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EDITORIAL

Newton wakes up to the dark side of America's housing laws

The reigning rules of suburbia have led to a country segregated by income, with the best zip codes and schools closed off to poor families. What happens when a rich city tries to reverse course?

By **The Editorial Board** , Updated February 21, 2020, **14 minutes ago**



A proposal by Newton Mayor Ruthanne Fuller calls for the city to buy the West Newton Armory and lease it a developer, which would convert and manage the property as affordable housing. JOHN HILLIARD FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

This is the first of a series of editorials about the future of housing in Newton that the Globe plans to publish in 2020.

If the city of Newton becomes a trailblazer at tackling inequality this year, it will be because, in 2013, the wealthy, mostly white suburb looked at itself in the mirror — and recoiled.

That was when the city's former mayor, Setti Warren, bowing to heavy neighborhood opposition, [yanked funding for](#) a plan to provide apartments for nine formerly

homeless people at an old brick fire station in Waban called Engine 6.

That move shouldn't have come as any surprise: Opponents were only following the time-tested suburban playbook, honed over a thousand fights against developers. The grass-roots uprising against new housing is not only the oldest story in America's suburbs, it's part of what has made them the pricey enclaves they are, ensuring that property values stay high while [deepening income segregation](#) and, in Massachusetts, leaving a handful of cities like Boston to shoulder the burden of housing the state's growing population.

But the silver lining was that the Engine 6 controversy shook the city's faith in suburban orthodoxy. The ugliness of the fight came as a painful epiphany, exposing how the quality-of-life, traffic, and environmental concerns so often cited in American suburbs to rationalize housing obstruction can serve as smokescreens for darker motives — like keeping certain kinds of people out.

“Newtonians were like, ‘What happened here?’” said Kathleen Hobson, the cofounder of the pro-housing group that formed amid the fight over the firehouse. “It was the thing that got a critical mass of residents up in arms.”

Josephine McNeil, the former director of [Citizens for Affordable Housing in Newton Development Organization](#), who spent decades fighting for affordable housing before the Engine 6 controversy erupted, said the controversy “surfaced” the city's longstanding gaps. She's noticed a shift: “The city is more receptive” to housing, she said — while pointing out that opponents have grown more vocal too.

Since then, the saga of Engine 6's demise has been told and retold, a rallying cry and unhealed wound. Hobson's group named itself Engine 6, keeping the episode at the

forefront of the city's conscience. And it's joined a broader movement, including veteran housing advocates in the city, climate activists, churches, and the business community, focused not just on housing for the homeless but also questioning the interlocking rules and zoning codes that have shaped America's suburbs into the nation's incubators of inequality.

"We have a long history of zoning and rulemaking that deliberately keeps out the poor and those of color from 'nice' neighborhoods," Hobson said. "But I had no clue at the time. What that fight told me, all the sudden, my epiphany, oh my god, this neighborhood exists because of a deliberate, longstanding effort to keep poor people and others less fortunate out."

Antidevelopment neighborhood groups, which have long dominated local activism with a familiar litany of worries about traffic and schools, suddenly no longer have the only megaphone in Newton. Researchers at Boston University have studied the way the local construction-approval process in Massachusetts often empowers an older, whiter, and wealthier minority of residents to thwart new housing projects. Their [2018 study](#) found that Greater Boston, only 15 percent of comments at public meetings between 2015 and 2017 were supportive of multifamily housing. In Newton, however, the figure was 43 percent, according to statistics provided to the Globe.

Housing advocates have scored some successes already, including a 2017 [vote in the City Council that allowed homeowners to convert](#) some kinds of garages or detached buildings into "accessory dwelling units," viewed as an easy way to create more low-cost housing.

Now, in 2020, in no small part because of the movement galvanized by the collapse of Engine 6, Newton is on the cusp of becoming a model of suburban reform. It will hold

a citywide vote March 3 on whether to allow an innovative plan for a mixed-income development at the site of an old factory, which would include the largest single addition of affordable housing units in the city's history. Then, later this year, now-mayor Ruthanne Fuller has promised a redesign of the entire zoning code, which advocates hope will legalize lower-cost housing, allowing more economic diversity.

Those votes will be a barometer of the staying power of Newton's great housing awakening. A few large cities, like Minneapolis and Seattle, have overhauled their zoning codes to promote lower-cost housing. But Newton is an archetypal rich suburb, with some of the nation's best public schools and a median home sale price over \$1 million. For a community like that to relax its resistance to housing would echo through the state, and possibly beyond.

"If other communities can see that the world doesn't end when you make these changes, it's incredibly valuable and could be a nice showcase and model," said Anthony Flint, a senior fellow at the Lincoln Institute, a Cambridge think tank that researches ways to promote affordable housing.

The turnaround would be especially notable given the ironclad control antidevelopment forces enjoyed until recently. Newton has far less affordable housing than the state's target (about 800 units less, [according to the state's affordable housing inventory](#)), a testament to the extraordinary difficulty of building anything but large single-family homes in the city. Just a few years ago, the city notoriously tried ([and failed](#)) to convince the state not to count three private golf courses as developable land in order to wriggle free from the state affordable housing law.

For Massachusetts, a state with staggering housing costs and [homelessness that's shot up 22 percent between 2007 and 2019](#), clearing the obstacles to more housing

in the suburbs would help solve key near-term needs. Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville have filled most of the need for new housing in Greater Boston, and officials there have long grumbled that the rest of the region isn't doing its share.

But in a country where zip code is destiny, changing the rules in places like Newton could have consequences well beyond housing. The consequences of America's economic and racial segregation have come under increasing academic scrutiny. Researchers have [documented](#) how access to higher-opportunity neighborhoods can boost lifetime earnings and college attendance for children from poor families and break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

The ongoing harm of segregation in America is too grave to ignore. More communities — and, ultimately, the statehouses that dictate the limits of local land control — are going to need to come to terms with the way long-cherished land-use traditions are exacerbating some of America's worst racial and economic disparities. One community won't change that on its own — but this year Newton has the chance to show the way.

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