



## THE 'D' WORD

*For years, the smart growth movement has struggled to find a way to stem the exodus of population further and further outside of Greater Boston's urban core. Density has become the central part of that debate. The argument for density is simple: Concentrating the region's population at key centers would enliven the civic and economic life and achieve desperately needed economic and environmental efficiencies. But skeptics wonder if the "urban village" that serves as a model for density and smart growth might be a thing of the past, eclipsed by the imperatives of the modern age of affluence and mobility.*

Density has become the centerpiece of a growing debate about regional sprawl in Greater Boston. Density is a basic, if sometimes elusive, part of the strategy for preventing business and residential population from moving further and further from the urban core. By concentrating population at key locations – near neighborhood business districts, employment centers, universities and hospitals, cultural centers, and transit stations – the region could both increase the opportunities for housing development and provide adequate markets for local businesses, transit, and public services.

But density is a hard sell in many communities. The planning profession has embraced density with evocations of the classic "urban village" – a tightknit community with a diversity of businesses, social networks, populations – but the populations of Greater Boston and other regions have moved further and further from the urban cores. The reasons for the urban exodus are many and varied. The so-called "crabgrass frontier" beckons with the promise of home ownership, good schools, low crime rates, and easy auto commutes. Many people simply do not like city living. From the republic's early days to the present, Americans have distrusted and feared city living and sought refuge in the countryside and suburbs. Federal policies on transportation, housing, the military, universities, and energy – to name just a few issues – have encouraged the migration from the city to the hinterlands.

Planners have become increasingly vocal about the need to bring density back to metropolitan growth. In September 2003, the Boston Society of Architects hosted a national conference entitled "Density: Myth and Reality" extolling the virtues and necessity of density to combat sprawl and promote smart growth. The BSA and the Rappaport Institute for Greater

Boston, based at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, took up the question again at a January 2004 conference entitled "The 'D' Word." The BSA-Rappaport event brought together leading academic experts, planners, policymakers, architects, and civic activists. After a review of the BSA's 2003 conference, two panels explored the design and policy challenges inherent in fostering density in an age of sprawl and suburbanization.

The review of the BSA conference was provided by David Dixon, the past president of the BSA and a planner with Goody Clancy Associates, and Randy Jones, the chair of design committee for the BSA and a principal for The Payne Jones Group.

The design panel consisted of Roger Cassin, a principal of the Cassin Winn Development Group; David Dixon; David Lee, principal of Stull and Lee and a longtime planner in Boston; David Parish, vice president of the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston; William Rawn, principal of William Rawn Associates; George Thrush, director of the architecture program at Northeastern University; and Alfred Wojciechowski, a principal of Childs Bertman Tseckares, Inc. The policy panel consisted of Barry Bluestone, director of the Center for Urban and Regional Policy at Northeastern University; Kurt Gaertner, director of Growth Planning at the state's the Executive Office for Environmental Affairs; Edward Moscovitch of Cape Ann Economics; Hubert Murray, an independent architect; Stephanie Pollack, vice president of the Conservation Law Foundation; Alden Raine, vice president of DMJM Harris and the former director of the Massachusetts Port Authority; and Jay Wickersham, an environmental and land-use lawyer, adjunct faculty at Harvard Design School, and former director of the Massachusetts Environmental Protection Agency.

Both panels were moderated by Charles Euchner, the executive director of the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston.

## AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME?

**Charles Euchner:** Density has become a religion among certain people, and a kind of the devil's religion to others. It's great to have a religion, it's great to have firm beliefs, and it's great to sing hymns and participate in all the other things that go along attending church. But we're at a moment in our discussions about density and smart growth when we need to do some reality checks. I believe in density myself. It's a really important way for us to think about building on the strengths of our cities, taking advantage of grayfields, protecting the environment, providing greater transportation choices, and attending to all the other things that are part of our bounden duty in this religion.

But when you show up at church and simply sing the same hymns and read the same passages, it might not do enough to move the discussion forward. We need to ground the discussion of density in some particulars. Is density possible in early 21st century America – and, in particular, early 21st century Greater Boston? I think it's mostly an open question. I believe it can work, but I think it's going to take a lot more smarts, a lot more willingness to face tough facts and tough realities, than perhaps we've demonstrated so far.

The conditions which led to the kind of dense mixed communities that we all celebrate have for the most part passed us by. That doesn't mean that there aren't new conditions and

new possibilities for creating density in a new way – and for enhancing the density that has already been embedded into our urban and regional environments. But we need to take a cold, hard, sober look at some of the issues behind density and what the barriers to density might be so that we can go about it a lot smarter than we have so far.

**David Dixon:** In the late 1980s the word “urban” was still a very negative term. It was assumed that urban crime that was worse than crime, urban crowding that was worse than crowding, and urban blight that was worse than blight. The time has come to really confront density as an issue and portray it as something that can be positive – just as urban has now come to have positive connotations. When we were planning the conference four months ago, the thought was not that density was a religion, it was that *fear* of density was a religion – and that we needed to dispel the myths around density.

Charlie asked whether is density is possible. One of the things we became convinced about as we planned the conference is that it’s *essential* to have more density if we’re going to solve the pressing urban and social problems we face.

Here are a few facts. Paris is four times as dense as Boston. The Commonwealth announced that undeveloped land in Massachusetts had dropped 50 percent since 1970. *The Washington Post* said tree cover was disappearing in the Washington, D.C., area. The Urban Land Institute announced that, in contrast with the situation as recently as five or six years ago, when you had a bell curve, the demographics of our region now look like a flat line. Meaning at any point on that curve, from 25 to 75 years of age, there’s roughly the same demand for housing. That creates unprecedented opportunities to reshape and rethink the way we live.

To create alternatives to sprawl, to expand affordable housing, fund new transportation options, and enhance economic competitiveness – in part because we live in an era of declining public resources – we have to use private resources. Density is often what brings private resources to bear to solve these problems.

We can’t solve a wide range of problems without being able to build more densely than we have tried to for the last 50 years. Fear of density – and this is where we reverse the religion equation – is ironic, it’s dangerous, and it’s counterproductive. It’s ironic because our cities have shrunk. The cities that we remember as part of a golden age were denser, more crowded, and more lively places. Fear of density is counterproductive because if we want vital main streets, if we want walkable environments, it takes more households living near each other than it did in 1950.

There are a number of myths about density, which often represent the starting point of conversations.

The first myth is that density depletes open space. Congressman Michael Capuano said a conference sponsored by the Boston Society of Architects that he didn’t want Somerville’s open space used for housing. In fact, I challenge anybody here to be able to identify a park that got used for anything, let alone to create more density.

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The second myth is that density is ugly. But it doesn't have to be, at all. It's a matter of design, not density.

The third myth is that density hurts property values. In fact, new construction is almost always far more expensive than existing buildings, and adding density tends to enhance property values.

The fourth myth is that density is a source of gentrification. I think everyone in this room knows that the housing crisis and the affordability crisis we have here relates to all the units we haven't built, not the units that we have in the Boston region. In fact, our challenge is to find room to build more.

The fifth myth is that density causes traffic congestion. But it's clear that the sharp rise in per-capita auto ownership in Boston, up 40 percent in the last 10 years, has nothing to do with population growth in Boston. That the fact we drive 15 times as much has to do with the lack of options for compact living, for walkable communities – places where we can walk to work, walk to school, et cetera. It's not density that has created congestion, but the density we have failed to create.

**Randy Jones:** Let me discuss ten key points that we explored at the Boston Society of Architects conference on density in September 2003:

*Design:* Architects are really the ones who can bring us the vision for denser and more livable communities. The issue, as Roger Booth has said, is not architects doing buildings but really understanding the context of doing buildings.

*Numbers:* What does density look like? Eight to 12 units per acre, you'd call this a fairly compact single family unit. Fifteen to 25 units per acre is what you see at places like DuPont Circle in Washington, D.C. Moving up to 30 to 50 units per acre, you can achieve that with traditional towers we see in Kansas City or Rindge Towers or in Boston's South End.

*Historic preservation:* Massachusetts has a wonderful pattern of traditional cities and towns. But density is needed to provide the capital and incentives for going back into our historic centers and providing redevelopment.

*Development in Boston:* We all know we're paying dramatically higher costs in our single-family houses. High land values in Greater Boston pose a problem, but also an opportunity. We know development costs more. That challenges us to make the most of what we have. Building on turnpike air rights requires structured parking. But by the same token, you're creating dramatically higher land values. It's really a means of balancing economic growth and environmental protection.

*Affordability:* We're seeing a disappearance of public subsidy and public support, and we have to rely more on the high value markets that can really cross-subsidize and provide more affordable housing.

*Transportation:* This issue is part of the classic situation where different policy discussions are held in separate rooms. We have this unique opportunity to bring both of those pieces of the conversation together, to look for places where public transit can really support efficient land use. Governor Mitt Romney recently rolled out his new transit-oriented development program to connect development and transit issues.

*Economic competitiveness:* The Lincoln Land Institute has estimated that the public sector could save \$40 billion over 25 years in the Northeast by pursuing more compact develop-

ment.

*Sustainability:* The Office of Commonwealth Development has really laid the groundwork for making Massachusetts a more sustainable place. It's going to require greater density to achieve that, to reduce energy costs, do infill development to protect open space – and ultimately to unlock the gridlock that we're trending toward.

