



TOWN OF GROTON
Affordable Housing Trust



Becky Pine, *Chair*
Carolyn Perkins, *Vice Chair*
Phil Francisco, *Member*
Richard Perini, *Member*

Regular Session Minutes

Date: Wednesday, March 23, 2022
Time: 7:45 pm
Location: Virtual meeting
Trust members in attendance: Phil Francisco, Carolyn Perkins, Becky Pine and Rick Perini
Others in attendance: Scott Alcorn, John Sopka
Referenced document: draft comment letter on MBTA Communities' draft DHCD guidelines

At 7:57 pm, Becky Pine called the Affordable Housing Trust to order. Becky Pine announced that this meeting is being recorded and that all four members are present with their cameras on. Members introduced themselves.

Agenda Item: Review draft regular session minutes from March 2, 2022.

Carolyn Perkins moved to accept the March 2, 2022 minutes as presented. Rick Perini seconded and the motion carried (4:0) by roll call vote of Perkins – aye, Francisco – aye, Perini – aye and Pine – aye.

Agenda Item: Review draft comment letter to Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) regarding MBTA Housing Choice Zoning draft guidelines.

Becky Pine shared the draft of a comments letter that the Select Board will discuss on Monday, March 28, 2022 (see text of letter below). Becky Pine said that the Trust can use this letter or not as you choose. Becky Pine said that she exchanged drafts with Karen Chapman, Senior Planner at the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC), and that MRPC was making similar points. Comments are due by March 31, 2022.

Phil Francisco said that this was a good letter and confirmed that the Town's 2020 population is 11,315. Rick Perini asked if the letter would have more impact if we cooperated and joined with a number of other affected rural communities. The group discussed ways to replace references to the character of the town with other language that might be more persuasive. Becky Pine noted the Massachusetts Municipal Legal Association's webinar that noted that the towns are charged with actions that are consistent with its long-term planning goals. The group agreed that referencing the Town's Master Plan may be a way forward even though our most recent Master Plan is from 2011.

Carolyn Perkins said that she is comfortable with what Becky Pine has written. Other Trust members agreed that the Trust supports these recommendations. Rick Perini said that the letter is extremely well written and, with the few discussed edits, he agrees with sending this letter to the state. If the Select Board agrees with this wording, then the Trust could co-sign this comment letter.

Carolyn Perkins moved to agree to accept this comments letter on DHCD draft guidelines with the mentioned changes to be co-signed with the Select Board if they agree, and otherwise to be sent individually on behalf of the Affordable Housing Trust. Rick Perini seconded and the motion carried (4:0) by roll call vote of Perkins – aye, Francisco – aye, Perini – aye and Pine – aye.

Agenda Item: Discuss citizens petition to change the definition of age restricted housing.

Jeffrey Brem, using the name Quality Green Homes, LLC, is the owner of three (3) parcels on Main Street (468 and 478 Main Street and parcel 216-101). Jeffrey Brem would like to build an age restricted development on this 7.5-acre parcel and he is the proponent of the citizens petition. Becky Pine said that the age definition does need to be updated but she is not sure that this is the change that is needed since the language removes all the affordable housing. Carolyn Perkins said that the language also requires the Planning Board to approve individual family members which she is sure that the Planning Board will not want to do. Becky Pine said that Jeffrey Brem spoke to the Select Board on March 14, 2022 and he is open to edits.

Phil Francisco drew attention to the affordability percentages and that the idea of levels of affordability might be considered. Becky Pine commented that the Town's flexible development bylaw calls for 15% affordability after the 9th unit. She added that Jeffrey Brem's present plan calls for 12 duplexes for a total of 24 units. Phil Francisco asked isn't it our position that we are opposed to this warrant article if it stands as written. Carolyn Perkins and Rick Perini agreed.

Carolyn Perkins said that the current zoning deserves to be changed but not to this language. John Sopka said that he is opposed to any reduction in affordability requirements until we have reasonably approached our goal.

