

MAYOR MARTIN J. WALSH

HOUSING A CHANGING CITY

BOSTON 2030



CHAPTER 9

2014



GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Successfully delivering on the goals of this plan requires that the City not only make significant changes to its approach to housing development, but also requires significant reforms in how it conducts its business. There are many existing administrative systems that, left unchanged, will present substantial obstacles to achieving the goals of this plan. A new administration presents a singular opportunity to make the necessary reforms toward a more efficient, and more transparent, City Hall.

Mayor Walsh has already demonstrated his support for major reforms to the City's permitting process in order to support his economic development goals. A major component of this permitting reform will include transparency improvements, which are critical to achieving community support for the increased housing development envisioned by this plan. Furthermore, the housing services provided by both government

and non-profit partners can achieve greater results for Bostonians through enhanced collaboration. As the City embarks on the new priorities established within this plan, Boston is in a unique position to establish regional and even national leadership on housing policy. However, this vision can only be realized through accountability to the goals established here and through strong, lasting partnerships.



Government Efficiency and Accountability: Key Issues

The Permitting Process is Complex and Difficult to Navigate

The City has a complex permitting process, which, although created to protect the public good, has had the unintended consequence of stifling development and creativity while increasing costs and time to completion of projects. The zoning process can force developers to submit significant and sometimes costly changes to designs, and the community process can be opaque and unpredictable.

To avoid delay, developers will often design homes that conform narrowly to the requirements of zoning, even if the resulting design is not as good for the site as a building that requires zoning relief. A system where adherence to narrow zoning requirements trumps good design is not a system that is going to yield housing production of the quality and scale that this plan envisions.

A changing Boston requires the ability to build well-designed, cost-efficient housing, and changes to the permitting process will remove significant bottlenecks toward achieving this goal.

The Development Process lacks Transparency

Currently, it is challenging for interested citizens to engage fully in the development process. While the City's key development agencies have made significant

improvements to making information about specific developments available to the public, the process of finding this information can be challenging. There are also limited opportunities for the community to make its voice heard outside of scheduled community meetings. Furthermore, data about development projects is often unavailable or scattered across multiple sources.

Increasing housing development to the level envisioned in this plan will require completing numerous projects that will need zoning relief. However, only through transparent community process can the City ensure that new residential development conforms with the character of Boston's neighborhoods and does not create quality of life concerns.

Housing Services are fragmented and distributed across Agencies

Bostonians who want to rent an apartment, purchase a home, or repair their current home have many opportunities to do so. There are many City programs available to assist citizens at all socio-economic levels; however, there is no single point of entry for issues around housing. Additionally, it can be difficult for citizens to locate the assistance they need unless they are aware of the specific program or agency in which that program is housed.

Currently, housing resources are spread across City agencies, including the Department of Neighborhood Development, the Boston Housing Authority, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the Fair Housing Commission, the Boston Public Health Commission, and the Inspectional Services Department. Additionally, several important housing services in Boston are coordinated through non-profits as well as programs operated by the Commonwealth. The result is a piecemeal process that can be intimidating to enter, difficult to understand, and too often passes applicants from agency to agency with no common oversight regarding outcomes.

By not having a single access point for all housing issues, the City loses potential opportunities to assist additional people. In addition, housing services in the

City have a broad range of requirements, applications, and waiting lists that can be overwhelming to those who need assistance. Program requirements should be simplified whenever possible.

Boston's Leadership in Innovation remains untapped for Housing

Boston is a leader in creating housing at all socioeconomic levels; however, this leadership has mainly been established through the City of Boston's relationship with more traditional development partners. Currently, Boston is a hotbed of innovation, but the city's housing policy and development community could do more to partner with the innovation sector in finding technologies, designs or policies that result in new and better housing for Bostonians.





Government Efficiency and Accountability: Goals & Actions

1. Improve the permitting process to stimulate greater housing production

To achieve a greater rate of housing production, the City must remove the administrative red tape and inefficient processing that risk and cost to development. While the community voice must be heard in shaping the development of neighborhoods, through improved management and community outreach, the results of the permitting process can be made much more predictable for both developers and neighbors. To address existing permitting challenges, the City must take the following actions:

Improve the permitting application and administrative process by creating a universal online application portal that will allow developers to track the status of all permits associated with a project, along with identified timeframes for regulatory decisions on each permit. Further reforms to the process should explore options to allow a developer to apply for concurrent zoning relief and design review guidance.