*Neighborhood revitalization:* It's going to take density to bring back neighborhoods and the associated services that go along with those.

*Race and class:* This is continuing to be a difficult issue. Recently, *The Boston Globe* talked about the of segregation that remains in Greater Boston. And it's really going to take greater density to expand housing options all over the region and address some of the problems of racial isolation.

**Courtney Miller:** I'm an architect in Arlington. The question I have concerns the disconnect between where the new employment is happening and where we want to put density – the Interstate 495 phenomenon. Why does the density discussion seem to be so focused around the Boston scene and not talking about how do we do density on a regional basis, with a multi-centered, multi-nodal kind of region? .....

**David Dixon:** It is fascinating to look at other regions – Houston, San Diego, Portland, and Seattle – where they are struggling, successfully, with regional approaches. But one of the real challenges we have is to bring more of our economy back into the core. In the 1990s, we built 5 or 6 million square feet in the core and 35 or 40 million outside, along Route 128 and Interstate 495. That never occurred before. In the previous booms, even in the 1980s, we still had something like 45 percent of our Class A office space in the core. We've lost that. We've exported much of our economy.

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We don't give the public sector the kinds of resources we used to for roads, schools, sewers, affordable housing, historic preservation. Increasingly, we rely on the private market. With such tight fiscal constraints, we need to understand that compact development is a lot less expensive than development in greenfields.

**Bryce Nesbitt:** I've worked mostly as a community activist. Who's preaching to the kind of people who come to the community meetings and speak against the very dense projects that we want? How do we reach out to those people? I see that as a very significant force. Every time a nice, dense project comes up for consideration, out come the neighborhood residents to oppose it. What strategies can we have to address those people?

**George Thrush:** Where we focus our efforts is extremely relevant. We have to get the urban house in order first and develop density in cities before we worry too much about achieving density in the larger region. It's more achievable. The land values are high enough that they can support denser development more easily. It's so expensive to promote density outside the urban core – for many reasons that have been raised already, like the cost of the infrastructure. Many of the images that we see of density are images of an urban village or a

town village. Well, the village does not provide enough density to support what we can do in the city. We need to talk not just about three or four stories, but sometimes something much bigger than that. I think we can achieve historic levels of density in this city if we talk about taller buildings, rather than just talk about villages.

**David Dixon:** The key is public education. Good planning is 90 percent public education and 10 percent writing a nice report and doing a PowerPoint presentation. It is really building understanding. Working in Cambridge neighborhoods that had declared a moratorium on development, we discovered that – when they came to understand what it took to animate the streets, put retail in Kendall Square, ease the housing shortage, and to put people in parks and pay for parks – residents embraced density.

**Curtis Davis:** The technical competence and the solutions exist – whether it's a financial, transportation, construction, even economic problem. But we have been woefully incompetent at communicating – selling people on this idea of density. I mean, we sold pet rocks to people in the 1970s. But we have been ineffective at selling good design.

We also need to focus on policy and power. As Charlie Euchner has argued, we need to connect planning with the idea of self-governing systems.

**Charles Euchner:** A self-governing system in planning would create the kind of foundation – infrastructure, housing, economic development in strategic locations, connected park systems and cultural attractions – where ordinary people would choose to live in more densely populated areas. One of the best explanations of self-governing systems comes from Steven Johnson's book *Emergence*. Johnson talks about different systems where unintelligent actors or phenomena take actions that add up to produce intelligent results. He looks at the brain, slime molds, computer programs, and of course cities. We have to think of ways to create the contexts where people's everyday decisions add up to more sustainable communities, with density where density is appropriate economically and socially.

## DEFINING DENSITY

**Stephanie Pollack:** There are several ways of understanding density. I was educated at MIT, where density is defined as mass divided by volume. In cities and regions, we define density in terms of housing units per acre. You can also measure density in number of children per classroom, and by that measure more is worse. You can measure density by number of cars trying to fit through an intersection. You can measure density the way the Trust for Public Land did when they looked at major American cities and their open space networks and ranked Boston near the top because we have more acres of park land per capita than most other cities. But if you measure density by square feet of development per acre, you come to the opposite conclusion, that having more acres of parkland per person dilutes our density.

**David Dixon:** The traffic that people experience, they associate it with what's nearby, but it's actually caused by what isn't nearby. Many of us have to do much more driving to make our lives work because of the density we haven't created. I worked with some community people in East Cambridge, and we had to explain to them that the 12 million square feet they

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didn't support there was the 12 million square feet that would be built elsewhere and really produce greater traffic congestion, not only regionally but also in Cambridge.

**Richard Dimino:** We have set up significant barriers of entry for density. When I look at a price tag of \$100 million to develop the Pritzker Property in the Fan Pier, I have to ask whether that is reasonable to build density in the South Boston waterfront. I would suggest that it's not. We all need to take a step back and look at how we're, in fact, relating our public investments and supporting density in a way that actually makes that economic investment more viable and that density more achievable. There are millions of dollars invested in that area in water quality, transportation, the public realm and open space. With some desire and some insight and vision, public infrastructure and investments to support density; meaning we built our mass transit system, we built a new central highway, et cetera. The core is a place where development and growth should take place.

**David Lee:** I'm glad to see that race and diversity is on Randy Jones's list, but I note that it's number 10. People aren't talking about race, class, income, and ethnicity. There are some examples where people are opposed to upper-end developments, but for the most part what people oppose is affordable housing. And I think we just have to confront that.

**Matt Frederick:** David Lee's question is why aren't minorities more involved. Who are the people for whom urbanism is most natural? It is, in many ways, the minority community – the poor, the homeless, immigrants, disenfranchised people. The problem is we are not empowering people who naturally want to make urbanism. So all we white people do is we sit around in these conferences and we try to ask ourselves, "By golly, how can we have density?" The answer is get rid of the controls, get rid of zoning, give power to minorities, to the poor, to the homeless, and simply let them build as they need on the empty lots that they need to build them on. And we need to get the heck out of the way.

**Michael Houck:** New Urbanism and Smart Growth advocates too often talk about protecting the environment outside of the city, but too often we write off urban areas from an environmental perspective – things like water quality, stream protection, wildlife habitat protection, and so forth. I fully agree we need more park land inside the city. But we also need a healthier ecosystem.

**David Dixon:** Certain historical factors created dense communities that no longer exist. There are also certain historical factors that created sprawl that don't exist, too. All of us have to remember that we paid for, in an era where we had a lot of public resources, a highway system and an infrastructure that supported sprawl, and we're not paying for that anymore.

We have just gone through what the Urban Land Institute has described as 40 years of a very unusual housing market where people with kids had more money than people with kids had ever had and made housing choices supported by subsidized sprawl. And that bubble is over. So we're only beginning to experience a whole new set of factors that are going to

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shape the way we live, and we have a chance to sort of get in front and provide leadership and help do that shaping.

**Wig Zamore:** There is a disconnect between transportation and design. Very few architects ever go to meetings of the Boston MPO – the Metropolitan Planning Organization. Can we get some kind of group going that marries good designers with transportation projects so that we can integrate future transportation infrastructure with design?

### OVERCOMING RESISTENCE

**James O’Connell:** I’m a planner with the National Parks Service. People say there have been notable projects turned down in the suburbs. The projects in Kingston, Holbrook, and other places were pretty large projects which scared people away. But there are a lot of communities interested in mixed-use development in their downtowns and see it as a way of revitalization – places like Norwood, Walpole, Canton, Natick, Framingham, and Wilmington. It’s a matter of scale. When you’re getting up to 300, 400, 500, 800 units, people get really scared. If you’re dealing with projects of 20, 50, 100 units, people are much more accepting. There are 40, 50 town centers in Eastern Massachusetts that are ready for some sort of mixed-use development.

**Charles Euchner:** Why is density stigmatized? Why do so many people hate density more than they hate sprawl? And do they have a point?

**David Parish:** I don’t think density is the issue. As Stephanie pointed out, density is simply a measurement. That what we’re really concerned with, I think, is how we build more vibrant communities. It’s not density *per se* that any of us are interested in pursuing, but more an issue of vibrancy.

We really have to understand who we are talking about when we talk about density. And a lot of it has to do with sort of a generational perspective. If you’re 18 years old and you’re looking for other 18-year-olds to have a good time with, Dover is not going to be your community of choice. But if you’re middle-aged with commitments, then something that’s a little bit quieter is more comforting. A very wise old man once told me that if you’re young or if you’re looking for somebody to have sex with, you live in the city. If you’ve already got somebody to have sex with, you live in the suburbs.

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**George Thrush:** One reason density is stigmatized has to do with the fact that density used to be associated with poverty. The baby boom generation moved to the suburbs as affluence allowed, and this movement was subsidized. That whole cluster of perceptions about density – that it’s just for poor cities – is not rational now. I think the core reason that

this stigmatization occurred is an historical artifact at this point. But we still live with that image, that association of density and poverty and blight.

**Hubert Murray:** The critique of Jacob Riis of the Lower East Side in the 1890s has had a

very powerful effect on the way we as a culture view density. And it's reinforced by the pictures of, say, Pruitt-Igoe, the public housing complex in St. Louis that had to be demolished. Reinforce that with the image of the huddled masses. We associate high density with disease, with crime, with poverty, with congestion. And of course with problems of race and class.

