

smart growth districts promise affordable housing

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Starting in April, communities across Massachusetts will be able to apply for a grant from the Planning Assistance Towards Housing (PATH) organization, a state group, to improve housing accessibility. To qualify for one of the \$600,000 grants, the community must demonstrate how the money will be used to contribute to housing production. An application form and guidelines will be available online this spring.

PATH is replacing the Priority Development Fund (PDF) as an organization under the Department of Housing and Community Development. Funding

from the PDF led to the creation of "smart growth districts" in the state, a precursor of sorts to the newly announced grant program.

The Smart Growth Zoning and Housing Production Act, also known as 40R, offer financial incentives for areas that zone a Smart Growth Overlay District. Since 2004, 27 cities and towns have created districts, with 9,780 housing units already approved by zoning commissions. To be eligible, these areas are required to be within a half mile of a transit station, include an area of concentrated development, or simply be dubbed "highly suitable." Many of the locations are labeled highly suitable, which could refer to existing underutilized facilities, access to transportation, or current infrastructure, among other factors. Several

projects are well underway, and towns such as Haverhill and North Reading have already completed zones.

Bill Pillsbury, economic development and planning director for the town of Haverhill, said he is satisfied with the new smart growth district in Haverhill's

downtown area, saying all of the units are filled. He is confident that the need for affordable housing will decrease due to the addition of the mixed-income smart growth plan.

"It was a huge project done in an expedited fashion but it's still a quality product and the units were absorbed right away," Pillsbury said.

The smart growth overlay district in North Reading has also been a success, according to planning administrator Danielle McKnight.

"The Edgewood Apartments have a total of 406 units, 102 of which are affordable. Construction is complete as of July 2013, the occupancy rate for the complex was 96 percent," McKnight said in an email.

A smart growth district is in the works on Olmsted Green in Mattapan. In 2004, Lena Park and the New Boston Fund LLC joined together to form Lena New Boston, the organization at the core of the development in Mattapan.

The Olmsted Green project is on the site of the former state hospital, which was decommissioned in the early 1980s. Lena New Boston put together a community outreach group when it was formed to gauge the needs of residents before determining how to use the site. Workforce and affordable housing were

determined to be the most effective ways to improve economic development in the Roxbury/Dorchester/Mattapan region of Boston.

Kirk Sykes, president of the Urban Strategy America Fund, L.P. at the A New Boston Real Estate Fund, said this effort is unique because of the level of inclusion. 59 percent of the people working on the project are women and/or minorities, according to Sykes.

"The best way to engaged the local community is their participation in construction, resulting in the project having some of the highest inclusion numbers of minority and women workers," said Sykes.

Karleen Porcena, operations manager for the Mattapan ABCD Family Service Center, often works with residents who are looking for advice on how to apply for affordable housing and be put on the waiting list.

"The Boston Housing Developments that are here [in Mattapan] are definitely for the lower bracket, as far as income is concerned, and I know there's always a crazy waiting list so there's definitely a need," said Porcena, regarding the current availability of affordable housing.

"We need affordable homes, not just subsidies for renters, so people can become homeowners, which is just as important," she added.

Porcena is also the lead organizer for Mattapan United, a community group that meets monthly at the ABCD Family Service Center. Mattapan United bases its goals on the interests of the community. They speak with residents and other stakeholders to identify strengths and weaknesses before determining seven action areas. One of those areas was housing, which Porcena felt needed more public discussion.