Reform the Zoning Board of Appeals through the recently launched ZBA sub-committee targeting small business and small residential construction. By hearing these cases in a separate forum, the City expects scheduling to become smoother and turn-

around times to decrease for cases heard at the sub-committee as well as for larger housing development projects heard before the full ZBA. Additionally, further reforms should target improving the process used to notify the community of issues heard before the ZBA so that all community members are aware of the appropriate forum and timeline for community comment.

Launch a residential zoning reform process

Working closely with community partners, establish a process to create more as-of-right support for housing production citywide. This process will identify specific areas to be re-zoned for residential density around selected transit nodes. Additionally, this process should include zoning reforms to allow for increased as-of-right development for residential projects sited on vacant lots to encourage appropriate infill throughout the neighborhoods.

Strengthen performance management throughout the permitting process. City managers will be immediately made aware of permits outside of acceptable review timelines, so that they can work with employees to improve results. Through data-driven accountability, the City can earn a reputation for delivering more timely and consistent decisions during the development process.

2. Commit to complete development transparency

A housing agenda that will increase Boston's housing stock by 20 percent and generate \$21 billion in new development will have long-lasting impacts in all neighborhoods. To that end, residents must be able to easily see what is happening and what is going to happen in their neighborhood at all times. Currently, the City does not have good systems for providing this kind of universal transparency.

While key development agencies such as the BRA, DND, and ISD all have websites where information about their activities is available to the public, this information has not been assembled into a single, user-friendly platform where the public can have a complete, up-to-date understanding of everything that is happening in their communities.

Under the oversight of the Department of Innovation & Technology, the City will create a new, easy-to-access and interactive **Boston Development Online** website. On this site, residents will find all development activities and related public meetings in an easy-to-use platform. Simple features can provide huge benefits; for example, users should have the ability to type in an address, bring up a map of nearby projects, and link to existing web resources (BRA, ZBA, City-owned property sales, etc.).

The website should also provide mechanisms for residents to provide direct input into proposed

development projects. Input options should include both traditional outreach (community meetings and City staff contact information) as well as new communication vehicles designed to reach a broader audience, such as online community forums monitored by City staff. The website must also have multilingual capacities to ensure that non-English speakers can also be informed and have a say.

DND will pilot a new development website this Fall that will allow the public to access all DND-led developments and City-owned surplus property, along with an online forum for community comment. The lessons learned from this pilot launch will be used to launch the Boston Development Online platform in Fiscal Year 2016.

3. Centralize the City's housing-related resources

A recommendation of the Mayor's Housing Transition Team that should be implemented on a priority basis is for a consumer-friendly, one-stop center where people in need of housing can more easily access every opportunity available to them.

At the same time, the City wants to ensure that it retains multiple access points for consumers to obtain services in a language and context with which they are comfortable. For many Bostonians, the most convenient and comfortable access point may be a community-based organization, church, or trusted health care provider. Others might



not be comfortable contacting a government agency or using a web site. Therefore, the City will strive to find a solution that provides comprehensive services through a one-stop portal, while also continuing to collaborate with trusted local organizations.

The City of Boston also recognizes that the regulations governing how affordable units are made available are by no means uniform; different subsidy programs can require very different procedures for selecting tenants or buyers. The City also believes that significant progress can be made in simplifying the process if the cooperation of funders and property owners can be secured.

In order to centralize and coordinate housing-related resources, the City will:

Launch an online housing center streamlining the process by which Bostonians can access housing opportunities and assistance. While programs today are often marketed based on who the service provider is, the Online Housing Center will focus instead on presenting services based on customer need. A rent-burdened senior looking for new affordable senior housing, a low-income family seeking a subsidized rental, or a first-time homebuyer looking for an income-restricted homeownership unit will all have different needs.

Upon reaching the Online Housing Center, customers will be able to identify whether they need assistance as renters, current homeowners, or potential homebuyers, and will have access to a simple wizard which can walk them through determining their potential eligibility for programs.