The statistics, however, show that it is not actually density that is the leading indicator of social problems. If you look at the tuberculosis statistics – for example, in Oakland, California – the key indicators are the new immigrants and poverty. Only lastly does the issue of high-density dwelling come into the equation. Similarly for crime, it's poverty that drives crime, it's the lack of social resources, the lack of job opportunities. It is not density, per se. In fact, when you think about Barcelona, which is the most favored city in Europe right now – everyone goes to Barcelona because Barcelona is the fun place to be – it has a density which is five times that of Boston. It's something like 44,000 people per square mile as opposed to Boston's 8,000. What does Barcelona offer? It offers job opportunities, cultural opportunities, social opportunities.

**William Rawn:** Let's talk about traffic and parking issue, which is always the reason people often give for being against density. We as planners and architects have to address that issue; despite Boston's great public transportation system, it doesn't serve most people, and most people want to have a car. We have to ask the question: How do you design these facilities that enable people to have cars? That applies whether you're talking about low-income people or high-income people. We have to come up with ways to defend the traffic that those cars generate.

**George Thrush:** Traffic is a huge issue. Why is density stigmatized? Because for most people, you say density, they hear congestion. And that's just another reason, it seems to me, why we should be pursuing density in cities where the infrastructure for transit already exists. When somebody was talking about the anxiety generated over an 800-unit development in an outlying suburb, well you can sort of understand. If there wasn't going to be significant infrastructure change as well, then the stop lights leading to that development would all be jammed up and people's commuting times would be screwed up.

One of the reasons density is stigmatized is because we're trying to pitch it as a catch-all solution in the South End and in Norton, as though these communities are the same thing. And they aren't at all. I'd just add, when it comes to traffic, there is a tendency of people to say that cars are not just maybe an irrational choice, they're sort of morally wrong – and that somehow we're going to turn the clock back on having cars. I don't think that's going to happen at all. I think car ownership is going to continue to rise.

The challenge to us is to design pedestrian-friendly environments that accommodate cars, that accommodate big-box retail, and that sort of stuff. If we imagine a kind of idealized past, I don't know, horse and buggy or something, that's not a very good model for the future.

**David Lee:** It's really important that we design for a balanced environment that includes cars as well as transit. I spend a lot of time in Vermont and I go over Mountain Gap Road to get to where I'm going, and I actually need an all-wheel drive. When we were working with

David Dixon and others on the air-rights study, there were some people who stood up and said, "Look, I don't mind using the trolley, but occasionally I got to go to BJ's and get some stuff. Or I got to take the hockey team to practice." It's unrealistic for us to dismiss that altogether.

**George Thrush:** I've participated in project after project where the analysis of traffic generated by the project turns out to be perceived as very great; and in fact when you look at the actual impact on people's lives, very minor. And if you think of the price people pay by looking at a project in a one-dimensional way, in terms of traffic as opposed to what it does for their main streets, what it does for their community's ability to pay for new schools, what it does for their ability to cover air rights, they pay a particularly big price.

**Charles Euchner:** Density is about having access to all the kinds of things that we want, right?

**Hubert Murray:** I spent my youth in a place where density was measured by the number of sheep per acre. Our density was roughly five sheep per acre. And the planning regulations were such that they actually planned so that you could not see another house from our front window. All you saw was bare moor land. Now, the reason this place was actually tolerable to live in was because there was a job opportunity. I got to work on the farm. There was educational opportunity because there was a school bus at the end of the road to take me to the school along with all the other farmers' sons and coal miners' sons, and that was three miles away. A traveling library came to every single house in the entire constituency. There was a food truck, there was a fish truck. All the services were provided and most of the people got a good education; most of the people had job opportunities - which eventually took them away from the area. But the fact is that we were aided in that emigration by a fabulous infrastructure at home.

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Now, that is the infrastructure that we seek in a high density situation in any city. And you have to ask, why do folks with multi-million dollar incomes, with all the choices in the world, why do they congregate in Manhattan? Because they have the opportunity not only to buy themselves a nice apartment with a view over the Hudson, but also to give their kids a good education. They're backed up by a good urban infrastructure. And it gives them choice and opportunity. I guess if there were any sort of contribution to the conversation, I would say that the issue is how to create a culture of choice and opportunity.

## DESIGNS FOR DENSITY

**Charles Euchner:** If we're going to make density happen, we have to be very conscious about it. The urbanism that happened in the United States at the early part of the 20th century

happened out of necessity. There was no other way to build communities where you could get access to things you needed access to, where you could get energy that you needed access to and so forth. For density to work now, we have to think it out, we have to plan it out, we have to make it happen, we can't just let it happen.

**Alfred Wojciechowski:** I really like the phrase "livable community" to describe what we're trying to create. If you take Hubert Murray's discussion of sheep farms, it was a livable community because goods and services were being brought to you. There was a delivery system. If you look at what we're referring to, density is where goods and services are immediately available too.

But on the flip side of services and products is serendipity. What makes a place really feel good? It's the sense of safety, you feel comfortable. And so you want to get out into the public realm. If we're going to be designing good dense communities, we need to focus on the public realm, the walkability to get to both the necessary services and also that opportunity for spontaneous engagement.

**Charles Euchner:** In his wonderful book *The Timeless Way of Building*, Christopher Alexander talks about what he calls the "quality without a name." It's the kind of delight and convenience and connection and beauty and efficiency and all those other things that get packed into a good place to live, whether you're talking about a house or a block or a neighborhood or a city or a region. He says that this combination of qualities is so ineffable that he can't name it. But I took to using an acronym and calling it QWAN. And I think that's really what we're looking for. We're looking for that QWAN that people will actively want and gravitate toward rather than something you want to kind of force people to accept because it's like spinach.

**George Thrush:** Whether you call it QWAN or something else, I think one has to be rational about this. Roger Cassin's development in simplistic terms had the tall tower, but it also had several blocks of the typical Boston six-story buildings surrounding it. By connecting tall buildings with a more familiar urban landscape, you are able to create the right kind of scale for the community.

**Charles Euchner:** So it creates continuity in the physical space of the area. That is critical to be able to get to the higher buildings if those are appropriate.

**David Dixon:** We got to be careful that it's not reduced to numbers. Because when you start talking about trip generation and about densities, it doesn't tell the story. We as a community are about to engage in a fundamental and very difficult debate about the Longwood Medical area. If we as a community aren't rational about it, we could choke off one of the really important engines for our own economic growth and development. Sometimes people are overly concerned about the height of buildings, but in fact tall buildings may produce no negative consequence for anyone. And in fact, when dispersion of that development may create far more traffic than concentration would.

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**David Lee:** On the question of what's good density and what's bad density, Duke Ellington once said there's no such thing as old music and new music, just good music and bad music. And I think to some extent that applies to density as well. One of the things that we have to address is that we're an awfully conservative city. You know, with anything over three stories, much less six, people seem to come out and rebel against it. And we really have to address that. I'm not suggesting you go in the middle of Commonwealth Avenue and put something up that's 25 stories, but there are places in this city that certainly could accommodate more height, and think the whole form of the city could be richer.

There are places like Vancouver, British Columbia, Chicago, New York, where high buildings and lower buildings make sense together. It is about design, it is about form, it is about the civic realm. But one of the things we have to admit is that our city is somewhere stuck in the 19th century. In a conversation with people under 40 years old, convened by the Boston Foundation, what one of the young people said to me was that nobody thinks about anything in Boston that happened since Paul Revere and the ride. And if you think about it, when people come to Boston, it is because they want to go on the Freedom Trail and they want to look at the old buildings. When's the last time anybody talked about coming to Boston for something that happened since 1925?

**Charles Euchner:** Where's our Bilbao? George Thrush has sketched out a concept for the Urban Ring, the circumferential transit system that we're dreaming about building in Greater Boston. And George's vision is that it's primarily a design project. If we can create the right design parameters along the corridor, and if we can create tall buildings where tall buildings help orient us and shorter buildings where they can create a human scale, then the whole area will have a greater legibility, it will bring in population, will populate the area, will give it a sense of place. And then transit has a chance.

**George Thrush:** We need to think of the Urban Ring transit project as an urban design project that has to do with the image of the city, like the high spine. The high spine was a corridor where Boston encouraged the construction of tall buildings, between the Financial District and the Prudential Building.

I don't know how many people in this room have seen a really amazing document – the 1930 Boston Transportation Plan. It's really fabulous because it captures a moment before purely quantitative measures ruled our planning process. The document fused an analysis of transportation issues with a concerns for the character of the built environment. The idea that urban design might serve as the generator for a vision that could then be followed is something I think that would advance the density conversation.

**Roger Cassin:** As a participant in the HOPE 6 project, we did the Mission Main redevelopment in Boston. And we demolished the old super blocks and brought back townhouses where we brought the streets back through the community. And everyone's happy and we're happy to declare victory there.

**David Lee:** In the HOPE 6 program, two things that were probably as important as design: mixing incomes and providing supportive services. And, you know, as much as I care about form, it's about more than that. Can you imagine if Charles River Park was a public housing project? We might have completely different images of it, it might be a very different place from what it is right now.

**Hubert Murray:** I have been doing some work in Brockton. Even though the design is absolutely delightful and the neighborhood is all there and the trees are there and there's brick sidewalks, there is poverty, there is drug addiction, there is crime. Brockton is in the papers every single week with some aspect of social morbidity to it. So design, while important, is not enough. It is the race and class issue. As designers, we can't solve that problem. As citizens, we have to.

