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DATE: Revised November 15, 2024
TO: Board of Directors
FROM: Jason Palitsch, Executive Director
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495/MetroWest Housing Committee Co-Chairs
RE: REVISED DRAFT: Our Vision and Priorities for Housing in 495/MetroWest

NOTE: *This document is being presented to the Board of Directors for review, discussion, and potential action at its December 4th, 2024 meeting; it has not yet been acted upon by the Board, and at this time does not represent the organization's formal position.*

This document has been revised since its original publication on June 10th, and again following the Board of Directors meeting held on October 9th. Revisions and additions made since October 9th are indicated here in Track Changes.

The 495/MetroWest Partnership's 2022-2027 Strategic Plan calls on the organization to identify a regional strategy to increase housing diversity, including affordable and workforce housing (Goal 4). The two chief objectives identified under this goal are to identify where there is regional consensus on increasing affordable and workforce housing, and help to strengthen that consensus; and further, to advocate for resources to assist municipalities in developing diverse housing.

The Housing Committee of the 495/MetroWest Partnership had previously met to consider this key question in two formats:

- June 2023: Reviewing the housing recommendations in the 2018 Suburban Edge Community Commission (SECC) report, and discussing how to operationalize the areas where the Partnership can make a meaningful impact at this time. The SECC was established by the Legislature in 2015 to examine the development challenges facing suburban edge communities in the 495/MetroWest region and determine how the Commonwealth's programs and initiatives can address their needs. One of the key topics addressed by the Commission was housing. Participants considered where reasonable progress had been made, where such progress had not occurred, and which components were no longer relevant.
- November 2023: Hosting the state's first Secretary of Housing and Livable Communities, Ed Augustus, to present on the administration's approach to the creation of additional housing units, including the administration's proposed Housing Bond Bill.

Additionally, input on housing concerns has been regularly sought through the Partnership's Planning and Economic Development Working Group (PEDWG), a monthly forum in which planning and economic

development officers from each of our 36 municipalities discuss and collaborate on common issues of relevance impacting communities and economic development in our region.

Housing Profile in 495/MetroWest Today

- The predominant housing typology in MetroWest is the detached single-family home, representing 65% of the region's housing stock. When including attached single-family homes, this rate climbs to 72%.
- There is less housing availability in 495/MetroWest as compared with the State, with a significantly lower vacancy rate (3.9% for 495/MetroWest versus 8.6% for the state).
- 75% of housing stock in the region is owner-occupied.
- Despite being a comparatively high-income area, the percentage of renters in 495/MetroWest who are cost burdened is close to the state rate, being only 2% lower.

Our Vision for Housing in 495/MetroWest

The Vision Statement of the 495/MetroWest Partnership is that is that “the 495/MetroWest region will enjoy sustainable economic growth, well-stewarded natural and built resources, and diverse transportation and housing choices. Together, these assets make our region a desirable place for all to live and work.” Regarding housing, the 495/MetroWest Partnership believes:

- Available, affordable, accessible, and diverse housing options within the region are essential to supporting continued economic growth. At present, there is an insufficient number of housing units in Massachusetts, which represents a threat to the economic vitality of both the state and the 495/MetroWest region. More housing units, both across the state and within our region, are necessary to support economic growth. More affordable and diverse housing options create benefits for all stakeholders, from younger workers and families looking to get their start in our region, to seniors looking to downsize while remaining in their home communities.
- The Commonwealth has set a necessary and ambitious goal regarding the production of new housing units statewide; the Commonwealth must strive to properly resource municipalities to create and accommodate this growth.
- Water and sewer infrastructure upgrades and improvements will be necessary to achieve substantial additional housing production; this topic should receive particular attention and investment.
- Carrying out the action steps identified in the 495/MetroWest Partnership's 2023 *Vision and Priorities* statements on the three transportation topics of Roadways, Commuter Rail, and Regional Transit Authority service are essential to properly supporting growth. Robust, reliable transportation infrastructure is necessary to support new housing.
- The creation of additional housing units does not occur in a vacuum; added housing units may further tax a community's municipal infrastructure and services, as well as impact traffic. These concerns are real and valid; however, these concerns should be addressed in tandem with the goal of creating additional housing units, as opposed to merely being utilized as a barrier to housing growth.
- While additional units overall are needed to address the state's housing shortage, greater diversity of housing types is necessary to meet regional workforce needs. The housing stock in

495/MetroWest consists mostly of single-family homes; the region will benefit from the creation of additional multifamily housing units, as well as workforce housing, including “starter homes” of smaller size and lower price points.

- Increased housing costs correlate to increases in other costs of living indicators over time.
- All communities should play an active role in helping to address the housing crisis.
- Greater effort should be expended by all stakeholders - including but not limited to the Commonwealth, municipalities, and business leaders - to engage and educate the public about the causes and impacts of the housing shortage, including connecting local opposition to individual project proposals with the overall crisis. Further engagement by the business community is essential to effective public communication about the impacts of the housing crisis.
- Development of additional housing units should prioritize redevelopment of parcels previously utilized for other purposes, including redevelopment of dated or defunct office and commercial spaces, to preserve open space and minimize impact on natural resources.
- The Partnership encourages communities to pursue Housing Production Plans consistent with other important local planning efforts, such as those focused on infrastructure improvements, transportation systems, and climate vulnerability. New development should strive for climate resiliency, particularly in the context of flooding and heat.

