

How-To Guide: **Architects in City Policy**



This guide empowers architects to understand and navigate the **MBTA Communities Act**, a significant policy shaping Massachusetts' housing landscape. In this How-To Guide you will be given a roadmap to navigate the MBTA Communities Act as an architect, a resident, and an advocate.

In this guide you'll learn:

- What the MBTA Communities Act entails
- The Act's significance and potential impacts
- Common concerns about the Act and its implementation
- Architects' unique advocacy roles
- Practical approaches for engaging in local policy processes

What is the **MBTA Communities Act?**

Adopted in January 2021, the **Multi-Family Zoning Requirements for MBTA Communities Act** ([Section 3A of MGL c.40A](#)), mandates that 177 cities and towns in Massachusetts establish **at least one zoning district** of reasonable size where **multifamily housing is permitted by right**.

Purpose & Impact

1. **Increase Housing Supply:** By allowing multifamily housing near transit, the Act aims to alleviate the housing shortage in Massachusetts.
2. **Promote Smart Growth:** The focus on transit-oriented development encourages sustainable growth patterns and reduces vehicle dependency.
3. **Enhance Economic Opportunities:** More housing options can attract more diverse populations, which can stimulate local economies.

Read the Guidelines:

[Multi-Family Zoning Requirement for MBTA Communities](#)

Key Facts

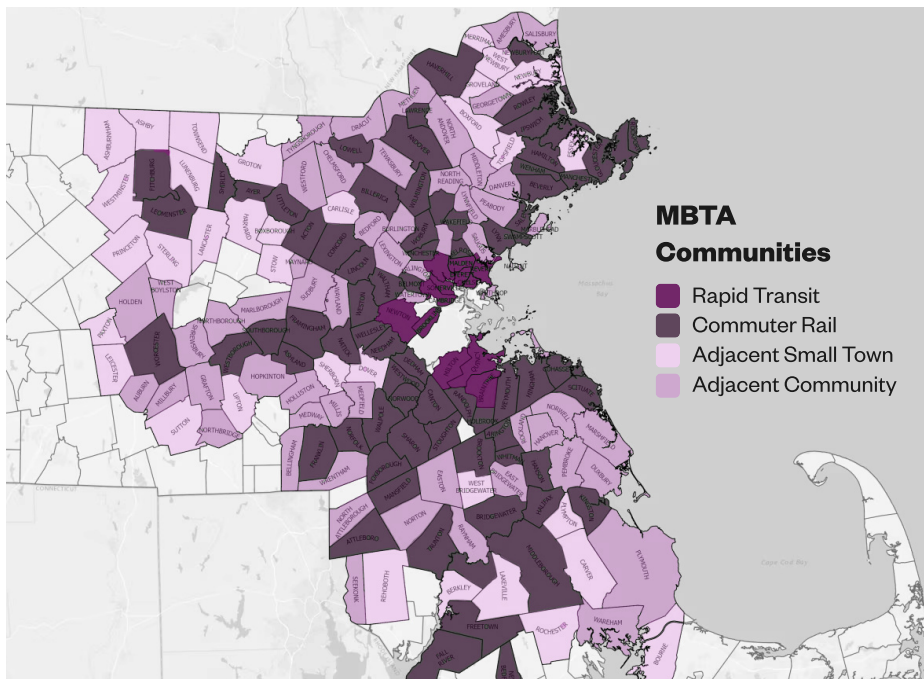
- Affects **177 communities** in Massachusetts
- Mandates at least **one multifamily housing zoning district** per community
- Minimum density: **15 units/acre**
- Focus on **transit-oriented development**
- Expected **20,000-40,000 new units** over **two decades**
- Past compliance: **12 communities** required to submit in 2023
- Pending compliance timeline: **December 31, 2024** for majority of remaining communities
- Extended compliance timeline: **December 31, 2025** for smaller adjacent communities

Where are **MBTA Communities?**

177 MBTA communities are subject to the new requirements of the Zoning Act:

- **14 cities and towns** that **initially hosted MBTA** service;
- **51 cities and towns** that also **host MBTA service but joined later**;
- "Served communities" that **abut a city or town** that hosts MBTA service; or
- A municipality that has been **recently added to the MBTA**.

While served by the MBTA, **Boston is exempt** from the Zoning Act.



What are people saying about the **MBTA Communities Act?**

Support

Addressing housing crisis: Many recognize the need for state action to address the severe housing shortage and affordability issues.

Economic benefits: Increased housing options could help retain young professionals and support economic growth in the state.

Transit-oriented development: The Act promotes housing near public transit, which can reduce car dependency and support sustainable growth.

Increased housing options: The law could provide more diverse housing choices for a diversifying region.

Regional approach: Supporters appreciate that the Act requires multiple communities to contribute to solving the housing crisis, rather than placing the burden on a few cities.

Opposition

Loss of local control: Many residents feel the Act infringes on traditional local authority over zoning and planning decisions.

Concerns on architectural characteristics: There are fears that new developments could alter the existing architectural character of these suburbs.

Infrastructure strain: Worries exist about whether current infrastructure (roads, schools, utilities) can support increased population density.

Traffic and congestion: Some residents are concerned about potential increases in traffic and congestion in their communities.

Resistance to change: There's a general reluctance to alter communities that have remained relatively unchanged for many years.

As an architect...

What expertise can I offer?