Other business

Fran Stanley will write up a program summary on the Emergency Rental Assistance program after the program concludes at the end of June.

The Diversity Task Force is looking at housing actions it might take including taking positions on Town warrant articles and perhaps another housing summit. John Sopka said that how the Town might meet the MBTA Communities multi-family zoning requirement could be a topic for a future housing summit. Becky Pine said that we should tell the Diversity Task Force that the Trust is open to the idea of participating in a second housing summit.

Carolyn Perkins referenced several ideas garnered from recent Massachusetts Housing Partnership webinars. Specifically, some towns are raising money for affordable housing apart from CPC funding by initiating a home rule petition to allow building permit surcharges. Also, Carolyn Perkins noted that some towns participate in housing consortiums ([RHSO](#), [Assabet Regional Housing Consortium](#)). A number of Cape Cod towns agreed to fund affordable housing projects even if they are not in their own towns. In Wellfleet, a booster group known as [Housing Angels](#) has raised support for affordable housing initiatives.

Carolyn Perkins recalled that some towns organize frequent periodic meetings between housing entities to help with coordination. Phil Francisco thought that this sort of effort is simply common sense as it should be clear what the mission of these groups are and some might be working together to achieve specific goals. Becky Pine referenced the annual conservation summits with rotating sponsors and rotating programs. Carolyn Perkins said that a specific agenda is needed for planning purposes.

Phil Francisco said that it is important to have affordable housing that is energy efficient and even net zero from a sustainability standpoint. This aim should be part of the conversation now and going forward.

Meeting adjourned 9:09 pm.

Next meeting: Wednesday April 13, 2022 (in person)

Notes by Fran Stanley

To: MA Dept of Housing and Community Development (DHCD)
From: Select Board, Town of Groton, MA
Date: March 28, 2022
Comments re Draft Guidelines for Multi-Family Zoning Requirement for MBTA Communities

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments regarding the DHCD Draft Compliance Guidelines for Multi-Family Districts Under Section 3A of the Zoning Act. We, the Select Board of Groton, MA, are writing to share our concerns and suggestions for possible revisions to those Draft Guidelines.

Groton is an 'Adjacent' MBTA community in northwest Middlesex County, with a 2020 population of 11,315, living in 4150 housing units, spread over 33.7 square miles. There is no public transportation of any kind in our town, although we abut several towns with commuter rail stations. Our one grocery store/pharmacy, one stand-alone pharmacy, one hardware store, and two post offices are located in different parts of town, ranging from one to seven miles from each other. We have a limited network of sidewalks. It would be very difficult to live in Groton without access to a car.

Many people in Groton, including the Select Board, would like to increase the variety and price point of housing types available in our Town, as well as our economic and racial diversity; however, we are very concerned about some of the requirements of the MBTA Housing Choice law.

Impact of 750 Housing Units

We consider the requirement that we create zoning to allow the construction of 750 family housing units to be inappropriate, unreasonable, and probably impossible to enact in Groton.

- 750 units would be an increase of 18% over our existing total of 4150 housing units.
- 750 family units, at 3.5 people per unit, would add 2625 people to our population, an increase of almost 25%.
- We are set to break ground on a very expensive new elementary school, for which our residents will be paying increased taxes over the next two decades. The additional students from 750 units of family housing would likely make this school overcrowded the day it opens.
- The vast majority of homes in Groton are served by private wells and private septic systems. However, we are also a town with many wetlands and large areas of poor soils that cannot support septic systems. The Town may need to make expensive upgrades to develop the capacity to provide municipal water and sewer for 750 units of new high-density housing.
- Groton has worked hard to maintain its rural small-town character while accommodating a surge of development and the accompanying increase in population over the last four decades. Our population has almost doubled, from 6,154 in 1980 to 11,315 in 2020. We are a desirable town where people want to live. We have done our part to address the Commonwealth's Housing Crisis, and we will continue to grow and build new housing, but there is no way to build at a rate of 15 units per acre that would not significantly detract from, if not destroy, the rural character of our town.

