

Housing and Neighborhoods

Formative Issues for Housing and Neighborhoods

Easton faces housing-related challenges that are common to many Massachusetts communities, especially within the Boston suburbs. Easton is an older, well-established New England town that is substantially built out, meaning land that can be used for new development is limited and future growth will be incremental. The scenic quality of the Town, its high performing school system, fairly uniform housing stock, and proximity to Boston and Providence all work to create a strong housing market demand and higher than average home prices¹². Participants in the Envision Easton process expressed strong support for the Town's predominantly single family, suburban residential atmosphere and quality of life. Respondents to surveys and workshops consistently agreed with goals designed to protect the character of neighborhoods through preservation of open space and historic resources.

Yet with dwindling undeveloped land to accommodate new subdivisions, and predominant reliance on the residential tax base¹³, the Town must think strategically about future residential growth. Continuing to use open space protection to set boundaries and connect green belts will help to provide a geographic framework for future growth (see Land Use section). However, under current zoning, within the limited available buildable land, maximizing the tax yield would push the community toward the development of larger and larger homes. To focus growth on existing developed areas, especially those where future infrastructure investment is planned, Easton will need to expand the types of housing offered in a strategic manner. By providing a clear picture of how housing will be developed into the future, Easton can build on its strengths and fulfill local needs, while protecting areas that are unsuitable for development. Many of the key issues that shape Easton's approach to housing policy are discussed in this chapter.

1. Easton's neighborhoods are integral to the identity of the community and should be sustained and strengthened.

Many participants in Envision Easton grew up in the community and felt lucky to be able to stay and raise their own families in the same surroundings. For other participants who relocated to Easton from other towns or states, the appeal of the community is rooted in a strong connection to the Town's quality of life. In either case, residents often expressed their fondest impressions of Easton in their own neighborhoods, reflecting on the architecture of surrounding homes, places where their children play, or the quiet character of their street. Residents at public forums and participants in the Envision Easton working groups were thoughtful about the challenges faced by Easton and recognized many issues that would need to be carefully managed in order to maintain and strengthen existing neighborhoods. To effectively manage these issues, Easton must continue to coordinate with residents, developers and numerous town government departments to identify tools and safeguards that will maintain and strengthen neighborhood

¹² Easton typically has a median home sales price in the top three when compared with the ten communities in the region. See Envision Easton Baseline Report for more detail.

¹³ The residential tax levy provides 53% of the total overall budget for FY14 (Massachusetts Department of Revenue).

resources. Some of these tools and safeguards are introduced in the formative issues provided below.

Neighborhood Design

While all residents may not be aware of the specific design elements that help to define the “neighborhood character” of different streets, many participants in the Envision Easton process called attention to important design features. Elements like power lines, traffic signs, street trees, sidewalks, road width, lighting, corner treatments, and crosswalks all play an important role in how residents experience their streets on a daily basis. As discussions continue in Easton around increased mobility of residents and better connections between neighborhoods, it will be important to be mindful of the scale and design of improvements to ensure the protection and enhancement of neighborhood character. More detailed discussions on mobility and connectivity are provided in the section on Transportation, Mobility and Access.

Protection of Historic Properties

Easton has an impressive inventory of historic buildings that contribute significantly to the identity of neighborhoods throughout the community. Four areas of the Town are designated historic districts under the National Register of Historic Places. Beyond these designations the Massachusetts Historical Commission maintains a database of historic resources and identified 30 separate areas in Easton as significant along with 554 buildings. The Town’s Historical Commission continues to work on developing a town-wide inventory of buildings of historical significance. This inventory is connected to the



Homes with historic value may be allowed to fall into disrepair, which can increase pressure to demolish the structure and build anew. Part of the challenge in preserving the character of existing neighborhoods is working to preserve these structures.

This inventory is connected to the Building Demolition Review Regulations in an effort to protect historically significant structures from being demolished if feasible.

While demolition protection is an important tool, it is more of a “reactive” strategy for preservation and cannot always save historic structures. The preservation incentives associated with Historic Districts can also be an effective tool, but they depend on the awareness of property owners for implementation. Relying exclusively on these tools will not fully protect against incremental removal and replacement of building features that may be historically significant. In many cases, the erosion of a building’s historic features can be avoided through simple outreach and efforts to educate home owners.