**Charles Euchner:** I want to get Alfred to talk about a couple of thought experiments, one dealing with Forest Hills. Tell us a little bit about your thought experiment in Forest Hills?

**Alfred Wojciechowski:** I'm chair of the housing committee of the Boston Society of Architects, and one day decided to play a scenario game, where we do a lot of what-ifs and imagine what places like the area around the Forest Hills T station could look like. Here we are living in the City of Boston, there's no place to build, and we have this housing crisis. So what if? What if we took an area and looked at it as physical designers? I kept thinking, now why in the world didn't anybody build housing here? There's the terminus of the Orange Line, just great locations, a wonderful pattern of streets, great goods. And then there's all this sort of vast area of gaps and deterioration. So here's the what if. We said what if we didn't care about zoning or who owned the land for a moment and said let's put some housing on - according to Boston sizes and forms, the three- to seven-story model. You can build 3,000 to 7,000 units of housing. I mean, I think that's a staggering number of units that could be played out in this little ten minute walk to the T. Now, we're not actually suggesting you put 7,000 units here, but we are suggesting there's plenty of land to solve a housing issue. And if you apply good planning principles, the numbers would be substantial.

*In the HOPE 6 program, two things were probably as important as design: mixed incomes and providing supportive services*

**Charles Euchner:** I was so excited about Alfred's vision for this area is that the area really has all the ingredients. You've got Franklin Park, the Arnold Arboretum, Jamaica Plain and South Street and Centre Street. You've got very vibrant and diverse communities. You've got transit, commuter rail, terrific bus service. And you've got amazing amount of land available. The trick, of course, is in the details.

**Roger Cassin:** As Nike said: "Just do it." I'm engaged in a development in East Boston called Clipper Ship Wharf. It's 400 condominium units, but what's important is that it's part of an entire new waterfront development, all part of a master plan. There will be over 1,500 new units where the waterfront has been walled off from its community by chain-link fence. In the future, there will be a whole new waterfront community which will have apartments, condos, affordable housing. There is a HOPE 6 project happening at the Maverick Gardens.

East Boston is South Boston without the food fight. It's that kind of scale of development, but we had the good fortune after we acquired this parcel back in 1997, to have the city engage in a master planning process. Massport was talking about disposition, and they did their own master plan. We did a little planning on our own. And you know what? Good planning is good planning, so there was a consensus. We also had the benefit of a community that welcomed us. It had been so bad, they'd been so separated from the waterfront, they

really wanted this development.

**Charles Euchner:** There are two kinds of policy in this world: *make it happen* and *let it happen*. And we're doing really badly at letting development happen. We have a lot of skilled people who can make it happen and who can figure out ways under, around and over the barriers and through the barriers sometimes. But we can't always depend on the brilliance of people like you. We also have to make it a little bit easier.

**Curtis Davis:** Roger's point about the planning process that led to a community desire to do something and to take action is fundamental to doing any of this stuff. And I am putting out a cry for more research and application and study and projects focused on how you build desire, you can call it salesmanship if you like.

I've gone to many of these conferences, I've heard all these good policy ideas, and we continue to miss the mark at refining our capacity to assure that any planning process will yield some action, no matter what it is. And we are hit and miss in that regard. It happens episodically, it does not happen because of rigor and discipline in getting from point A to point B, and this is a cry for that.

**Charles Euchner:** The East Boston process really did have a pretty clear timeline and a pretty clear set of objectives. It had a project manager who was in there pretty much every day at community meetings. It basically did all the things. Roger, am I right, is there anything too terribly exotic about the process in East Boston?

**Roger Cassin:** You know, what it had was good leadership. I'll stop right there. It had leadership.

**Charles Euchner:** From?

**Roger Cassin:** From government. There was planning and there was leadership from the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

**Charles Euchner:** Who should we praise there? Who in particular? At what level does leadership make a difference? Was it Tom O'Brien as director of the BRA at the time? Was it Jansi Chandler?

**Roger Cassin:** Yes, it was Jansi who was the project manager. But it came all the way from the fifth floor. That's why I hesitated for a moment. I think the mayor was behind it. There was a will, not just in the community and at the BRA, but in City Hall.

**Charles Euchner:** And what you're tracing is that there's kind of very clear responsibility and direction. Mayor, the director of BRA, the project manager who's actually showing up at East Boston High School – all are on the same page?

**Roger Cassin:** Absolutely. And I would put that all under one heading and call that leadership. For us here, if we can influence our community leaders to believe in density and smart growth, then we'll get somewhere.

**Alfred Wojciechowski:** I just want to add to that about leadership. We visited the BRA and the Department of Neighborhood Development, and they were interested in the idea of dense development, but they said, "What is the community going to feel about it?" And so we met with a series of neighborhood groups and Grove Hall became a test community, and we went there with the BRA and DND and developed a visualization of the neighborhood – not a master plan, but a visualization about how to introduce density on Blue Hill Avenue. And we created a document that set the stage for future development.

**Charles Euchner:** Kevin Lynch once said that the real way to think about planning is *future preservation* – keeping opportunities for the next generation to develop and creating better opportunities for the next generation to develop.”

## QUALITY OF LIFE AND NUMBERS

**Charles Euchner:** Density is appropriate at different levels in some places, and less appropriate at different levels in other places. And it’s probably as much an art as a science.

**William Rawn:** Earlier there were a lot of points made about the kind of quality of life, the QWAN, the considerations of Christopher Alexander about the quality of an urban place. But I do think we have to start talking in terms of numbers also. And that’s why I made the comment I did earlier about trying to think of a standard or norm in Boston, at least in downtown Boston, and then how do you work off of it? And that’s why the high spine to me is very interesting.

George Thrush wrote a couple of very elegant op-ed pieces about the tall tower proposed for the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Boylston Street over the Massachusetts Turnpike. The building bridged the turnpike, created a wonderful way to connect Back Bay to the Fenway – and of course the project was killed easily. And yet in many ways, if you were an advocate of density, that was probably one of the easiest places to put density.

I think that we as designers have to start dealing with that question of what is necessary. You have to start doing that in a rather analytical way.

Northeastern University used to be a set of buildings that were four stories high. And as you know, in the west campus we’ve raised that bar to six- or seven-story standard within that four-story context. And we were trying to understand the nature of urban universities, right? If you go to NYU or Hunter College in Manhattan, that’s a 10- or 12-story baseline. But in most American cities, they don’t build universities like that. And so that issue of how do you raise the density and still provide a quality of life I think is important. So I would advocate a conversation around some of these height issues, probably FAR [floor-to-area ratio] is much too abstract a term, but height is something everyone understands.

*Northeastern University used to be a set of buildings that were four stories high. And as you know, in the west campus we’ve raised that bar to a six- or seven-story standard within that four-story context.*

**David Lee:** As much as I wish there was an absolute answer to that question, I would say that the real answer is “it depends.” We can’t separate place from discussions about height and density and form. There are certain places in this city that I submit are quite capable of accepting higher densities and forms, and might even add to the legibility of the city.

But one of the things I think we have to be very careful to take into account is the infrastructure. And I don’t mean just the transportation infrastructure, although that would be at the top of my list. I think we have to look at the social and economic infrastructure as well. I happen to live in Brookline, near Brookline Hills. They have taken an old brick building, lifted it, turned it around, they’re adding a whole bunch of stuff along the tracks, and they’re build-

ing on sites that no one would have thought to build on if it wasn't for the economic value which is tied to the quality of schools and the open space and other things.

The town went ballistic because they wanted to build a hotel near Coolidge Corner. I don't think my life has been terribly bothered by the fact that they were able to build that. The problem is, as someone once said, if you're going to make an omelet, you got to break some eggs. And the problem with Boston is we just aren't willing to break any eggs.

**Hubert Murray:** I want to bring your attention to the work that has been done under Tony Blair's government in Britain. Almost the first thing that they did on being elected in 1997 was to set up the Urban Task Force under the chairmanship of Richard Rogers, the architect. And they established some quantitative parameters to look at this whole issue of density. Well, basically urban revitalization was the mission, and looking at brownfield sites. The task force looked at correlations between the density of housing and the number of kindergartens, health care clinics, elementary schools, high schools, gymnasias, playing fields, acreage of open space. And one of the emphases that they make is that there is a range. Hattersfield is different from London and so on.

And so that type of planning thinking has been revitalized in Britain. It used to exist here in the '60s but it had been dropped.

**David Parish:** Let me just say once again, I hate the numbers. Quality of life is what we're describing. That's the difference between when it works and when it doesn't.

**Hubert Murray:** Can I just tell you about a real success in Cambridge where almost all the rules were broken? There is a little housing development of seven units on Auburn Street, very close to Central Square. It has seven units for special-needs tenants, and the project was done by a nonprofit housing association. There is no parking required, there is almost full plot coverage. All the zoning variances were just busted wide open. Right next to Central Square, some people with less than average income have been accommodated, right next to

really good public transportation. A historic building dated 1840 has been fully restored and added onto in a sort of New England style fashion.