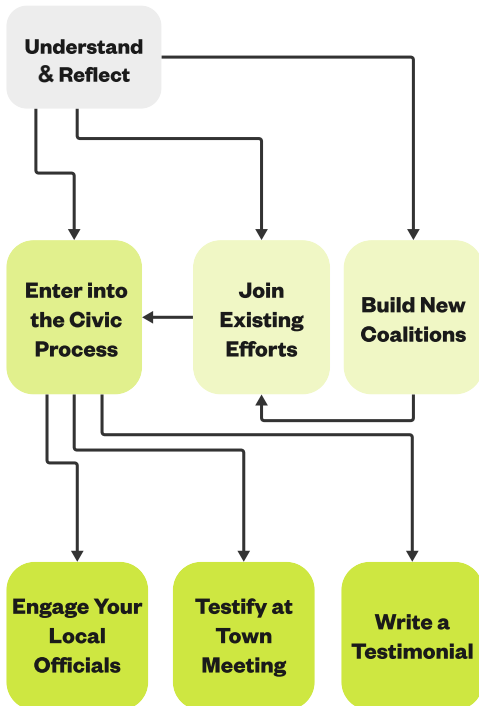
Beyond providing perspective as a **resident** and/or **local professional**, architects offer unique technical expertise that is invaluable to municipal advocacy and decision-making processes, including the ability to demonstrate:

- **Visualization skills** that can help communities understand what 15 units per acre looks like, addressing concerns about density and community character.
- **Thoughtful design and site planning** that integrates multifamily housing into existing neighborhoods, mitigating worries about traffic, parking, and preservation of open spaces.
- **Knowledge of sustainable design practices** that illustrate how multifamily developments can be more environmentally friendly than existing older buildings.
- **Creative solutions for adaptive reuse**, that can preserve historic structures while meeting the law's requirements.
- **Distilling complex zoning requirements and building codes** in accessible ways that can dispel myths and misconceptions about multifamily housing.
- **Thoughtful community engagement strategies** that can be instrumental in outreach efforts, facilitating dialogue between developers, residents, and municipal officials.

As a resident...

What are my channels for advocacy?

Advocacy, which simply means public support of a certain policy, can be pursued in different avenues. Below are a few examples of how to begin and continue various advocacy efforts.



Learn

Educate yourself on the MBTA Communities Act. Understand its impact on your town and your work. Identify your unique architectural expertise. Listen to community leaders, residents, and officials. Research town websites, local news, and attend meetings to grasp diverse perspectives on the Act's potential benefits and challenges.

Mobilize

Decide whether to initiate or join existing advocacy efforts. Connect with like-minded individuals to form coalitions. Create and share resources. Co-author articles or editorials. Offer your architectural expertise to inform their understanding of the Act's implications.

Participate

Engage with city councilors and officials to build relationships. Submit written testimonials highlighting architectural insights on zoning, design practices, and community impact. When testifying at meetings, blend expertise with resident perspective. Focus on key issues, visualize proposals, address concerns about density and character. Clearly state your stance, offer assistance, and end with a specific recommendation.

As an advocate...

Where can I find resources?

Learn

MBTA Zoning 101

- [Final 3A Guidelines](#) and [3A Compliance Model](#)
- [Multi-Family Zoning Requirement for MBTA Communities](#)
- [MHP 3A Webinar Series](#)
- [TOD Research Brief](#)
- [CHAPA Resource Hub](#)
- [Upzone Update](#)

Mapping + Data Tools

- [DataTown](#)
- [Residency](#)
- [MAPC Zoning Atlas](#)
- [Redlining Maps; Mapping Inequality](#)
- [Transit-Oriented Development Explorer](#)
- [MassMapper](#)
- [Density Visualizations](#)

Mobilize

Key Topics

- [Fair Housing and Equity Assessment for Metro Boston](#)
- [Household Carbon Footprints by Zip Code](#)

Coalition Building

- [Eight Step Guide to Coalition Building](#)
- [Strength in Numbers](#)

Participate

- **Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP)**
[MBTA Communities Resource Guide](#)
- **Citizens' Housing & Planning Association (CHAPA)**
[Template for Community Use](#)
[Community Engagement 101](#)
- **American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)**
[Letters to the Editor: How To Write Them and Why They Work](#)

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Write a Testimonial

- Offer key resources that can be implemented/be a barrier to the policy.
- Provide expert information on how zoning policies can be a solution to community challenges (permitting processes, construction time/cost, etc).
- Share the importance of building design when it comes to character, accessibility, sustainability, resiliency, and the health of those who reside in them.

Testify at Town Meetings

- As part of your 2 minute testimony, speak from what you know and value.
- Keep your comments to high level issues/recommendations.
- Offer your assistance and expertise to the city, and end with your request.

Engage your Local Officials

- Identify a board or city council member to connect with based on common ground, initiatives, and roles.
- Use the proper channels of communication, whether that is email, phone call, or a meeting.
- Continue to stay in touch! Advocacy can take time, remember to be patient yet persistent.

Navigating a Municipal Website

Look for Key Sections	Find Meeting Information	Find your City Council
These may say “Government,” “Town Hall,” or “Administration.” You may also find local events and meetings under “Community” or “Residents.”	Look for links labeled “Meeting Schedule,” “Agendas and Minutes,” “Calendar”, or “Town Meetings” to meeting dates, and how to sign up to testify.	This Act could come before your city council, select or planning board, etc. Find the "Contact Us" section to contact the town clerk for assistance if necessary.

Want to sit on a Board?
Become a community leader in your town planning!
Reach out to Miranda D’Oleo, Program Manager of Policy & Advocacy & BSA’s Committee on Professional Appointments at mdoleo@architects.org