Housing and Neighborhood Scale

In historic communities like Easton, neighborhoods that were established many decades ago are often characterized by smaller homes with very efficient construction and interior layouts. Collections of these homes across an entire neighborhood create a sense of scale and comfort for residents that they intuitively connect with an idea of “community character”. Over the past three decades in particular, the scale of these long-established communities has been disrupted as many individual homes were torn down and replaced with much larger structures. Easton, and North Easton Village, in particular, has seen several instances in recent years where smaller homes were razed and replaced with much larger buildings out of scale with the surrounding neighborhood. As Easton takes a closer look at its neighborhoods moving forward, refinements to basic zoning standards related to allowable height, building setbacks, and floor-to-area ratio (FAR) may be useful in protecting the character of these neighborhoods.

2. There is a need for diverse housing options and revisiting Easton’s land use regulations.

Housing Diversity

As with all communities across the U.S., demographic and market trends are creating needs and demands for different types of housing. The aging of baby boomers, shrinking family sizes, higher rental demand, rising and uncertain energy costs, and increases in market preferences all continue to create demands for a more diverse set of housing choices within an individual community. In some cases, these units are simply single-family units that may be smaller than what is typically found in Easton, or may be located on smaller lots. In other cases, there are demands for different styles such as cottages, quad-plexes, town homes, accessory dwelling units, or other similar models that may have been limited within Easton’s regulatory framework. Housing diversity may also include retrofits to existing homes that make them more accessible to the elderly or disabled. Regardless of the approach to diversifying housing, Easton is ready to explore different models and develop regulatory tools to encourage change that works within the context of the Town’s existing neighborhoods.

Many of the issues related to housing diversity and neighborhood design can be wholly or partially addressed through the Town’s Zoning Bylaw and Subdivision Regulations. The challenge for any community as it begins to think about these issues is to consider what elements are appropriate to regulate and what elements should be left to the discretion of property owners. These discussions can be very challenging at the community level and it is important for Towns like Easton to have open and honest dialogue—working through any tensions that arise between the desire to protect property rights and the desire to preserve many of the features that contribute

Potential Tools for Easton to Diversify Housing:

- Smaller lot options through a refined cluster housing bylaw;
- Potential expansion of Easton’s Chapter 40R program;
- Application of the state’s Compact Neighborhoods program;
- Detached Accessory Dwelling Units;
- Small multi-family models like quad-plex units;
- Townhomes; and
- Cottage communities.

to Easton's quality of life and economic success.

At the time Envision Easton was developed, the Zoning Bylaw applied a fairly uniform density for residential development town-wide, generally requiring lots with at least 40,000 sq. ft. of land and 150 feet of frontage on a public way for single family homes. There are some limited opportunities to deviate from this density through a special permit mechanism. The bylaw also allows for limited small-scale apartments in the Business District (with large minimum lot size that generally makes these developments infeasible), and two-family homes by special permit within the Residential or Business Districts. This fairly uniform approach to most of the residential areas provides a level of predictability for the Town. Requiring lots of a certain size and geometry helps to ensure that on-site disposal of wastewater will be feasible. With this approach as the foundation for residential development in the community, the Town can begin to explore other regulatory tools that provide some opportunity for different models. The Town has already had success in diversification with the application of Chapter 40R (a.k.a the State's 'Smart Growth District' program) in places around Queset Commons.

A community-wide education campaign and discussion around different housing types should occur in advance of drafting any proposed regulatory language meant to address housing diversity. Questions that should be explored in detail as a precursor to zoning reform include:

1. What are our options for different housing types?
2. What opportunities do different areas of the community offer (i.e., market opportunities, access, infrastructure, etc.)?
3. What housing types suit the needs of current and future residents?
4. What housing types can fit the traditional, historic character of Easton?
5. What areas of Town would be appropriate for different housing types?
6. What standards should be regulated? When does regulation "go too far"?

With answers to these questions, Easton will be well-prepared to identify a regulatory framework and specific tools that can help diversify housing while protecting its neighborhoods and the natural environment.

3. **The Town should coordinate future residential development with plans to expand or increase the capacity of local infrastructure.**

Beyond neighborhood impacts, there are coordination issues between infrastructure investment and housing that operate more on a town-wide scale. Infrastructure that supports wastewater treatment, transportation, and pedestrian and bicycle mobility impacts the cost of new development, quality of life, and the Town's capacity for growth. Easton can direct growth to areas that have the most capacity, and help to manage the cost of improvements to both existing residents and new development by coordinating residential development with investments in hard infrastructure.