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*The citizens of Cambridge, the neighbors, and the zoning board, deserve a lot of credit for busting all the rules wide open. And it's a real good example of excellent urbanism, but not observing the rules.*

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It's terrific. And the City of Cambridge deserves a lot of credit. The citizens of Cambridge, the neighbors, and the zoning board, deserve a lot of credit for busting all the rules wide open. And it's a real good example of excellent urbanism, but not observing the rules.

### IMPERATIVES FOR DENSITY

**Charles Euchner:** With the clock ticking, I'm going to take the moderator's prerogative and ask you to pretend you're on "The McLaughlin Group," where everybody just spits out these incredibly brief bursts of opinion. Rather than give us a question, give us an imperative. Tell us, "Do this" or "Don't do that."

**Alison Field Juma:** I'm from the Mystic River Watershed Association. And we have major flooding and water quality problems with the Mystic River. When there's new development, we need to make sure that the existing infrastructure is upgraded instead of assumed to be adequate - particularly storm sewers and sanitary sewers, to reduce the pollution that's getting into the river.

Also, look creatively at storm-water management and try to increase the infiltration on site and increase the open space at the same time. By using local low-impact development techniques, we can create open space to infiltrate water.

**Camilla Chavez Cortez:** I come from Bogota, Colombia. And we have a model where public and private transportation have really been taken care of. There's a program where the people that have odd number of license plates will use their cars on odd days, and those with even on even days. So the transportation quality has really gone up. And at the same time, the public transportation has really increased a lot.

And along the public transportation lines between the urban and suburban communities, you have green space which has been built, and those green spaces have now been constructed with all different qualities of income housing. And we have small housing and large housing.

**Denise Provo:** I'm the President of the Board of Alderman in Somerville, a small city, probably the original transit-oriented development of the 19th century built along traditional lines which over the years has tried to reform itself as though it were a sprawling suburb with endless space.

*Show us how to promote density. You need a demonstration model of a city that has become dysfunctional for lack of design and planning, lack of expertise and resources, and that has been improved.*

The imperative I would put before you is show us how to promote density. You need a demonstration model of a city which has become dysfunctional for lack of design, lack of planning, lack of expertise, lack of resources, and that has been improved. Show us how. Show us how, because Somerville is a wonderful city with fragments left of this QWAN, mostly in the spontaneous opportunities. When the city's that dense, you can't go out without meeting people you know, and that's a plus. But in almost every quality-of-life measurement, it's very bad. But we need to know how to educate people, to get away from the clichés and the negative assumptions. And we need to educate our own leadership, which doesn't usually come from the planning and design professions and background.

**Alfred Wojciechowski:** Improve quality of life. I'd like to add schools to our conversation, from daycare through grade 12. How can density support schools and vice versa? How can we get good schools to support our quality of life?

**David Parish:** My imperative would be: Let's begin to implement. The Federal Home Loan Bank is a fairly major funder of affordable housing and we've been trying to figure out how to implement some of the questions that have been raised today. So we've sort of put ourselves out there and required anybody who applies for funds to fill out this community development index. We're going to try to figure out how you quantify some of these issues to

the point that you can make funding decisions around it.

**David Dixon:** I'm going to quote the mayor of Baltimore who goes around saying: "Believe." The most important thing we have to do, if we're going to help our larger society, is that we need to go out and have this dialogue with many, many more people. We need to believe and keep the dialogue going.

**Roger Cassin:** Ride the horse in a direction in which it's going. Look for the opportunity. Propose density as a solution to existing problems, as a public benefit, and then it'll be accepted.

**David Lee:** We need to be strategic in terms of who we engage in the dialogue.

**Hubert Murray:** Okay, think post-Fordism. Henry Ford said you could have any color so long as it's black, and I think a lot of the planning profession are handing out a product without really listening to the consumer. What Toyota did was listen to the consumer. What Benetton did says not the color red or the color blue or anything, it looked at what was happening on the ground.

It is actually possible to have two-way communication and to understand that the product is not the high-rise or the seven-story or the six-story, whatever it is. It's not that individual commodity which so focuses us architects; it's the quality of life and the opportunities offered to people by the city which come in a variety of shades and combinations that we've got to listen to.

**William Rawn:** I think the comment from the last speaker from Somerville combined with Charlie's comments about political leadership is a challenge to all of us in this room. And think of yourself as being a mayor who wants to take on the issue of density. And if you're in the Boston region watching what happened to Somerville and its mayor, wouldn't you choose to stay away from anything that reeked of increasing density? We better figure a way to make it easier for those mayors to do what we're talking about.

**George Thrush:** I agree. Maybe a place we could start, and this maybe would be an effort to answer the fellow from Brookline who asked a pointed question about why should the heart of Brookline get denser. Well, I think it would be a perfect opportunity to study additional density as a shared community process. What would density look like at one of those transit hubs in Brookline?

## PUBLIC POLICY AND DENSITY

**Charles Euchner:** What is public policy? And what does it have to do with density?

**Stephanie Pollack:** I would define public policy as the art of solving problems. And so to have a good public policy, you need two things. You need a well-defined problem and you need a solution. There are lots of issues in the world, but not all of them grow up to be public policy problems. One of the things I would like to put on the table is the possibility that density is actually not a problem that any particularly well-connected constituencies care about solving. And so if we want to take on the issue of density, we actually need to reframe the public policy problem. We have real problems in Greater Boston. We have an affordable housing problem. We have problems around education, funding and quality. We have prob-

lems about rising taxes. We have problems in our transportation system.

To really inject density into the public policy debate, we are better off talking about whether and when density could be a solution to some of those problems rather than attempting to frame either density or its inverse, sprawl, as a problem. And in saying that, I am not in accord with a lot of my friends in the Smart Growth movement who truly believe in their heart of hearts that they can convince the public that sprawl is actually a public policy problem on par with housing affordability and schools and taxes. And having tried it for a decade or so, I'm not convinced it's going to happen.

But I think that density can solve problems. And I think that Roger Cassin gave an interesting example of that earlier. Why did the East Boston waterfront development go so much better than the seaport? Because what was being proposed solved problems for a lot of different constituencies. The mayor had a problem, he promised a certain number of housing starts and he needed housing starts.

The community had a problem. They had this waterfront that they couldn't get to because there was a big, giant fence and a truck-driving school on the waterfront. And maybe not of the same order of magnitude, but there's a really strong merchant community in Maverick Square, and they had a problem which is they need more customers in order to support the kinds of small, often immigrant-owned businesses that had begun flourishing there. And dense residential development with open space and destinations built in solved all three of those problems. And therefore, it was possible to get to a far denser development than it would have been in another place.

**Edward Moscovitch:** As one who really likes the outdoors, I would like to preserve as much open space as possible. And of course, density could be a solution to that.

The question is why doesn't that happen? We've been talking mostly about Boston, which is sort of a case unto itself. But in the Commonwealth as a whole, most public officials understand very well that the most important thing is to make sure all development happens somewhere else - unless it's commercial development, in which case it should be on the boundary with another town. This is NIMBYism.

I do some work for a conservation organization, and at one point they said to me, "Could you help us prove that development doesn't pay?" And I said, "Yes, I could but I won't because I don't really like the implication of it." It's real easy to do, right? We spend \$6,000 or \$7,000 to send a kid to school, and if you have a family with two children come to your town, that's \$14,000 just to educate the kids. There are very few two- or three-bedroom homes whose property taxes would cover those expenses. So every local official understands that the thing you should do with residential development is stop it.

Now, that kind of resistance to housing doesn't work statewide, right? We need housing

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in the state and region, even though it doesn't make sense for most cities and towns to allow it. That's why we get sprawl.

Therefore, it's probably the case you can't solve the housing problem if you have local zoning alone. You also need a school-funding system that does not penalize communities for allowing more families to come into their town. In most states, the typical school-funding formula basically says that you will tax yourself at a certain rate wherever you are in the state. There's a funding goal and the state will make up the difference. That means that you have no reason to oppose a school. We couldn't do that because of Proposition 2½, which limits local property taxes. That just defeats the purpose of a lot of what most of us agree would be really desirable.

**Kurt Gaertner:** Let me follow up on Stephanie's point, the idea that you don't want to talk in terms of sprawl in terms of solving other problems. If you take this approach, you'll hit different interest groups. You may get the support of someone concerned with the financial aspects of a sprawling development pattern if you approach it from that perspective. If you talk about it from an environmental perspective, you'll tap into some of the groups that are particularly interested in that.

*We spend \$6,000 or \$7,000 to send a kid to school. There are very few two-or three-bedroom houses whose property taxes would cover these expenses.*

And I think approaching it from those perspectives rather than necessarily leading with the issue of sprawl. I think that was an excellent point I wanted to tap into.

**Barry Bluestone:** Following Stephanie's approach, let's ask, "What are the problems?" And I would count at least three. First, we've got a housing shortage and everyone knows that now. Second, we have a real time-squeeze problem in America. People are working longer hours, more people are working in households. People are trying to find ways of getting household efficiency. How do I save time? And any kind of housing development, any kind of new policy which makes people spend even more time walking to work, biking to work, some of the other things that sound so terrific in the abstract, is not going to get a lot of votes. People are going to have to find ways of dealing with that time-squeeze problem, and denser development might help do that. Third, we've got a local tax problem and a local spending problem.

One of the things we can do is begin to think about all of those problems simultaneously, try and find solutions that at least touch on all of those. A number of civic and business groups have come together to form the Commonwealth Housing Task Force to really think very seriously about a revolutionary policy for dealing with the question of how do we produce more housing and how do we do it in a smart growth way?

