



TOWN OF ARLINGTON  
MASSACHUSETTS

DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

MEMORANDUM

To: MBTA Communities Working Group

From: David Morgan, Environmental Planner

Date: July 31, 2023

Subject: Criteria for Environmental Bonus in MBTA Communities Zoning

Town plans reflect the need for development criteria that consider sustainability, climate resilience, and ecological land management.<sup>1</sup> Residents have underscored their support for these goals in conversations about MBTA Communities and made specific requests that the Town incorporate such aims in the zoning criteria. The Department of Planning and Community Development has explored options to this end and finds the SITES rating system by the Sustainable SITES Initiative to be the best framework to apply in the context of an MBTA Communities. The proposed bonus is of one additional floor for a Gold-level certifiable development on the SITES scale.

Like its companion rating system LEED, SITES has become a standard for landscape design and construction. SITES emphasizes the design, construction, and maintenance of outdoor spaces but, through its synergies with LEED, also ensures healthy and sustainable buildings. SITES is evaluated across ten categories and the system has a maximum score of 200 points.<sup>2</sup> A checklist of SITES prerequisites and credits is attached to this memo.

The criteria align well with Arlington's existing bylaws and regulations. The Town's requirements ensure that compliance with SITES is easily within reach. Major developments are already typically asked to manage precipitation beyond the baseline, to provide bike and pedestrian friendly transit options, and to landscape with ecologically appropriate species—all of which are SITES criteria.

The proposed MBTA Communities zoning is further compatible with SITES. Prerequisites like protecting floodplain function, conserving aquatic ecosystems, and conserving habitats for sensitive species are accomplished owing simply to the location of MBTA Communities zoning districts. Additional SITES points are awarded for redevelopment of degraded parcels, infill

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<sup>1</sup> The Arlington Master Plan, Net Zero Action Plan, Hazard Mitigation Plan, Open Space and Recreation Plan, and Public Land Management plans have action items related to working with private actors to realize the Town's goals on these topics.

<sup>2</sup> Site context (13 points), Pre-design assessment and planning (3), Site design – Water (23), Site design – Soil + Vegetation (40), Site design – Materials Selection (41), Site design – Human Health + Well-Being (30), Construction (17), Operations + Maintenance (22), Education + Performance Monitoring (11), Innovation or Exemplary Performance (9)

development, connection to multimodal transit networks, and preserving historic features, all of which are applicable to the districts.

SITES is a suitable system for this context because it incentivizes outcomes that the Town wishes to see but does not yet have the capacity to require. For example, residents have requested features like public, accessible site use (e.g., in the form of pocket parks) be required in the MBTA Communities districts. SITES helps to realize this goal by awarding points to the creation of open space where residents can sit in landscaped outdoor areas, enjoy green streetscapes, and enjoy the benefits of those amenities, like physical activity, mental restoration, enhanced social connection, and equitable site use. Beyond the existing Stormwater Bylaw, Arlington's Engineering Division advises redevelopment projects to manage precipitation on site beyond the baseline and finds that designs can be achieved easily and cost-effectively that meet the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile precipitation event, in part through the design of functional stormwater features as amenities (e.g., rain gardens). Both best practices are SITES credits.

Even with such strong alignment, it will be necessary to adapt the SITES scorecard for use in Arlington. Certain landscape features to be conserved or enhanced under SITES are not present in the MBTA Communities districts—healthy soils and appropriate vegetation, special status species, to name a couple—while, at the opposite end of the spectrum, some criteria are not required under SITES that are essential to Town goals, such as reducing urban heat island effects. In addition to the standard scorecard, a modified SITES checklist that has been tailored for use in Arlington is attached to this memo for your consideration.

DPCD requests that a one floor bonus be awarded within the MBTA Communities districts for developments that meet a SITES minimum score of 100 of 200 (Gold Level). The modified checklist is tailored to Town plans and priorities and instead has a maximum score of 100. Minimum compliance across all categories will achieve 76 points. Gold Level compliance is set at 80 points.

DPCD recommends that site plan review for SITES compliance and ongoing reporting be received, assessed, and recorded by Department staff. Successful implementation of these criteria will require that new owners be appraised of the requirements. DPCD recommends that notice of the requirements run with the land and be recorded with the title for the property.