

Draft Housing Production Plan Update - Open Comment

This form has been created to allow submission of comments on the Draft Housing Production Plan update.

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Written response:

I express a sincere thank you to the Housing Production Plan (sometimes hereafter referred to as the HPP) Advisory Committee and to The Director of Planning and Conservation, Anne Capra, for all their efforts and meetings to prepare the Draft Housing Production Plan. The outreach to engage the public has been prodigious.

I have read, examined, discussed, and reflected on the entire Draft Plan.

I am very pleased with almost all the recommendations and strategies of the Plan, and will address those with which I disagree below.

I start off with a question: We are in a "safe harbor" for how long if we build about 65-70 affordable housing units in two years? June did not have the answer to this question at the most recent Community Forum on the Housing Production Plan. I feel that a straightforward answer is needed so that the public is not lulled into a false sense of security that the town will be in a "safe harbor" if it builds 65-70 affordable housing units in two years.

The plan has a sense of urgency, panic, and finger pointing at South Hadley. "Crisis" is used many, many times in the plan. Housing is a national issue. It is not a fault or shortcoming of South Hadley alone.

Historically, housing has always been tight and expensive. It has never been plentiful and inexpensive.

The pandemic exacerbated the housing situation in many ways: Covid created a shortage of materials and thus higher prices to build housing units. Plus, the higher mortgage rates set by the Federal Reserve have limited the number of home buyers. Current homeowners stay in their homes because of the exceptionally high mortgage rates. So, presently there are both a shortage of available housing units and very high prices for any available units. This "tight" situation should compel neither the Housing Production Plan Advisory Committee nor the Planning Board to hurriedly propose new zoning by laws to add Affordable Housing to existing stock in town. Both Committees must proceed slowly and carefully, with abundant public input to avoid rash decisions that may rectify the limited housing supply and yet compromise and alter the character of existing neighborhoods.

Overall, the Housing Production Plan seems to be the product of the goals and aims of the Advisory Committee members, not of the public. The language is very, very technical, and cannot be understood or worked with by the average person, including myself, and I consider myself semi well versed in the language and vernacular of planning, zoning, and housing. I also feel that inviting public comment on a nearly 200-page document is a herculean task from which most citizens will shy. I also feel that the Planning Board will latch onto the recommendations in this Draft Plan and propose zoning by laws which will be detrimental to the town and to established neighborhoods. Before the Planning Board proposes any new zoning by laws, they must pursue considerable, far-reaching efforts to educate the public. This is necessary and crucial so that citizens feel empowered. In my opinion, many citizens, including myself, currently feel powerless and ignored due to unilateral actions by the Advisory Committee and certain members of the Planning Board.

The Housing Production Plan Advisor Committee is overrepresented with professionals, town officials, and Planning Board members. Two members of the Advisory Committee are also members of Redevelopment

Authority, one of whom is an architect. Two members of the Planning Board are also on the Advisory Committee, one of whom is an architect. There should be only one member from each of these boards to enable more everyday citizens to participate in the development of The Plan. Even the citizen at large is a professional architect.

I wish to comment specifically on Objective C: Encourage Incremental and Contextually sensitive “gentle density”.

This is a euphemism or a sugar coating of “congest the town and established neighborhoods further.” Let us call a spade a spade here. This kind of “misinformation”, white-washing, or minimizing disinformation was used by the several members of the Planning Board and certain supporters of Accessory Dwelling Units to snowball the public and Town Meeting Members to assure passage of the proposed zoning by law on “ADU’s” by referring to them as “in law suites, granny flats, and guest houses”. Such detached units are genuinely and truthfully full-sized houses with their own garages and other appendages that can be rented to anyone. If the public had been honestly and openly educated as to the factual nature of “ADU’s”, I doubt that this by law would have passed at Town Meeting.

The Plan recommends, “Allow more missing middle housing types by right in more zoning districts.”

Conversions of single-family homes to two family homes are already allowed by right with ADU’s, which are really not going to help the missing middle because this Plan says they are too expensive and only wealthy people will be able to afford to add them onto their houses.

This plan is supposed to be about Affordable Housing not strategies for other types of housing in town.

Triplexes, townhouses, and other multifamily structures and apartment buildings by right in established single family home districts are not “gentle density and contextually sensitive.” These are harsh, extreme, sledgehammer strategies that will negatively change the character of existing residential neighborhoods.

If a builder wants to build, he/she should have to go through a thorough vetting process that includes a special permit or a site plan review.

Abutters and entire neighborhoods are entitled to the right to question the developer about all aspects of the proposal and to express any and all reservations regarding such.

I am very displeased with Strategy 9: “Reflect historic patterns in zoning by aligning residential dimensional requirements (e.g. minimum lot size, setbacks, etc.) within the historic pattern of development.”

This again is a euphemism or sugar coating of “let us go back to smaller lots everywhere.” Most citizens could easily be swayed by the words “historic patterns of development”, but might then object when this term is explained to them.

