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Housing Production Pitched As Economic Imperative At Hearing

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By 2040, Massachusetts will need about half a million additional residential units, analysts told lawmakers Tuesday as they advocated for increased housing production to go along with the state's growing economy.

Metropolitan Area Planning Council assistant data services director Tim Reardon said most of this housing demand will be in urban areas, and two-thirds of it will be for multi-family housing, a type of development limited or discouraged in much of the state.

About one-third of the state's 351 cities and towns do not allow multifamily housing, and more than half have not permitted any project larger than five units in the past decade, according to the Citizens' Housing and Planning Association.

The Joint Committee on Housing heard testimony Tuesday on a bill sponsored by committee co-chairs Rep. Kevin Honan and Sen. Linda Dorcea Forry that looks to change those numbers, in part by requiring all zoning ordinances and bylaws to include districts where multifamily homes are allowed by right. The bill would also call for cluster developments to be permitted with planning board approval.

Undersecretary of Housing and Community Development Chrystal Kornegay said during the hearing that the zoning laws of many communities do not reflect the way people live, as preferences shift toward smaller households.

"Massachusetts has a housing affordability problem because Massachusetts has a housing supply problem," she said. "We don't build nearly enough housing to keep up with demand, and when we do, it's often the wrong type, and it's often in the wrong place."

Honan said during the hearing that the committee expects there to be "some resistance" to the bill from municipalities, the level of which members are working to evaluate.

The bill includes provisions designed to allay concerns typically expressed by municipal officials and suburban residents in the face of proposed apartment construction, including an allocation of additional state funding to cover the costs of educating children moving into the multifamily districts or cluster developments.

Committee members also raised the issues of how increased traffic and congestion could affect their districts, as well as potential impacts from septic systems in communities that rely on well water.

"Another problem is, we don't have a lot of open space left," said Rep. David Rogers, a north Cambridge Democrat. "Generally I salute the idea that we need more housing, housing of all ranges, that's affordable,

certainly, but there is a tension here.”

Proponents of the bill praised an increase in multifamily housing as a key economic factor, with housing costs less expensive in many of the states that compete with Massachusetts in the innovation industry and other sectors.

“If we want to attract and retain new workers, we need to create housing units for them to live in,” Reardon said.

Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance Executive Director Andre Leroux said one feature that would help attract younger workers is walkable neighborhoods where cars aren’t required.

“We need to figure out how to retrofit many of our communities, particularly in the suburbs, so that we could do a better job attracting our workers.”

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