No Affordable Housing Requirement

We are dismayed that the Draft Guidelines do not include any requirement to build Affordable Housing, despite the fact that the Commonwealth of MA has directed that 10% of the housing stock in every town should be Affordable to people whose income is below certain amounts. Groton's 2020 Housing Production Plan (prepared as mandated, and certified by the DHCH) shows that Groton is falling far short of meeting the 10% target. Based on the 2010 census, Groton needs to create 173 more units of Affordable Housing. This number will undoubtedly rise due to the increase in population and housing stock since 2010. If we build 750 units of housing without any Affordable units, we will fall even further behind on meeting the 10% target. We do not understand this inconsistency between these two different housing mandates.

Zoning for 750 Units vs. 750 Units being built

It has been mentioned repeatedly in informational programs and FAQs about the Draft Guidelines that the Commonwealth is only requiring that the zoning be created, not that the units be built. We consider this disingenuous. Groton is known as a desirable place to live, and as such, housing prices are higher than average, and have increased dramatically during the pandemic. If Groton creates Zoning to allow 15 units per acre by right, it seems very likely to us that developers will immediately begin construction of this housing, and will strive to build it as fast and as dense as they can, in order to capitalize on the current high-price market. The Town will have no ability to restrict or delay the construction. While these homes will certainly be more modest than many in Groton, they will still likely be sold at the high end of the price range. Even if it took ten years to build all 750 units, the impact of this additional population would overwhelm our schools, water and sewer capacity, roads, and public safety infrastructure.

The Cost of Determining Buildable Land

Groton, whose native American name translates to 'swampy place', has numerous wetlands. We are also home to a wide swath of biodiversity, including numerous endangered species. These two factors, along with frequent non-perc-able soils, have served to limit or prevent development on many otherwise prime development locations in our town. It costs a good bit of money to do the professional testing and analyses necessary to determine if any given parcel of land in Groton is developable. It is unrealistic to expect that the Town can create a 50-acre district that is known to have the capacity to be developed at 15 units per acre, without any funding from the Commonwealth to pay for the testing and professional consultation needed.

Given these concerns, we believe it will be impossible to convince voters at Town Meeting to accept a Multi-Family District.

Suggested Revisions

We know that Groton is not the only small rural Adjacent Community with the same concerns that we have expressed here. We expect that many other towns may also find it impossible to pass the Zoning for a Multi-Family District as described in the Draft Guidelines. We respectfully suggest that the goals of creating more housing in MA are more likely to be met if DHCD revises the Draft Guidelines in the following ways:

- Create a new category of Adjacent Communities that have fewer than 15,000 residents and reduce the minimum number of new units required from 750 to 250 for towns in this new category.
- Allow towns in this new category to determine the appropriate parcel size for a By-Right Multi-Family District of 250 units that is in keeping with the character of their town.
- Require that 25% of the required units be Affordable, for all towns that adopt the Multi-Family District Zoning, not just towns under 15,000 population. (This is in keeping with the requirements of Chapter 40-B, which is the only way that developers can currently build at higher density than local zoning allows. We anticipate that Developers would prefer to build in this Multi-Family District, even with a 25% Affordable Requirement, because they would not be held to limits on their profits as they are under Chapter 40-B.)
- Allow all towns, if they wish, to enact provisions to spread the buildout of housing units over a period of ten years.
- Provide some funding for the due diligence needed to determine if a parcel of land is buildable and/or for some of the infrastructure improvements that will be needed to support the addition of housing and population that a By-Right Multi-Family District will require.

Thank you for considering these suggestions. We would be happy to answer questions or to work with you on making revisions to the Guidelines. We look forward to seeing the final guidelines.

Respectfully,