The task force has proposed a new deal for Massachusetts communities. The idea is to have the state provide incentives to local communities to create special overlay districts in their community around town centers, around transit nodes, and also in areas where you have abandoned industrial or commercial property – where you could put up denser housing, both single family denser housing and multiple family housing.

In return for encouraging communities to create these new overlay zoning districts, pro-

vide them with a series of incentives. One of those is what we call a density bonus; once a community has created an overlay district and has done an approved build out analysis that says they can produce so many housing units in that area, in that denser housing units in that overlay district, they will get between two and three thousand dollars per potential unit which they can use for any of their local needs. Number two is to provide for them, and this is the real kicker, full funding of education for kids who live in that district. Finally, we are proposing that communities that create overlay districts for housing development get priority on infrastructure and capital investments from the state.

### THE CASE OF THE SOUTH BOSTON WATERFRONT

**Alden Raine:** Planning is about creating broad templates that reduce the scope of disagreement on particular projects. When you don't have broad planning principles, then people believe that the particular project they're fighting about is the end of the world—and they will fight forever over particular projects.

The obvious example is the South Boston Waterfront. The Waterfront is where we have the opportunity to expand Boston's downtown, its business district. The Waterfront gives us a great opportunity for smart growth, transit-oriented development, building near South Station, creating a 1,000-acre district with maritime and mixed-use development. There was a broad consensus. And when we were in the last throes of getting that plan approved, people were yelling at each other about the details. But people really had a substantial amount of agreement. And the point is simply that absent public policy - saying that these are the things we're trying to achieve, both broadly in the region and specifically in those 300 acres - you simply couldn't get to any kind of agreement. And so what? The consequences of not doing that is a generation of lost growth that might have been captured in that location.

Ultimately, public policy about smart growth and transit-oriented development is something that has got to come from the private side. You don't have to win that battle by convincing everybody. You've got to have a publicly-approved template and push people in the private sector, development people, to do it.

**Jay Wickersham:** I'd like to step back and connect up Al's example of South Boston. There are different ways to encourage density. One is what Al talked about - using public dollars to build things. That's probably the most direct thing that government does that would affect whether or not density makes sense, whether or not we're going to see density, is how and where we spent our dollars to build roads, to build transit, to build water and sewers.

*Planning is about creating broad templates that reduce the scope of disagreement on particular projects. When you don't have broad planning principles, then people believe that a particular project they're fighting about is the end of the world.*

What you really have in South Boston was an enormous public investment that essentially created the market. Once that money had been spent for the highway, for the new transit system, really density was inevitable because the market demand there was enormous. How

precisely that density got shaped, the timing with which it's going to occur, you know, that's a matter of the vagaries of politics and of business cycles. But once that particular public policy decision had been made, you were going to see density on the South Boston waterfront, and we will see it at some point.

Another way to encourage density is what Barry Bluestone and Ed Moscovitch were talking about, which is regulation, specifically zoning and public policy relating to property taxes.

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*The best way to understand zoning is to play Sim City for an hour or so. You learn that the best way you succeed at Sim City is to maximize your ratables.*  
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As Ed essentially has described it, the best way to understand zoning is to play Sim City for an hour or so. And you learn that the way you succeed at Sim City is to maximize your ratables; by getting a lot of commercial development, and you keep your public approval ratings high. But at the same time, you exclude all of kinds of useful things from the community.

So the question there then goes to what can we do as a matter of public policy to attract investment knowing that we're not going to be able to force that investment? And I think that's what's very intriguing about the Commonwealth Housing Task Force. It essentially is looking to get more choice in both of those areas. It's not telling communities

how they have to make their fiscal policy decisions, but it's essentially bribing them and saying, "If you make certain decisions, we'll try to offset the cost to you with some extra money from the state."

Similarly, it's not going to produce density by itself. But by up-zoning and particularly by establishing as-of-right rules for zoning – which I think is really key to the task force proposal, to take certain amount of that out of the vagaries of the difficult, local approval process, out of the kind of often Byzantine bargaining for exactions (sic) of various kinds, you're giving an incentive for private capital to flow to certain locations and giving it essentially a competitive advantage.

It doesn't mean that we're going to see density. The density will only happen if that capital sees a market and sees market demand and thinks that people will actually move there. We don't really know. We haven't given density much of a chance in Massachusetts. I think it's an open question how much demand there is and where it is. But at the very least, that would be a public policy that would allow the market to work on a more even footing and allow us to find out what really is the demand for density.

## THE 'Z' WORD

**Charles Euchner:** One of the participants in the first part of this conference came up to me and said, "There's one word you haven't used and it's the most important word of all. It's zoning." But now it's come up several times – for example, in the context of this Commonwealth Housing Task Force proposal, which as Jay said is a kind of bribe to local communities to create zoning that's more hospitable to housing development.

My question to everybody is: Is it possible to reform zoning in other ways? Or is this kind

of bribe approach, this incentive approach, this carrot approach, the only way to get localities to allow levels of development to house our people and give space for our businesses?

**Alden Raine:** I think it's possible to incent or bribe communities to do what you want them to do on the smart growth and in transit-oriented and mixtures-of-density front, as well as the affordable-housing front. And I think on the affordable housing front, to a great degree, it's the right approach.

The city and town center growth policy back in the Dukakis Administration and the efforts by Governor Romney and Doug Foy now to link housing, transportation, environmental infrastructure and location in a concerted, targeted investment policy, is a good idea. It was a good idea then, good idea now. And when resources are scarce, I wish they weren't as scarce, but when they are, bribery works a little bit better.

It won't work every time and some people will refuse to be bought. But I think you can definitely push development with more carrot than stick in the kind of mixed-use dense, center-oriented direction you want simply because municipalities need public investments. They look to the state, they look to federal funds in which the state has a significant hand on the faucet.

Not only is affordable housing illegal under zoning in many places, but smart transit-oriented development is illegal under zoning in a lot of places. And it's not a question of making people do stuff. To some degree, it's a question of getting them to stop prohibiting people from doing what you want them to do. And if you can bribe them with some infrastructure, and I think you can, by all means do it.

**Stephanie Pollack:** We have 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts. Why? Because of a public policy decision that was made in the 19th century that was different from most other places, which is that you couldn't annex your neighbor unless both communities independently had a majority of votes in favor of it. So in the rest of the country, while Pittsburgh was gobbling up all of the surrounding communities, Brookline never got absorbed by Boston because every time they voted, Boston voters overwhelmingly voted for the annexation and Brookline voted against it. And the rules of the game protected you.

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*You can definitely push development with more carrot than stick in the kind of mixed use dense, center-oriented direction you want simply because the public investments it takes to make it happen are things that municipalities need.*  
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So we have 351 cities and towns who between them have several thousand zoning codes as far as I can tell. And, you know, the smart Growth advocates have debated for years whether it's worth sort of a concerted attack. And I think zoning is a classic example of an issue that if we frame it as a problem, we're kidding ourselves. There is no more zoning crisis in Massachusetts than there is a density crisis in Massachusetts.

Zoning changes may solve some other problems. And if we're going to make changes to zoning, it will be because they can solve a housing problem. I grew up in New Jersey, where that Mount Laurel decision forced localities to deal with the affordable housing problem and segregation. Sometimes that's what it takes — planning happens when other issues force the hand of cities and towns.

Policy changes have got to address something that people care about. And as I think everyone has said, what people care about right now in Massachusetts are high housing costs, high, or at least perceived high, property taxes which are directly related to high housing costs because valuations have gone through the roof. Quality of their kids' schools. I mean, those are the things to care about. So if we can argue for changes to zoning that will address those, I think there may be a window to make some changes to zoning.

**Edward Moscovitch:** Well, I'm not a lawyer so I don't want to venture in where I'm over my head. But one thing I'm fairly certain about is that the 351 cities and towns are creatures of the state. And I believe that there is a state statute which sets the framework. Somebody here must know more about this than I do. There's a state statute which sets the framework for local zoning. And it seems to me it would be possible and desirable, in fact, for the legislature to pass a new standard state zoning code saying, for example, that smart development is what is as a matter of right, and the classic single family would have to be by exception and then give cities and towns, say, two or three years to redo their own zoning codes in light of this new one. And I think that would certainly be a good idea.

I'm not sure I made this point as explicitly as I wanted to before. Housing costs are high in Massachusetts because of the success of local governments; local officials have successfully used zoning and harassment of developers to prevent development. We built half as many housing units as another state with similar demographics would build. And that, of course, is why our housing is so expensive.

Two other things, quickly. I don't think you can do this on the cheap. To give communities enough school aid so that they are policy neutral in terms of stopping development of family housing, costs real money. And if the priority of the administration is under no circumstances to spend any more money, then let's not kid ourselves. It isn't going to happen.

A second point: If you're going to induce people to live in denser developments, you're going to need to figure out some way of having schools in communities that are densely settled that are every bit as good as the schools in communities that are otherwise.

**Charles Euchner:** We're starting to make a connection that people were urging us to do at the end of our last session, which is a connection between schools and communities. When you think about the things that matter to most ordinary people, it's schools because of kids, and houses because they got to sleep some place every night. And the two things, schools and housing, are very closely related. *The Two-Income Trap*, by Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi, makes this point very explicitly. When you move to a community, you move there to buy the schools that are there.

