

MBTA COMMUNITIES

ZONING FOR MULTIFAMILY HOUSING IN ARLINGTON



& The Fossil Fuel-Free Building Demonstration Program / Climate Change Mitigation

What is MBTA Communities / Section 3A?

The MBTA Communities law, or Section 3A, requires that 177 communities in eastern MA with access to MBTA service, including Arlington, amend their zoning to allow multifamily housing. The goal is to address the housing crisis by encouraging new housing production in close proximity to public transportation. Informed by community input and existing Town priorities, volunteer residents in the MBTA Communities Working Group have developed a proposed zoning district that extends throughout our community from Arlington Heights to East Arlington and encourages multifamily housing in a variety of sizes and price points, near transit, retail, and other services.

What is the Municipal Fossil Fuel-Free Building Demonstration Program?

In 2022, the MA legislature passed a law requiring the MA Department of Energy Resources to establish a demonstration program in which 10 municipalities in the state may adopt legislation requiring new building construction or major renovation projects to be fossil fuel free. This program responds to the efforts of several communities, including Arlington in 2020, to pass fossil fuel free bylaws and Home Rule Petitions requesting authority to prohibit the use of fossil fuels in new construction and major renovations.

How does MBTA Communities relate to the Municipal Fossil Fuel-Free Building Demonstration Program?

To participate in the Municipal Fossil Fuel-Free Building Demonstration Program, communities applying must comply with one of three affordable housing requirements by February 11, 2024. The only requirement that Arlington can meet by the deadline is compliance with the MBTA Communities law.

Why does the Municipal Fossil Fuel-Free Building Demonstration Program matter?

Nearly 92% of Town Meeting Members voted in 2020 to pass a Clean Heat Bylaw prohibiting new fossil fuel infrastructure in new construction and major renovations. Buildings are responsible for the majority of Arlington's climate change-causing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. By participating in the Municipal Fossil Fuel-Free Building Demonstration Program, we will ensure that new and renovated buildings in Arlington won't use fossil fuels and won't lock in new sources of GHG emissions for decades to come. This strategy is crucial to the successful achievement of local and regional GHG reduction goals, including Arlington's net zero by 2050 GHG emissions goal. Participating in the Demonstration Program also ensures that any multifamily housing built in the proposed MBTA Communities zoning district will not use fossil fuels.



For more information about the MBTA Communities process, visit tinyurl.com/MBTACommunitiesArlington

Why should Arlington be one of the ten communities to participate in the Municipal Fossil Fuel-Free Building Demonstration Program?

The Fossil Fuel Free Demonstration Program is a pilot project, intended for ten leading communities to develop and share what they learn. Because of Arlington's continued leadership around building efficiency and electrification, our community is uniquely well-positioned to participate in the program. Furthermore, there is currently no ability to enter the program later; if Arlington does not qualify to participate now, it may be several years before we could join an expanded Demonstration Program or what may follow it.

Didn't we just pass a building code that bans fossil fuels?

No. Town Meeting did vote to adopt the Specialized Stretch Energy Code in 2023, which strongly favors all-electric new construction but does not prohibit the use of fossil fuels. It also does not apply to major renovations. Only participation in the Fossil Fuel-Free Demonstration Program will allow Arlington to make new construction and major renovations fossil fuel-free.

Why doesn't the proposed MBTA Communities zoning district mandate fully electric buildings or compliance with standards like Passive House?

The [MBTA Communities Compliance Guidelines](#) clarify that proposed zoning districts that impose requirements on multifamily housing but not on other types of buildings will not be in compliance with the MBTA Communities law. Subjecting multifamily housing to requirements that are different than requirements for all other housing is discriminatory and raises equity concerns. Therefore, requiring that the buildings constructed in the MBTA Communities zoning district be fully electric or meet standards like Passive House is not allowed. However, by complying with MBTA Communities, Arlington will have the opportunity to participate in the Fossil Fuel-Free Demonstration Program, which would enable Arlington to require all-electric buildings everywhere in town. Plus, Arlington has already opted in to the Specialized Stretch Energy Code, which imposes the highest energy efficiency requirements available to municipalities and also offers a Passive House pathway that buildings may pursue.

How does MBTA Communities zoning support the Town's efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change?

The proposed MBTA Communities zone encourages the development of multifamily housing near public transit and commercial corridors. The introduction of denser, transit-oriented housing is an explicit priority in the Town's Net Zero Action Plan (NZAP). Denser development is generally more energy efficient and encourages lifestyles with lower carbon footprints. Allowing for increased density near public transit will enable more residents to commute sustainably and reduce vehicle miles traveled. Walkable neighborhoods close to retail shops and services reduce automobile dependence. Furthermore, increasing our housing stock close to Boston addresses regional needs for more infill development rather than greenfield development which threatens natural habitats and farmland. Finally, if we do not pass an MBTA Communities zoning amendment, the State has made clear that the Town risks the loss of important funding sources, including Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) Planning and Project Grants, which continue to provide the Town with funds for critical climate mitigation and resilience initiatives that get us closer to our goals.



For more information about the MBTA Communities process, visit tinyurl.com/MBTACommunitiesArlington