Affordable Homes Act

The 495/MetroWest Partnership supports several important policy changes implemented via the *Affordable Homes Act*, signed into law on August 6th, 2024, including:

- The requirement that accessory dwelling units (ADUs) be permitted as-of-right in single family zoning districts.
- The creation of a new tax credit to incentivize production of homeownership for first-time home buyers earning up to 120% of AMI; expanded financial support to programs aimed at supporting the creation of Middle-Income housing is essential in 495/MetroWest.
- Requiring the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities to prepare a statewide housing plan every 5 years, conducting regional outreach in the process of crafting such a plan.

Our Housing Priorities

The 495/MetroWest Partnership supports the following policy initiatives regarding the creation of additional housing units:

- Supporting the development of multi-family housing, by right, in the immediate vicinity of MBTA commuter rail stations, shopping, entertainment, and other business and commercial entities, with reasonable flexibility provided to communities regarding allowable number of units proportional to municipal population.
- Encouraging the use of inclusionary zoning practices that balance affordable and market-rate housing development to ensure both are built in residential developments and subdivisions.

- Supporting continued investment in the state’s HousingWorks Infrastructure Program, a grant program available to municipalities and other public entities for a variety of infrastructure related activities to support housing development. This grant program awards funds based on the project’s nexus with housing, transportation, infrastructure, and community development needs. It is essential that the Commonwealth support cities and towns in upgrading infrastructure to support increased housing capacity. This builds on the “Circuit Breaker” concept identified in the 2018 SECC report.
- Increased investment in water and sewer infrastructure is necessary to support housing growth; those investments should consider regional equity.
- Legislation to create formula-based funding through bonding to support cities and towns in conducting regular maintenance and improvements to water and sewer infrastructure, such as the approach taken by House Bill 852 in the 2023-2024 Legislative session *An Act Relative to Municipal Assistance for Clean Water and Economic Development Infrastructure*. Predictable, formula-based funding supporting all municipalities is needed alongside competitive funding opportunities.
- Recognizing that many sites across the region are contaminated, and that redevelopment of these sites is a critical strategy both for protecting our environment and increasing affordable and market rate housing production, the Partnership supports the Brownfields Tax Credit’s applicability to efforts that engage in environmental cleanup of contaminated sites and the redevelopment of those sites.
- State investment and regulatory action, as needed, to support innovative water re-use solutions.
- Continued state investment in financing vehicles to support accelerating the development of mixed-income and workforce housing production projects through the provision of low-cost capital, such as the Residential Production Momentum Fund.
- Continued and consistent state assistance to upgrade, expand, and improve the state’s public housing stock, such as the Public Housing Capital Fund to support the repair, rehabilitation, and modernization of public housing units.
- Continued investment in the state’s Public Housing Mixed-Income Community Demonstration Program, which provides planning and pre-development funding to Local Housing Authorities interested in partnering with a developer to pursue mixed-income redevelopment of their state-aided public housing portfolio.
- Robust support of the Chapter 40R Smart Growth Overlay District program, advocating for updates to the program where necessary to support and encourage further adoption.
- Amending Title 5 of the Massachusetts environmental code to increase the 10,000-gallon-per-day wastewater limit per development on conventional, locally regulated septic systems not served by public sewers. As reported by the Massachusetts Housing Partnership, the current restriction limits such developments to approximately 90 bedrooms or less; relaxing the limit with reasonable monitoring in place can allow for the creation of additional units that can be adequately served by such systems. Specific supports to cities and towns without sewer or with severely constrained sewer capacity; rezoning alone will not create additional housing units in municipalities without adequate sewer. Title 5 septic regulations should be reviewed, and adjustments should be considered to support additional housing capacity with appropriate protections for health and the environment.
- Requiring that all state-subsidized or state-certified affordable housing units be listed online and have applications managed through the new online system.

- Making permanent temporary processes put into place as part of the *Affordable Homes Act* to support the efficient disposition of state-owned land for the purpose of creating additional housing; this process should also preserve open space. Specifically, requiring EOHLC and DCAMM to regularly review government-controlled property suitable for housing and open space. Where parcels are suitable for housing, investing state funds to make such properties ready for development by covering the cost of demolishing obsolete structures or conducting environmental remediation activities. The Partnership further supports the reuse of federal and municipal parcels, exclusive of open space, for housing where appropriate.
- Supporting state investment in repurposing underutilized residence halls at state higher educational institutions to provide affordable housing options, including for faculty and staff.
- Supporting the adoption of “Starter Home Zoning” under Chapter 40Y, intended to incentivize overlay zoning districts that permit the development of smaller homes on smaller lots, which would ideally enter the market at more affordable price points. If this program continues to see limited adoption, it should be revisited by the Legislature for further improvement.
- A state-level public education effort, which engages the business community, to create public-facing communications with the general public about the impacts of the housing crisis, and the deleterious effect intense local opposition can have on the state’s economy and on cost of living. Individual municipalities may lack the resources to persuade an oppositional public on the merits of rezoning for the creation of more dense housing; support from the Commonwealth and the business community is essential in this regard.
- Encouraging a robust discussion among stakeholders on updating 40B to ensure it is an effective vehicle to encourage thoughtful housing growth.

The 495/MetroWest Partnership will advocate to partners in government at the state and federal level to adopt laws and regulations consistent with the approaches outlined above, and encourage our cities and towns to be proactive participants in carrying out these aims.