

“Local communities need to start asking the right questions: What is the appropriate density? How do we diversify housing choices? And, how do we deal with affordability?”

Why Greater Boston Needs Transit-Oriented Development

Q: COULD YOU DESCRIBE THE CURRENT HOUSING SITUATION IN GREATER BOSTON?

MICHAEL SCOTT: Massachusetts is a highly desirable location for many multinational companies due to the state’s outstanding resources in education, life sciences, health care, and technology. As more global firms make Greater Boston their new home, however, it is hard not to ask the question: where will these professionals live? These employees—like many current Massachusetts residents—will look for convenience factors such as transportation, amenities, and suitable housing to keep pace with their changing lifestyles.

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council estimates that Greater Boston will need to add 435,000 housing units by 2040 to keep up with demand. To meet this demand, the Baker administration has proposed a new law that would change the zoning requirements for housing. The Housing Choice Initiative features an ambitious goal of adding 135,000 homes over the next eight years to extend the current pace of development, setting aside \$10 million in state funds to reward participating cities and towns.

Q: WHAT ARE THE PRIMARY OBSTACLES TO TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT IN MASSACHUSETTS?

MS: There are many challenges to overcome, particularly at the local level. Some communities view transit-oriented development as solely as an area served by a subway stop. However, strong commuter rail and bus service, as well as access to regional transit, must be included in the transit mix.

Density is also a factor. Certain regions of the state have pockets of land currently zoned for single family housing or otherwise place restrictions on housing unit production, limiting the density and thus making transit-oriented development that includes affordable housing uneconomic. Local communities need to start asking the right questions: What is the appropriate density? How do we diversify housing choices? And, how do we deal with affordability?

Q: HOW IS MASSACHUSETTS GRAPPLING WITH DENSITY ISSUES?

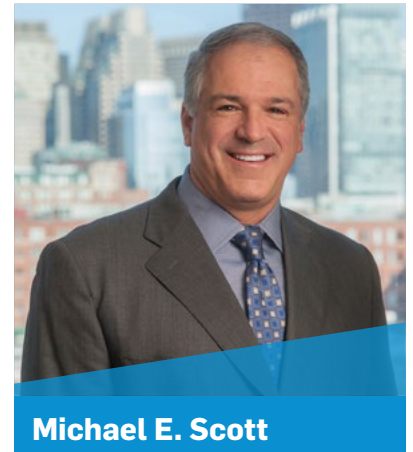
MS: The Smart Growth Zoning Overlay District Act (40R), enacted a decade ago, encouraged communities to create dense residential or mixed-use smart growth zoning districts, including a percentage of affordable housing units, to be located near transit stations, in areas of concentrated development such as existing cities and town centers, and in other highly suitable locations.

This legislation created greater permitting density for transit-oriented development, but more needs to be done. It is time that we as a Commonwealth recognize the incredible housing shortage and work with local communities to overcome this barrier of NIMBY-ism to create districts that are zoned around transit.

Q: WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS TO TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT?

MS: More housing means lower prices and, whether you work for one of these multinational companies or not, lower prices mean your children will be able to raise their families here, too. We should come together and commit to provide more transit service if municipalities agree to commit to density and affordability in these districts.

The bottom line is that Massachusetts and its development community need to think strategically about our housing needs.



Michael E. Scott

CHAIR

Real Estate Department
617.439.2811
mscott@nutter.com

Michael E. Scott chairs Nutter’s Real Estate Department, is a member of the firm’s Development, Land Use and Permitting practice group, and serves on the firm’s Executive Committee. He represents developers, corporate, institutional and municipal clients in all aspects of commercial development, acquisition, disposition and repositioning of assets and has significant experience in matters involving zoning and land use, regulatory permitting and real estate development.

PRESS CONTACT:

Heather Merton
Senior Communications Manager
617.439.2166
hmerton@nutter.com

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