Wastewater disposal in Easton is currently the greatest infrastructure constraint. This limitation was discussed during the community engagement process. Discussion was primarily

related to commercial or industrial properties that cannot achieve their full potential through the use of conventional on-site wastewater disposal. Easton's Comprehensive Wastewater Management Plan (CWMP) establishes the five highest priority areas of need in the community, where investment in infrastructure will be needed in the future to facilitate strategic economic growth. These areas include North Easton Village, South Easton, Five Corners, Turnpike Street, and Easton Center. As wastewater solutions are financed and implemented, the Town will need to be prepared to regulate the scale and density of development that could follow. These areas will represent tremendous opportunities to address many of the housing needs within the community as well as driving higher levels of commerce and fiscal revenue. Easton already has success in this regard with two major projects, Ames Shovel Works and Queset Commons. These projects enabled the Town to leverage the construction of wastewater treatment facilities that will serve the immediate surrounding neighborhoods in addition to the proposed developments.

In addition to wastewater treatment, residential development can be coordinated with transportation infrastructure and other public amenities that serve both existing and future residents. The Town guides the construction of new roadways, pedestrian and bicycle paths, open space, and stormwater management by means of its subdivision rules and regulations. The Town should continue to identify best practices and prioritize links for establishing connected networks, so these investments provide the optimal public benefit. Major development projects such as Ames Shovel Works also present opportunities to facilitate improvements to existing transportation infrastructure in developed areas. The potential development of commuter rail stations in North Easton would provide added incentive to examine other housing models that can respond to the market created by increased access to public transportation.

4. Easton will continue to work toward achieving the goal set by the Commonwealth for 10% affordable housing, and shall consider housing needs after reaching that threshold.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, like many other states, plays a significant role in how communities provide housing to families that qualify as “low to moderate income”. Perhaps the most powerful mechanism is the state law provision known as “Chapter 40B”, which provides a tool known as the “Comprehensive Permit”. This tool allows developers to override local zoning and regulatory controls when they propose a residential development in which at least 20% of the housing units are affordable to low and moderate income households. These homes are deed restricted in a way that keeps the resale value “affordable” and allows the units to be counted on the states Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI). Communities that have at least 10% of their overall housing stock recorded on the SHI have the ability to deny or condition Comprehensive Permits that do not align with local planning goals. Communities that do not meet the 10% goal are vulnerable to Comprehensive Permit proposals that often significantly exceed the density regularly allowed on a particular parcel of land.

Easton has made significant progress over the past decade toward achieving the 10% goal for SHI units. The Town will be approximately 280 units short of 10% after previously approved 40B subdivisions are constructed. Further comprehensive permit proposals currently under review could move the Town closer to achieving this goal. Once that 10% threshold is reached, Easton will need to shift policy towards maintaining it as the community continues to grow.

Looking Ahead: Multi-Family Housing

While the Envision Easton process was ongoing, the Town entertained several proposals for housing at varying levels of commitment from the different applicants. While not all of these projects actually went through the full permit process, each was considered under the Chapter 40B Comprehensive Permit mechanism. Two of these projects proposed large (+/- 250 unit) multi-family housing developments. This apparent market pressure to build multi-family housing potentially reflects the nationwide trend, particularly for areas close to cities like Boston. These proposals suggest that continued pressure to develop multi-family housing through the Comprehensive Permit may occur in Easton. If local and state officials view new applications as “consistent with local needs”, the Town could see an increase of several hundred multi-family units in the coming years. The addition of this number of multi-family units could impact the community with greater demands for services and potential traffic impacts. Easton must also work to fully understand the market implications of adding this number of multi-family units to its overall housing stock.

The addition of several hundred multi-family units as part of Comprehensive Permit applications would push Easton beyond the 10% statutory threshold under Chapter 40B. Easton will have greater control of how subsidized housing is produced in town after it achieves the 10% goal and gains greater local control of the Comprehensive Permit process. In order to maintain this control, the Town will need to increase the number of units on the SHI at a rate proportionate to new housing growth (i.e., stay above 10%). Monitoring existing subsidized housing units to ensure that they remain affordable to low and moderate income households and seeking opportunities to add SHI units through smaller scale projects can help the Town to stay above the 10% threshold. The Town can continue to entertain Comprehensive Permits where it deems a proposal is consistent with the community’s needs as part of a larger suite of tools designed to address housing needs in a sustainable and comprehensive manner. Continued coordination and support of the Housing Authority, the Affordable Housing Trust, and the Community Preservation Committee will be an integral part of this continued success. Easton may also wish to seek out partnerships with developers that have a proven track record of working with communities to provide high quality subsidized housing that meets local needs.