There is not a big enough supply of communities that have the schools that are desired by people who are mobile. And so the people that can afford housing in good school districts drive up the cost of housing. That causes a price spiral for communities with good schools.

**Barry Bluestone:** I think the reason why the school issue is important is that building a \$300,000 home is not going to produce enough property taxes to cover the schooling costs. Therefore, there is a natural tendency for local politicians to want a big-box development that brings in a lot of revenue but doesn't cost them anything on the spending side.

That is the link with schools. And of course part of the reason that people do not want to have a lot of new kids coming into their neighborhood without a lot more money is they think

that is going to affect school quality. And therefore, it becomes as vicious circle.

I'd like to comment on Ed's point that we need to force 351 towns and cities to build housing. The state controls localities in some way, but you have to realize that the legislators who make up the state legislature come from those towns and cities, and they kind of like to get reelected and don't want to oppose local wishes. They don't want to be hanged in their own neighborhood. That's why the Commonwealth Housing Task Force explicitly used incentives for localities to change zoning to allow more housing - to make it possible for legislators to support the kind of rezoning that we all agree is necessary.

**Charles Euchner:** The Rappaport Institute has produced a new study on home rule in Massachusetts. It's called *Dispelling the Myth of Home Rule*, by Jerry Frug, David Barron and Rick Su from Harvard Law School. The central point of the study is that limits on local authority prevent regional cooperation. The conventional wisdom is that *too much* local authority prevents regional cooperation. Frug, Barron, and Su argue that the limited revenue-raising capacity of localities fosters a local resistance, a stubbornness, on land-use issues. Localities are all-powerful on land use, and they're all-weak on revenue capacity. Loosening up restrictions on local government's ability to raise revenues could actually lead to a kind of greater willingness to open up to housing and other things.

**Stephanie Pollack:** About half the New England states actually have these top-down approaches to land-use planning, where the state tells communities: "Your plans have to do A, B and C." In these cases, the state reviews the community's zoning or master plan and if it's not approved by the state, it's not implemented.

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*Legislators who make up the state legislature come from those cities and towns and they kind of like to get reelected and don't want to oppose local wishes.*  
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Massachusetts is one of the states that doesn't work that way. Massachusetts has a zoning-enabling act; communities don't have to have any consistency. What we found is states that had the top-down approach were no better than the states that did. In other words, despite the fact that the books said the state is going to review these plans and make sure they do A, B and C, the actual developments in those communities bore no more relationship to the public policy objectives than in the communities that didn't.

There is an unbelievable Yankee streak in our region, where if you tell cities and towns what to do, they'll find a way not to do it. So we need to come up with policy solutions that are not based on telling them what to do so explicitly. Because it doesn't work.

**Kurt Gaertner:** I would argue that zoning is one of the critical problems we face. The build-out analyses coordinated by the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs found that the zoning we have across the Commonwealth now is not what we should be promoting. It doesn't allow enough housing and density. We really need to encourage alternatives to the existing zoning.

Governor Mitt Romney recently announced the creation of the Commonwealth Capital Fund. The basic idea is to use infrastructure and other state funding as leverage to encourage municipalities to change zoning and other land-use regulations to support sustainable development.

We do have a very significant problem with the planning and zoning subdivision statutes that we have presently in the Commonwealth. I think that if we're serious about encouraging the municipalities to do something to alter those existing zoning and other regulatory practices, we need to give them the tools to do it. And the subdivision and zoning statutes we have right now represent a significant barrier to actually getting that done and something we ought to be changing.

**Charles Euchner:** This raises another point, the capacity issue. So many towns are run by amateurs—that is, good citizens who volunteer their time and their effort to make their localities work as best they can. But they lack resources to get the kind of expertise that they need. Simply processing what needs to be processed and putting out brush fires takes a lot of time. That's another one of the legacies of Massachusetts small-town government approach to things.

About 10 years ago, Michigan adopted a whole new approach to funding schools which presumably might lessen some of the pressures that you're talking about here. But basically shifting from a property tax approach to funding local schools to using state funding – in this case, from both the sales tax and the income tax. Does something as big and bold as that make sense?

**Barry Bluestone:** Well, I think it made a lot of sense in Michigan and it would make a lot of sense in Massachusetts. Essentially this was under a court order. I mean, the state had such unequal spending that the state decided under a conservative Republican governor, to adopt state funding of K-12 education.

*If we're serious about encouraging the municipalities to alter existing zoning and other regulatory practices, we need to give them better tools to do it. And subdivision and zoning statutes we have currently represent a significant barrier.*

It's led to two things. No. 1, it's led to a greater equalization of spending across school districts. And No. 2, it has taken a tremendous amount of pressure off of communities to have to cover their largest cost which was school cost, out of their local property tax, allowing them to use their property tax for other matters and taking some pressure off of the communities from dissuading future development.

That's part of the reason why you'll see so many Michigan communities building more housing at a much faster pace—twice the pace that we've had here in the Massachusetts area. As a result, while housing prices are rising, they're not rising much faster than inflation. The shift in school finance played a critical role in that, even though that was not the primary purpose of the reform.

**Jay Wickersham:** I'd like to challenge this assumption of how important schools are in relation to density. I'd like to begin with the city. Most people move to the city at a time when they don't have children. They move to Boston or another city right after college because of work opportunities, or they may move after their children are grown. So the question is whether in fact the quality of the schools is a primary driver of the city's economic strength. And this leads to another point: Perhaps the real education problem is that a great many people are locked out of suburban communities that have better schools. And so it's really a lack of housing opportunity in the suburbs that is the real school crisis.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR DENSITY

**Edward Moscovitch:** There were two spectacular opportunities over the past five or six years where government controls a large block of land, and where there is the potential to build the most delightful possible high-density community. One of them was at Fort Devens and the other was the South Weymouth Naval Station. I was struck by the fact that, at South Weymouth, the development was approved on the specific condition that not a single unit of family housing be built. I mean, what an outrage.

I would like to envision the following, wonderful dialogue. A representative from one of these wealthy communities comes to the Speaker, say, or the Governor and says, "My town needs more money." The governor responds: "Are you willing to welcome to your town more families, some of which will be low income? If not, we have no interest in giving you more money." What a wonderful conversation.

**Charles Euchner:** The Metropolitan Area Planning Council has initiated a regional planning process which they hope leads to some kind of consensus approach to coordination of planning, transportation, housing development, commercial, and other business development. Is there any hope for that? And how should it work: carrots or sticks?

**Stephanie Pollack:** Right now, a lot of infrastructure spending is basically an entitlement model, right? Every town gets their Public Works Economic Development grants, and every town gets Chapter 90 money which is local road money on essentially a formula basis. And every town gets their school money and there's a process for getting in line for school construction dollars. So we're spending hundreds of millions of dollars every year on public infrastructure. And it's driven by each program's rules and which towns are the most aggressive about seeking it out. If you don't have a good regional planning process and it's just the Office of Commonwealth Development deciding where capital dollars go, you're not going to do Smart Growth.

**Charles Euchner:** So who would drive that process? Who would drive that regional planning process that ends up having something authoritative at the end of it?

**Stephanie Pollack:** The key is that you have to engage at all levels. I'm less concerned about who the driver is - whether it's the governor or the MAPC or someone else. I'm more concerned about who's at that table, because it's got to be everyone. It's got to be community people on local communities and elected officials and state people. Otherwise the end product is going to be unacceptable to some constituency, which is going to be able to block it.

**Alden Raine:** I'm all for regional planning and I'm all for engaging at all levels. But there are things that the state, the Commonwealth, can say and do that cuts through that. You don't have to give all kinds of grants to fund stuff you don't want to do. And if you can get a little more courageous on the legislative front. You don't necessarily have to do school construction reimbursement in places you don't like. Compared to changing 40A [the statewide zoning law], changing school reimbursement might be doable.

**Edward Moscovitch:** Mike Dukakis really felt strongly about this and did it very effectively. And I'm impressed you can go to just about any inner city in this state and there is a

community college there because of Dukakis. In Massachusetts, because the legislature is so fractured, you really can only get leadership from the governor. Romney is saying some of the right things, but he has to feel it as passionately as Dukakis did, he has to be willing to fund his priorities. He has to be able to articulate a vision, and he has to build bridges with the legislature.

**Suzanne Demancho:** There is a tremendous imperative in the culture to extol the virtues of owning a car, having a house on its own lot, and being accessible to certain things like the schools – and this is a matter not only for what you want your life to be, but also evidence of status.

We also need to pay attention to the whole marketing and consumer area. Take Home Depot. Home Depot could not exist without the suburban dream of a place where you can expand, develop, put in new things. The same is true with all the sort of Martha Stewart things. They all extol the virtues of this independent homeowner, controlling their piece of space and land.

If you look at the magazine rack, look at all the home-focused magazines, 90 percent of them are speaking to the suburban life, the suburban home. And if high-density places are mentioned at all, it's about some famous celebrity who lives in a multi-million dollar loft overlooking Central Park.

## LOOKING FOR EVIDENCE

**Charles Euchner:** What we need for density planning or smart planning is a Paco Underhill. Paco Underhill is a marketing genius who goes into all kinds of stores, whether it's department stores or auto parts stores or electronics stores, and he observes very closely what it is that people do when they get there, how they behave, how they respond to things, how they pick up a scarf and fold it and kind of touch it to their cheeks and decide whether they want to buy it or not. Underhill's time-lapse photography, observing how consumers respond to their environment, provides a model for us to look at what people like and what they don't like.

