing the right kind of housing supply is more important than just building our way out of the housing crisis; ending exclusionary zoning practices can help. Zoning reform is the kind of transformative policy shift I want to see from the Healey administration. Every city is responsible for housing residents of all income levels; our zoning should enable, facilitate, and demand it."

Angie Liou, executive director, Asian Community Development Corp.:

"One of the essential things the Healey administration can do is to hold towns accountable for meeting the new MBTA Communities Act requirements. At ACDC, we work in highly gentrified neighborhoods like Chinatown and less dense communities, including Malden and Quincy. We truly believe that all communities must step up and do their part to help solve the housing crisis. By

allowing more housing development along transit stops, towns can ensure that their community members — elderly, working families, and young adults — can afford to stay.

Another bill we continue to advocate for is the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act. Last year, we purchased a privately-owned and -occupied building in Chinatown. That experience has deepened our belief that enabling tenants and community organizations they work with to preserve their housing is an important tool to add to our arsenal of housing strategies."

Chris Norris, executive director, MetroHousingBoston:

"Safe, secure housing that is affordable based on a household's income is one of the most critical issues facing Massachusetts residents. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, Massachusetts has only 44 affordable and available rental homes for every 100 households with extremely low incomes. Also, of the over 313,000 renter households within this lowest income category, 64% spend over half of their income on housing costs.

Gov. Healey's administration should focus long-term on producing homes that are affordable to those most in need and acknowledge that the expansion of shelters is only a short-term solution. Additionally, the expansion of the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program to include all households who qualify could be just the thing for Massachusetts to think differently about how to approach housing affordability in the commonwealth. While Massachusetts was clearly experiencing a housing crisis prior to 2020, rental assistance proved its critical role in preserving housing stability during and since the pandemic."

Josh Zakim, executive director, Housing Forward MA:

"The Healey administration is facing a dire housing crisis, with a shortage estimated to be well over 100,000 homes. While new policies should be enacted to support further construction of new homes, Housing Forward hopes that the new administration will use every tool at its disposal to support new housing production, especially including enforcement of the MBTA Communities Act.

As of this writing, most covered municipalities either have a qualifying MBTA district or have submitted a plan for future compliance. Attorney General Andrea Campbell recently issued an advisory stating that MBTA communities that fail to comply will be subject to civil enforcement action, will be ineligible for certain forms of state funding, and will be at risk under federal and state fair housing laws.

Housing Forward applauds this approach, but we also hope that the administration ensures continued compliance. The administration should also expand other tools, such as increasing available state funds under Chapter 40R smart growth zoning districts, a powerful incentive that can work alongside the new requirements to support MBTA communities in developing compliant zoning districts and new housing."



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