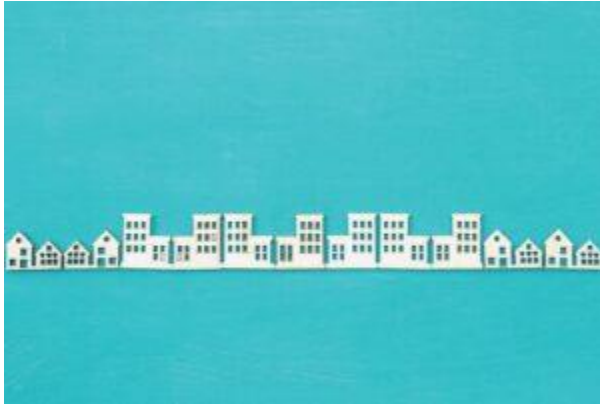


Realtors on Beacon Hill: Build More, Skip Rent Control

By Sam Doran | State House News Service | Jun 13, 2023 |



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As renters and would-be homebuyers face an affordability crisis, a leading trade group for the people who facilitate home sales is eyeing new building projects as the solution.

“Rent control tries to attack a symptom of our lack of building. And that’s not the way to fix the issue. We need to build more housing,” Justin Davidson told Massachusetts Association of Realtors members as they prepared to visit House and Senate offices Monday.

Elected officials in Boston are among those trying to tackle the affordability issue by capping rent increases, which Davidson, MAR’s government affairs director, called a “harmful” policy.

“If we build enough housing, if people have the options of where to live and what type of home to live in, we don’t need rent control,” Davidson said.

The group also pointed to increased state funding for rental voucher programs as a way to address the problem without invoking rent control, and supports a tax-deductible savings program (H.2727 / S.1787) to help people bank away up to \$5,000 per year to put toward their first property.

A Rep. Angelo Puppolo bill pertaining to zoning reforms was touted by the Realtors as a top priority, featuring increased by-right zoning for multifamily housing and so-called in-law apartments, and a lower local threshold to win approval for variances and special permits.

“So much housing in Massachusetts is reliant on a special permit or a variance, and a supermajority threshold is so incredibly difficult to meet,” Davidson said of the proposed move to a simple majority for those votes.

Lt. Gov. Kim Driscoll, a former Salem mayor, recalled that Realtors “were with us” on housing goals in the Witch City, and were “standing up in zoning meetings, supporting the conversations in the local watering holes to promote projects.”

“There’s 351 cities and towns in this state. The state doesn’t build housing, it happens in the ground, in the places you live, where you work, where we need it, where it’s also hard to get done,” the lieutenant governor said.

MAR opposes transfer tax and rent control bills that many housing advocates are promoting as possible solutions, and Davidson also lumped the transfer tax into a category of “harmful policies.” “You’ve worked with buyers that know that they can’t just come up with a few thousand extra dollars to close the deal,” Davidson said, adding that transfer fees are “exclusionary.”

Legislation to create a local-option transfer fee has been pushed by proponents who hope to apply the fee to transactions greater than \$1 million, although an enabling bill has provisions in it to allow it to apply in any community.

Other association priorities include a real estate licensure bill dealing with required coursework on diversity and fair housing law (H.265 / S.166), and proposed tax-exempt grants for owners of [houses with crumbling, pyrrhotite-contaminated concrete foundations](#) (S.495 / S.2242).

The same day, Senate President Karen Spilka said a suite of tax credits aimed at incentivizing new housing development will not be “the end of what the Senate will be doing on housing” during a separate media availability with reporters.

Asked if she expects an omnibus housing bill to emerge during the 2023-2024 session, Spilka would not commit, only acknowledging the housing challenges and proposed solutions pending before the legislature.

“We will be looking at other reforms and other ways. We all know we’ll be working with the administration, the new housing secretary,” Spilka said. “When I go out, I hear about workforce and housing. Those are the two areas that we all are focusing on and putting a lot of intensity to. So we will continue to be looking at that. The Senate’s tax relief proposal, I hope, is a big step forward, but it will not be the last step.”

The tax relief bill due for deliberations in the Senate on Thursday includes housing provisions, such as a boost to the cap for the Housing Development Incentive Program (HDIP) and a local-option real estate property tax exemption for lower-income renters.

State House News Service staff writer Chris Lisinski contributed to this report.