

July 26, 2020

Equity and racial justice housing amendments must be prioritized in the economic development bill – a housing package without them would harm vulnerable communities

People across the Commonwealth were already struggling with out-of-control housing costs, eviction, and displacement prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, we face an additional challenge: the prospect of tens of thousands of coronavirus-related evictions and foreclosures upon expiration of the moratorium.

The populations hit hardest by the housing crisis are also among the most impacted by COVID-19: working class residents, low to moderate-income households, Black people, immigrants, and communities of color. The “Housing Choice” measure would do little to help these groups and in some cases would actually cause harm. **It would be unconscionable to move forward with Governor Baker’s plan while neglecting the needs of the most vulnerable.** Therefore, we call on the Legislature to revise Housing Choice & include the Equity & Racial Justice Housing Amendments in the economic development bill:

- **Local Options for Tenant Protections, Amendment #66**
- **Right to Counsel (legal representation in eviction cases), Amendment #82**
- **Tenant right to purchase (First Right of Refusal), Amendment #269**
- **Local Option Transfer Fee to Fund Affordable Housing, Amendment #34**
- **ID access for people experiencing homelessness, Amendment #194**
- **COVID-19 Housing Stability Act, Amendment #439**

The Governor’s Housing Choice plan paves the way for approval of more new housing, but does not take the necessary steps¹ to ensure that new projects include truly affordable homes. The majority of units produced will likely be far too expensive to help with the crisis of unaffordability and displacement that many lower-income communities face right now. Further, the Governor’s proposal does nothing to address the negative collateral impacts of new luxury development. In many parts of our state, Housing Choice could worsen the crisis for lower-income people and communities of color by helping to usher in a new wave of segregated luxury development that will [intensify gentrification](#)² and [lead to displacements](#).

“Production” alone is not the answer to our housing crisis. The idea that building luxury housing will help all of us sounds like the faulty trickle-down theory sometimes used to justify tax cuts for the rich. We have witnessed rapid development in one Boston neighborhood after another followed by astronomical rent increases and an enormous displacement crisis that threatens residents and their communities.

“Production” is no panacea for residents of smaller cities either. In Lynn, for example, plans for three new projects will create 2,000 luxury units, a [gated community](#),⁴ and not a single affordable home.

As a coalition of groups that organize working class, low and moderate income tenants and homeowners, we are on the front lines of our state’s housing crisis. **Behind the [alarming](#)⁵ statistics on [cost burden](#),⁶ [evictions](#),⁷ and [shortages of affordable housing](#)⁹ are the people and communities we work with every day: [elders](#)¹⁰ being forced out of neighborhoods they helped build; parents who have less time with their children because they are working second and third jobs to keep up with rent or mortgage; multiple families living crammed into one apartment; people trapped in abusive domestic situations because they can’t afford to move; a growing number of people experiencing homelessness; patients suffering from [physical and mental health](#)¹¹ issues created or exacerbated by housing instability; people losing communal ties and support when they are displaced; students unable to focus because of stress over eviction; people of color disproportionately harmed by [eviction](#)¹² and gentrification; communities losing culture and social capital. The pandemic has added a new dimension to this crisis and intensified the negative health impacts.**

The Governor’s proposal does little to address the needs of these people, and we reject the idea of passing it now and considering additional measures to protect against displacement later. If a “production” measure supported by wealthy interests is passed on its own, reforms that directly assist working class, low- and moderate-income people – and protect us from the impact of more luxury development – will likely be left to languish. We are facing an emergency and we can’t afford to wait.

A housing package including the Governor’s Housing Choice plan but not the equity and racial justice amendments would be unbalanced and should be rejected. But that is not the outcome we want.

Massachusetts desperately needs action to address housing; zoning reform can be one part of a strong response if coupled with measures that ensure affordability, promote fair housing, and prevent displacement.

The Legislature has an opportunity to bring constituencies together by linking zoning reform with equity and racial justice **through passage of a revised Housing Choice along with the Equity & Racial Justice Housing Amendments.** That would move us toward a goal we should all share as we struggle to address systemic racism and build toward a strong and equitable recovery: protecting the most vulnerable and securing the human right to safe, dignified, affordable housing for all residents of our Commonwealth.

— Homes for All Massachusetts, Springfield No One Leaves, Right to the City Boston, New England United for Justice, Lynn United for Change, Chinatown Community Land Trust, Chinese Progressive Association, City Life/Vida Urbana, Arise for Social Justice, Alternatives for Community & Environment

NOTES – Homes for All Massachusetts statement – July 26, 2020

Full statement: <https://homesforallmass.netlify.app/content/hfamass-statement-equity-amendments-2020-07-26.pdf>

- ¹ In a few specific circumstances, the measure does require inclusion of a small number of homes for people at 80% of Area Median Income (AMI). That leaves out most people who need help, and there is actually not a major lack of housing in the 80% AMI segment (see https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/SHP_MA.pdf). Under the governor's proposal, apartments in Greater Boston with rents set to be manageable for a family of four making over \$80,000 per year (see <http://www.bostonplans.org/housing/income,-asset,-and-price-limits>) would satisfy the requirement for inclusion of “affordable” housing. That is not truly affordable and neglects the populations with greatest need. Further, it is striking that Housing Choice seems to make it easier for municipal governments to permit luxury developments while maintaining the restrictive status quo when it comes to local initiatives such as inclusionary zoning that help lower-income households.
- ² See <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/globelocal/2018/08/02/will-lynn-revival-leave-residents-behind/94EgqM8cpaH5DBdfhXHjRL/story.html>
- ³ See <https://shelterforce.org/2018/11/05/heres-what-we-actually-know-about-market-rate-housing-development-and-displacement/>
- ⁴ See <https://www.wgbh.org/news/2018/04/05/how-we-live/gear-works-project-could-boost-lynn-or-change-it-completely>
- ⁵ See <https://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2019/02/19/rents-soar-boston-low-income-tenants-try-stave-off-eviction/QddCq1bLrV3JQhaFTzYnGP/story.html>
- ⁶ See <https://www.policylink.org/resources-tools/renters-rise-cities-thrive>
- ⁷ See <https://commonwealthmagazine.org/opinion/eviction-rates-alarming-in-gateway-cities/>
- ⁸ See <https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2019/04/03/boston-fed-report-paints-bleak-picture-for-low-income-renters/GBEs7mtdroncuNG4AJwhO/story.html>
- ⁹ See <https://reports.nlihc.org/sites/default/files/oor/files/reports/state/MA-2020-OOR.pdf>
- ¹⁰ See http://www.clvu.org/chocolate_factory_petition
- ¹¹ See <https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2017/03/16/eviction-public-health-lara-jirmanus>
- ¹² See <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-01/black-renters-in-boston-face-highest-eviction-risk>