**Jay Wickersham:** Michael Porter of the Harvard Business School pointed out 15 years ago that there's a lot of money to be made out of retail in the inner city. These are hugely underserved areas, one of our public policy goals should be to get out of the way and to allow the market to exploit these opportunities. Even though some people have noted that suburban ideals seem to dominate the media, you could just as easily say that the success of "Friends" and "Sex in the City" shows that urban living is now the predominant model. There are in fact a great many American dreams.

**David Luberoff:** I have several questions and comments. The first is on capital budgeting. The most dramatic state effort to direct capital budgeting to urban areas as a Smart Growth strategy came under Governor Parris Glendening of Maryland. The idea was to target as much state money as you could to urban areas, where development would have a minimal impact on land-use patterns. Garrett Knapp has done a study for the University of Maryland suggesting that if anything, Maryland's Smart Growth strategy actually exacerbated sprawl because it pushed development out even further than it might have been absent the state pol-

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icy. So I'm wondering: What evidence do we have that directing capital resources to urban areas actually will have a significant impact on land-use patterns?

My second question concerns school aid. Bill Fischel, an economist at Dartmouth, has argued that when you move funding for schools to the state level – the example he uses is California after the passage of Proposition 13 – total spending on schools goes down and school quality deteriorates. The reason is that all those empty nesters in suburban communities, who were willing to pay high property taxes for good schools in their community because it made their house price stay up, no longer have any incentive to support increased school spending. And so the political support for school spending tends to collapse. Dutch Leonard more or less confirmed that finding in his study, “By Choice or By Chance,” in the early 1990s. So if we focus on school spending, do we actually run a serious risk of winding up really ruining a terrific albeit imperfect public education system?

My third question actually has to do with zoning. There are three ways to think about zoning. One has to think of it as a planning tool. That it's supposed to get us to the land use we want and this great frustration about its inability to do that. The second way is that zoning is essentially a fiscal management tool. It is to make sure that whatever development comes in generates more revenue than you want.

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*There are three ways to think about zoning. One is to think of it as a planning tool. The second is that zoning is a fiscal management tool. The third is to see zoning is a property right.*  
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The third way to think about zoning is the way many economists think about zoning; Robert Nelson is best known for this and Bill Fishel has also picked up on this – is that zoning is a property right. Homeowners use zoning to protect themselves from the possibility that something bad is going to happen next door to them. In this line of analysis, the problem with zoning is that since we won't really admit that it's a property right, we then can't engage in a serious negotiation about selling zoning rights and saying to people, “Okay, if I build denser development in your community, what do I have to give you to make you do that?” So I am wondering if zoning is really an imperfect property right and whether we might correct a lot of problems by basically allowing communities to sell zoning rather than maintaining some fiction that it's about planning.

My fourth question has to do with the fact that close to 70 percent of households in Massachusetts own their own home. If we were to build significantly more housing and hold prices down, people who now own homes would see their property assets decline, or at least they wouldn't increase as fast as they would hope.

**Jay Wickersham:** I guess in response to what you said about the impacts of public investments, I guess I would be skeptical about whether we're at a point to know what the effect has been within Maryland. I suspect what we have seen would have been a starving of the road builders and the sewer builders within the inner suburbs. Because the quickest thing you can do is to cut off public investments, and so that in turn may very well have driven the sprawl out to the outer fringes of the metropolitan areas where land costs are so low that in fact you don't actually need as big a public subsidy.

But I think to know what would be the long-term impact of siting public state buildings, of siting transit, of siting a whole bunch of things which take many, many years to design and plan and build within the cities, may take 10, 20, 30 years. I mean, here it was 30 years ago that we recast public transportation investment in Massachusetts through BTPR – the Boston Transportation Planning Review – and we’re only now finishing that program. And I think, in fact, only now in many ways starting to reap-- Or potentially think about-- Reaping the land use benefits of actually siting some development around those transit systems that we have so carefully restored.

So I guess I’d like to be a little bit cautious about kind of early returns from Maryland.

**Barry Bluestone:** In the Commonwealth Housing Task Force proposal, however, we’re talking about changing about 3 percent of Chapter 70 funding, so we’re not having a state takeover of education. But we are trying to incentivize it.

How do you get homeowners who have seen a doubling of their property values to support new housing development? We’ve begun to see the business community realizing that while they’ve gotten great advantage from housing appreciation, in the long run, this could undermine the economy of the state. If we don’t build more housing, we’re going to be living in a state which doesn’t have any of the amenities and the jobs we want. And I think it has been the understanding that housing has gotten to a crisis level where it may affect economic development. That has gotten people who would normally think of this in terms of the short-term private interest thinking about it in a broader public interest that might affect them down the road.

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*The next great environmental issue for eastern Massachusetts is water. We have water haves and have-nots. If density can make that better, great. But if density exacerbates that problem, you won’t be able to permit it.*  
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**Stephanie Pollack:** The other thing I would say is that for homeowners, the extent to which rising valuation is an unmitigated good depends on whether they’re short-termers or long-termers. Because if you’re a long-termer, all higher values in your community mean are higher taxes. That’s just the way it works in Massachusetts. So in fact slowing the growth of the increase in housing values, if you’re in it for the long run or if you’re a senior on a fixed income, is not an unmitigated, bad thing.

**Edward Moscovitch:** That’s right. So if the residential property rises more quickly than the commercial property, then it does in fact raise your tax bill and there’s no particular advantage to having your house worth more.

**Bryce Nesbitt:** A lot of zoning codes mandate on-site parking within a building, which just takes people out of the pedestrian environment. When people come to Harvard Square, they park a different place every time, they experience as a pedestrian a different piece of Harvard Square.

**Tad Reed:** I want to draw on my work as a planner and affordable-housing developer in southern California. I worked in a small city where we had a planning commission that was tilted against development and in favor of slow growth. But two of the commissioners agreed

to go to a UCLA conference on smart growth and sustainable development, and they came back with religion and started making decisions very different from the decisions they were making previously – tilting the balance on that planning commission in favor of denser development. So I think there is a role for education. But I do think it has to be outside the context of a specific development proposal.

**Nancy Hammett:** I'm with the Mystic River Watershed Association. I'm an economist by training, and I really applaud the focus of thinking about incentive-based approaches to a lot of this. I'd make two comments about incentives. One is in terms of incentives for people to move to and live in densely developed areas, I think open space has to be added to the list; attractive, well-maintained, safe open space has to be added to the list for developing transit that doesn't take too much time and good education. Getting people to live near the Esplanade. People really do need attractive, safe open space.

And the second thing is in terms of creating incentives at the policy level such as any kind of incentive that includes reduced environmental review, because right now environmental review is happening at the local level. Anything that overrides the local level or reduces the environmental review creates a strong incentive. We've got to figure out a way to set high environmental standards so that people who develop in the right way – with design that takes the burden off the local infrastructure – get faster approvals.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

**Charles Euchner:** Let me ask the panelists to give us the last words. What's the one thing that you want everybody to walk out of here knowing that they didn't know before?

**Kurt Gaertner:** I would add that density offers a solution to a variety of problems, housing, environmental and others. And public policy can promote it and should.

**Barry Bluestone:** There's some good ideas out there and we got to get political support for them and they could make a difference this time around.

**Stephanie Pollack:** Two problems that we didn't talk a lot about that density could either help solve or exacerbate, and which therefore we're going to have to wrestle with it, one is the other "D" word, which is displacement. And I don't think you can just say, "Oh, density doesn't really cause it." It is *the* issue in most urban communities faced with either dense development or transit, even new transit raises fears.

And the second issue and the next great environmental issue for eastern Massachusetts is water. We have massive water quality and quantity problems. We have water haves and have-nots depending whether you're in or outside of the MWRA [Massachusetts Water Resources Authority] system. And I think the next great battleground over the future of development is going to be its impact on our water resources, both in terms of quality and quantity. If density can make that better, great. And if density exacerbates that problem, you won't be able to permit it.

**Edward Moscovitch:** We have a lot to learn from other places in the world. One of my favorite cities is London and I've had an opportunity recently to get inside some of those London row houses and was really impressed with the fact that every single room is light and airy, unlike the three-story brick apartments in the neighborhood I grew up in Chicago, and

most of them have a view of green. So you have these wonderfully dense, lively sidewalks supported by dense living which doesn't feel dense because it's light, airy and green. But look at another city, look at Miami. I spent a whole day driving around, looking at parks in Miami. And with one exception, they were all unmaintained, unused, ugly, unattractive.

**Alden Raine:** Density is not an organizing principle. City, town and neighborhood centers, that's an organizing principle. Transit-oriented development or transit villages, that's an organizing principle. They both imply appropriate density, they both have more political currency than we think.

**Jay Wickersham:** I guess this is really circling back to design. There's good density and there's bad density and we've got extraordinary built examples of successful density throughout Massachusetts that people love, that people cherish. And there are a great many opportunities to do that. It's going to be small; it's going to be site by site, community by community, and that's okay. I'd go back to Stephanie's starting point. It's not the problem, it's the solution. Density is part of the solution to a great many things and I think there's a lot of interest in it, using it as that kind of solution now.



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