

Walsh administration calls for 50,000 new units of housing in Boston

[Sandra Larson](#) | 10/15/2014, 11:15 a.m.



Mayor Martin Walsh announces his new housing plan Oct. 9 in front of the One Greenway construction site in Chinatown. The new plan targets housing for low- and middle-income residents, seniors and students. Mayor's Office photo by Isabel Leon

One strategy to create more mid-priced housing will be to lean on colleges to build more on-campus housing. Walsh administration officials predict this will free up 5,000 housing units in neighborhoods such as Fenway, Mission Hill and Allston. The new housing goals also include an excess 4,000 units to loosen the market, in an effort to keep supply ahead of demand to stabilize market prices.

In his speech, Walsh highlighted new tactics and new collaborations to lower development costs.

“We will provide zoning relief, tax incentives, streamlined permitting, and free up city-owned land,” he said. “Developers will work with us in a transparent process. And my former colleagues in the building trades are looking at different ways to deliver construction in a different way, so they can be part of the solution.”

John Barros, the city’s chief of Economic Development and a Housing Task Force member, expressed confidence that the city can and will take steps to reduce building costs, including rezoning for greater density and streamlining the permitting process.

Speaking to the Banner after Walsh's speech, he said the city has tools to hold developers to promises on middle-income housing creation.

"There are levers the city can pull," he said. "We're on this."

The 131-page housing plan report includes goals and actions for meeting housing needs for each population segment as well as sections on strong and healthy neighborhoods, preservation of current affordable housing stock and green/sustainable housing.

For strong neighborhoods, the plan emphasizes mitigating gentrification and providing housing options for people at various income levels and life stages.

More affordable housing is to be added to sections of Boston that currently have little, while mixed-income developments will be directed to areas that already have a high concentration of income-restricted affordable units. Another action step is exploring land trusts as an anti-displacement strategy, and the report refers specifically to the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative's longtime work in that area.

"The inclusion of the community land trust proposal in the report demonstrates the Walsh administration's commitment to development without displacement," noted DSNI executive director Christopher Jones in an email.

"We need to make sure that [the housing plan] doesn't end up on a shelf," Jones added.

The plan was developed over several months by the mayor's Housing Task Force, made up of housing and community advocates, nonprofit and for-profit developers, building trade representatives, data experts, academics, state legislators and representatives of several city and state agencies. Demographic data and analysis were provided by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council.

The report directly addresses raising home ownership for people of color, calling for greater attention to discrimination in lending practices and disparities in buying opportunities in order to increase diversity in the ranks of home owners.

Dion Irish, director of the city's Office of Fair Housing and Equity and a Task Force member, expressed satisfaction with the process and the plan.

While fair housing doesn't have a chapter of its own, it's infused throughout the plan, he said. He noted in particular the plan's attention to fair lending practices and a new initiative to increase lead-safe housing options for families.

"I don't think anyone has been left out," said Irish in a phone interview. "If we missed anything, it's not because we didn't try. We heard many voices, and that's reflected in the plan."

While the new plan was praised by many for its inclusiveness and spirit of collaboration, housing advocates say additional measures and continuing vigilance are still key.

“Organizations that care about affordable housing need to stay on top of it, and work together to realize these goals,” said Kathy Brown, coordinator at the Boston Tenant Coalition. “The housing crisis is really severe. This [plan] is great, but we need to look at federal and state strategies, too.”

Brown would like to see more discussion of implementing a tax to discourage people from flipping properties, and measures to limit rent increases without hurting small landlords.

“How can you not think about [rent control] when you see these crazy rents and see people being pushed farther and farther out?” she said.

Lydia Lowe, executive director of the Chinese Progressive Association, who also served on the Housing Task Force, echoed Brown’s concern for low-income tenants.

“It’s not really solving the affordable housing problem,” Lowe said. She praised the process as a “sincere effort” and acknowledged positive steps toward increasing middle-income housing, but said a true solution requires more regulation and federal investment as well as strong affordability preservation strategies such as nonprofit acquisition of housing.

Chinatown is one of the areas facing sharply rising rents that spark fears of displacement of longtime lower-income residents. As the housing plan was announced, the local community was highly visible at the event, from Great Taste Bakery’s table of coffee and pastries to leaders of Chinatown agencies mingling in the crowd, to a podium appearance by Janelle Chan, executive director of the Asian Community Development Corporation. The nonprofit ACDC is co-developer of One Greenway.

Chan spoke to the Banner about One Greenway, which she said will have the highest percentage of affordable units of any single Boston project right now, with 40 percent — 152 of 363 units — designated for moderate, low or very-low income tenants.

“We’re hoping this won’t be the only one,” she said. “Chinatown wants more affordable housing. There’s no NIMBY-ism in this neighborhood.”

Chinatown aside, the “not-in-my-back-yard” attitude that some Boston neighborhood groups take against high-density housing could very well be an obstacle in achieving the city’s ambitious housing goals. Boston Globe columnist Lawrence Harmon noted recently that Walsh has been hesitant to push even moderately dense projects in the face of residents who “reflexively oppose” new construction on their turf.

The plan is expected to generate \$21 billion in new development, and to create an estimated 51,000 construction jobs over 17 years.

The final sections of the report address ways to fund the surge of new housing, and accountability and efficiency improvements to ensure a transparent process and steady progress.

The city will need an additional \$20 million in resources annually to support the costs of building city-funded housing. Funding sources may include more efficient use of state and federal resources, adjustments to the local Inclusionary Development Policy and developer-paid linkage fees, and evaluating adoption of the Community Preservation Act, which allows a property tax surcharge to fund open space and affordable housing.

The plan gains strength from its sophisticated data analysis, a team drawn from diverse community and government segments and what appears to be a commitment by the Walsh administration to new collaboration between government, labor and private developers. In addition, plans include formation of a Housing Innovation Lab that draws together local academic and private-sector thinkers to help devise policy, financing and design solutions for housing challenges.

Irish noted the Task Force is not disbanding with the completion of the report. Members have been charged with staying engaged, reconvening periodically and keeping an eye on progress.

“The report creates a road map for how we want to address problems. I think the difference will be seen over time,” Irish said. “The ongoing work will be what makes this plan real.”

For more information, see the full “Housing a Changing City” report at bit.ly/Boston2030, and follow the Twitter hashtag #Boston2030 for news and discussion.