Goals, Objectives and Actions for Housing and Neighborhoods

	Lead Agency	Time Horizon (1-2 years; 2-5 years; 5-10 years)
Goal H-1: Match opportunities for housing with the needs of all of Easton’s residents.		
Objective 1.1 Provide diverse housing alternatives appropriate for seniors, young adults, families, small households, and people with mobility limitations.		
Action 1: Undertake a study to identify specific recommendations and consider zoning to create opportunities for a broader range of housing types.	Planning Board, Planning and Community Development	2-5 years
Objective 1.2 Identify areas that can accommodate new residential development, redevelopment, and infill development.		
Action 1: Identify areas for higher density zoning that also encourage protection of remaining open space.	Planning and Community Development, Planning Board	1-2 years
Action 2: Consider areas for compact housing districts, condominiums, duplexes, small single family units on small lots or on land owned in common.	Planning Board, Planning and Community Development	1-2 years
Action 3: Continue to prioritize sewer investment to serve residential neighborhoods with existing need and/or new development potential.	Board of Selectmen, DPW	Ongoing
Action 4: Coordinate housing development with investments in transportation and economic development.	Board of Selectmen, Town Administrator, Planning/ Zoning Board	Ongoing
Goal H-2: Protect the character of residential neighborhoods.		
Objective 2.1 Encourage development that reflects the density and scale of the existing neighborhood.		
Action 1: Establish advisory design guidelines to encourage new development or modifications to existing structures compatible with the neighborhood character.	Planning Board	2-5 years
Action 2: Analyze and refine zoning to align with development patterns that exist in different areas of the Town.	Planning and Community Development, Planning Board	2-5 years
Action 3: Consider a bylaw imposing stronger design standards on structures out of scale with other homes in the neighborhood.	Planning Board, Historic Commission	2-5 years

Objective 2.2	Encourage preservation of the Town's older housing stock and adaptive reuse of existing structures.		
Action 1:	Identify opportunity sites for adaptive reuse.	Planning and Community Development	1-2 years
Action 2:	Encourage reinvestment in established areas and rehabilitation of obsolete structures.	Historical Commission, Planning/Zoning Board	Ongoing
Action 3:	Facilitate rehabilitation and adaptation of existing structures to meet housing needs.	Affordable Housing Trust, Historical Commission	Ongoing
Objective 2.3	Enhance infrastructure to support residential neighborhoods.		
Action 1:	Undertake pedestrian/bicycle network plan to identifying priorities and funding opportunities.	Trails Committee	2-5 years
Action 2:	Consider regulatory incentives to encourage neighborhood infrastructure enhancements in connection with housing development.	Planning Board, Planning and Community Development	5-10 years
Action 3:	Implement the Comprehensive Wastewater Management Plan.	Board of Selectmen, DPW	Ongoing
Action 4:	Promote public and private investment in infrastructure and amenities that support and complement housing and mixed use development.	Planning Board, Board of Selectmen	Ongoing
Action 5:	Consider zoning to allow small scale business serving residential neighborhoods.	Planning Board, Planning and Community Development	2-5 years
Goal H-3:	Foster community partnerships to address housing needs.		
Objective 3.1	Build support for housing policy and investment through civic engagement.		
Action 1:	Build public consensus around and establish locations for housing.	Planning/Zoning Board, Planning and Community Development, Affordable Housing Trust	2-5 years
Action 2:	Incorporate broad public participation in developing zoning strategies to address housing needs.	Planning and Community Development, Planning/Zoning Board	Ongoing
Action 3:	Educate the public about affordable housing and create a dialogue about community needs and objectives.	Affordable Housing Trust, Council on Aging, Veterans' Services, Housing Authority	Ongoing

Objective 3.2	Coordinate available resources to address the need of residents for affordable housing.		
Action 1:	Identify community partners to facilitate development that is affordable.	Affordable Housing Trust	Ongoing
Action 2:	Continue working toward the State mandated goal of 10% of the Town’s housing stock qualify as “affordable”.	Affordable Housing Trust, Board of Selectmen	1-2 years
Action 3:	Continue to support the efforts of the Affordable Housing Trust.	Board of Selectmen, Town Administrator	Ongoing
Objective 3.3	Coordinate public resources with private capital.		
Action 1:	Use Housing Trust funds to leverage housing development projects that provide public benefits.	Affordable Housing Trust	2-5 years
Action 2:	Track affordable housing units with expiring affordability restrictions and pursue opportunities to preserve affordable housing.	Planning and Community Development	Ongoing
Action 3:	Ensure that affordable housing units are monitored for compliance with fair housing and affordability requirements.	Planning and Community Development	Ongoing
Action 4:	Identify opportunities for redevelopment or infill development in the vicinity of proposed train stations and areas with potential sewer capacity.	Planning and Community Development, Planning/Zoning Board	5-10 years