About 50% of the houses built in town were built before zoning took effect. Many houses are on smaller, nonconforming lots because they are part of flexible development. Also, the Zoning Board of Appeals historically, (and before I was appointed as a member) habitually, and liberally granted variances (exceptions to zoning by laws) to create undersized lots, all of which were illegally granted as no hardships were ever documented. Therefore, there is no logic to the statement that, because about half the town’s houses occupy non-conforming sized lots, zoning by laws must be revised to return to legalizing undersized lots.

The current dimensional regulations for residential lots were passed by Town Meeting members for many reasons. These reasons cannot be glossed over and ignored.

To return to historical or old ways is regressive and detrimental to the town's residential areas because current homeowners would now have a house built next to them when they knew all along that a house could never be built on the adjoining undersized nonconforming parcel

There is no guarantee that smaller, market rate or Affordable houses will be built on these small lots. Developers will want to extract maximum profits from any building project in which they engage.

The current Master Plan Update did not mention legalizing undersized, nonconforming sized lots or decreasing residential lot dimensions. I was a member of the Master Plan Advisory Committee for the current Master Plan Update. I and other members of this committee, who raised concerns about such language, were emphatically and heartfully assured by the Director of Planning and Conservation, Anne Capra, that any language that could possibly be construed as recommending legalizing undersized nonconforming would not be included in the updated plan.

Moreover, these small, undersized "pocket parks" in established neighborhoods were deemed essential to offsetting climate change in a series of emergency preparedness workshops held at the town hall and conducted by Anne Capra when she was the Director of Conservation. I attended several of these workshops and learned the following:

These small parcels harbor greenery, vegetation and trees to offset the increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

These small parcels offer shade.

They are a breathing space in neighborhoods.

They are sponges to soak up water during flooding and storms.

They are home to wildlife and small animals.

I cannot believe that the Master Plan Update is being contradicted, and that the teachings from these Emergency Preparedness Seminars are being ignored by the Housing Production Plan Advisory Committee.

In sum, The HPP needs to focus strictly on Affordable Housing and getting the town into permanent "safe harbor" status. That is the purview of the Advisory Committee. They should not stray from it.

South Hadley already has two 40R zoned districts when most communities in Massachusetts do not even have one! Both the he Advisory Committee and the Planning Board should focus all their efforts and energies on these areas rather than compromising and chopping up established neighborhoods, which will result in almost no new Affordable Housing or units for the "Missing Middle." The town has already spent most or all of the incentive pay that it received for the Falls Smart Growth District on administrative costs for the Redevelopment Authority which right now is inactive and out of funds. How can the town justify spending these funds and yet ignoring the Falls 40R District as a prime location for Affordable Housing?

Considerable infrastructure, sidewalk, roadway and bike lane improvements have been made to accommodate Affordable Housing at the Woodlawn Plaza.

Let us put our efforts where they matter most and where the town has spent considerable time and effort to

make Affordable Housing available and relatively inexpensive.

I feel disempowered and disenfranchised by the Housing Production Plan's Advisory Committee recommendations that I have addressed in my commentary.

I am impressed by and in favor of most of the other recommendations, but ask the question, "Who is going to pay for all these strategies to bring South Hadley to the state mandated quota for Affordable Housing?" Developers want "top dollar" for any project in which they engage, so there must be highly enticing financial incentives for developers to take on units that will involve considerable paperwork, state funding, and other headaches.

Zoning By laws can have unforeseen, unfavorable consequences, if such proposals are not thoroughly vetted and analyzed. A prime example is a past effort to make condominium developments happen in South Hadley. The Planning Board proposed and Town Meeting passed a by law to make such possible, without limiting the number of condominiums that could be built on a parcel of land. The bylaw permitted a developer to place as many units as he/she wanted just about anywhere in town, based only on a Special Permit, which at that time, had only four requirements that were so vague and permissive, that just about anything could be built anywhere in town.

Rivercrest on Ferry Street is an example of the appalling consequences of a well-intended by law. On a tract of land, with considerable environmental constraints, the zoning permitted 4 single family homes. The developer proposed 30 condominiums under the new by law, and ended up with 29, even under the 12 expanded Special Permit requirements, after threatening the town with 60 units under a 40B Comprehensive Permit.

So, let us proceed with caution, common sense, and many, many neighborhood meetings before any new by laws are proposed.

Even if every square inch of South Hadley were to be developed with Affordable and "Missing Middle" Housing, the national and worldwide lack of housing would still continue. South Hadley can do its part to gradually, carefully, with full sensitivity to citizen concerns and respect for established neighborhoods, work towards the 10% goal of Affordable Housing. South Hadley can eventually reach the 10% quota and still preserve its existing residential neighborhoods, current zoning dimensional requirements, and all else that makes our town a lovely place to live.

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