The first launch of this website can simply link customers to each service provider's individual applications for services. Future additions to this website should explore leveraging a strong back-end customer relationship management software (such as DND's investment in Salesforce.com) to create customer assistance cases that will be managed by trained housing experts who will have accountability for results.

Those Bostonians who prefer to access services through a local community-based provider will continue to be encouraged to do so. The City will partner with community-based organizations, churches and others to ensure that social workers, housing counselors, and others are fully trained on how to use the website to assist their clients. This will help ensure that all Bostonians have access to the same services, regardless of how or where they enter the system.

Explore co-locating City housing policy and service providers at one location.

The City agencies focused on housing are spread across City Hall, DND's offices at Court Street, BHA's offices at Chauncy Street, and other sites. Co-locating these services may be an opportunity not only for simplifying access for customers and partners, but may also increase the level of collaboration across service and management teams while reducing administrative overhead costs. In 2015, the City should undertake a cost-benefit study to explore co-location of these services.

Bolster the City's strong partnerships with community-based organizations to expand outreach.

Community Development Corporations, housing service agencies, and other community-based organizations are essential partners for the City. These organizations often assist hard-to-serve individuals and families, such as linguistic minorities, people with disabilities, seniors, and others who might otherwise have difficulty accessing services. These organizations are also physically proximate to the people being served, can deliver services in the evenings and on weekends, and can leverage significant private and federal money that may not be available to a City agency. Additionally, these groups can bring an entrepreneurial component that might otherwise be missing. The City will continue to fund these organizations to deliver key services and programs including homeownership education, foreclosure counseling, home repair, lending, lead paint abatement, and more.

4. Establish Boston's Leadership in Housing Innovation

Although Boston is an epicenter for innovation in the architecture, design, finance and policy realms, few of the innovative new housing models envisioned in our academic and research centers are actually put to use in Boston.

To accelerate the pace of housing innovation, the City will seek partners to create a Housing Innovation Lab, focused on deploying real and practical solutions to address housing needs within Boston. Through a consortium of government, academic, and private-sector partners, the lab's focus will be to rapidly turn ideas into homes.

A successful Housing Innovation Lab should explore all facets of Boston's housing challenges, including innovations to lower the costs of housing, creating greater accessibility through improved design, or using housing policy as a tool for reducing crime. With the right investment and partnership, Boston could be the world leader in establishing next-generation housing that is greener, safer, smarter and more enjoyable for all Bostonians.

To be successful, the Housing Innovation Lab will need the backing and staff support of a well-resourced non-profit or academic partner that the City will work to recruit.



5. Ensure ongoing accountability to this plan

In order to successfully implement a comprehensive, 17-year plan, the City must put into place a rigorous process of reporting and accountability. To that end, the City must establish a process by which progress is regularly reported and the plan will be continually updated to keep up with evolving needs and market conditions. To do so, the City will:

Publish a work plan with clear deadlines for each of the goals established in this plan. By creating this work plan by the end of 2014, the City can establish both short- and long-term accountability toward accomplishing these goals.

Create a quarterly performance scorecard that tracks the key operational performance measures central to this plan, and publish this plan using the Boston About Results platform.

Provide the public with an annual report within 60 days of the end of each calendar year that tracks the overall progress made on all of the major strategic goals of this plan. This report should identify the results achieved in addition to the major areas where progress is lacking and assess the

issues driving these trends. This report should also provide updated demographic and market analysis to ensure the goals and strategies of the plan are still relevant and viable.

Regularly convene the Mayor's Housing Task Force to review the progress and issues raised in the annual report. One of the primary responsibilities of the Task Force will be to make recommendations on changes to the plan's goals or strategies where necessary and appropriate.

Continue to partner with the Office of Fair Housing and Equity, bearing in mind that accessibility to opportunity is key to achieving diversity. Boston must remain a diverse and welcoming city by ensuring access to fair lending practices, addressing impediments to housing choice, reducing racial and economic segregation, improving access to employment and services, and facilitating broader access to quality healthcare and quality education.

These mechanisms will ensure that Housing a Changing City: Boston 2030 is a living, continually evolving plan that will consistently be calibrated to meet Boston's changing housing needs.