

From policy to progress:
**National lessons from
community-led housing
advocacy in Massachusetts**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PARTNERS

The Barr Foundation
CultureHouse
Lowell Alliance
Westside Legends
YWCA Greater Newburyport &
Greater Newburyport Housing Choice Coalition

PROJECT TEAM

Katharine Burgess
Eric Cova
Rachel Ellis
Sam Gordon
Joseph Mendonca
Michael Rodriguez
Tocarra Nicole Thomas

ABOUT SMART GROWTH AMERICA

Smart Growth America is a national nonprofit that envisions where transportation, housing, and development choices create communities that are healthy, prosperous, and resilient—no matter where you live or who you are. Through direct technical assistance, advocacy, and thought leadership, SGA works towards solving challenges like climate change, affordable housing, and the need for vibrant local economies.

Learn more at www.smartgrowthamerica.org.



Executive Summary

Smart Growth America's Massachusetts Equitable Development Technical Assistance (MA TA) program is grounded in the belief that while state and municipal leadership can create pathways for housing and land use reform, strong local advocacy is often essential to achieving implementation and meaningful, lasting change. In response to the state's estimated shortfall of 220,000 homes, Massachusetts has enacted some of the nation's most ambitious, comprehensive housing policies in the country, including the **MBTA Communities Law (2021)** and the **Affordable Homes Act (2024)**. Yet the success of these initiatives ultimately requires local-level implementation, which often depends on local organizations to educate residents, mobilize grassroots support, and advocate for reform at the municipal level.

Through the MA TA program, Smart Growth America (SGA) supports community-based organizations in Massachusetts by strengthening policy knowledge and advocacy capacity around equitable housing and zoning reform, with a special focus on advocacy to deliver more affordable housing near high-quality transportation.



Triple-decker missing middle housing.

THE FOUR CORE LESSONS LEARNED FROM SGA'S MASSACHUSETTS TEQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE:

1. Strong leadership sets the foundation for reform.

Comprehensive housing and zoning reform is most effective when guided by clear framing, direction, and goal-setting from state or federal leadership. This top-down guidance is especially critical for addressing the complex challenge of reversing decades of exclusionary zoning and restrictive land use patterns, while also expanding long-neglected affordable housing options. It can also ease the burden on local governments, allowing them to focus on implementation rather than managing community uncertainty and expectations about whether change will occur.

2. Local engagement and advocacy drives implementation.

Informed and engaged local leaders—including elected officials, community organizations, or grassroots advocates—are essential to turning state-level reforms into tangible, community-level progress outcomes.

3. Smart Growth principles can be integrated across sectors.

Smart Growth values and principles can be embedded across a wide range of systems, from the internal operations of local community organizations to municipal comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances. This integration allows guiding priorities like sustainability, livability, and equity to serve as the foundation of any forward-looking vision.

4. Creative, engaging communication strategies can inspire and inform.

Housing policy and zoning reform are complex, technical subjects that rarely come up in everyday conversation unless you work in planning, law, or development. To reach broader audiences, explore visual and creative approaches to storytelling that make these topics more accessible and compelling. Art, narrative, and design can offer fresh entry points into the conversation. Housing affects everyone, so making that connection clear is essential.

Context: Countering the housing affordability crisis with comprehensive statewide reforms

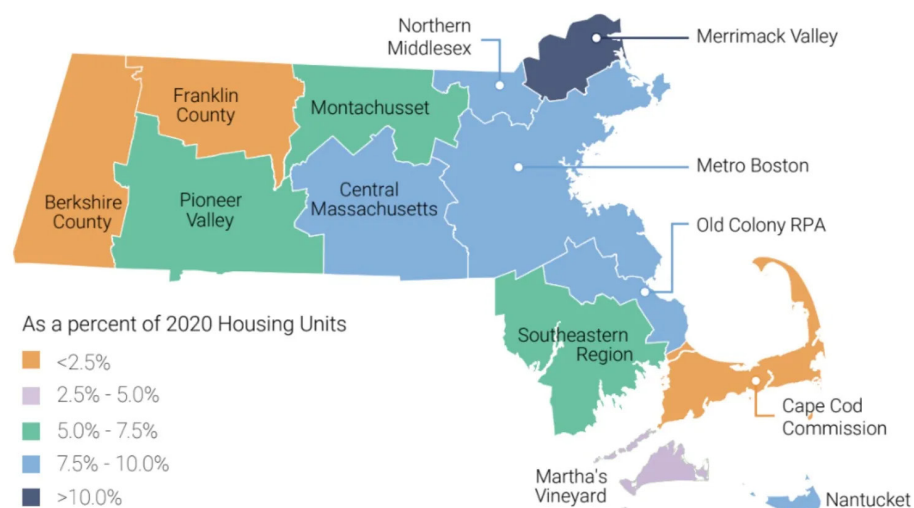
Over the past century, American zoning policies have often acted as barriers to affordable homeownership and wealth-building for low-to-moderate income households and households of color. Practices such as redlining discouraged federally backed mortgages in specific neighborhoods, while local zoning laws often prioritized the development of larger, standalone single-family homes on expansive lots, which were often out of reach for these populations. Loosening such zoning restrictions to allow for more moderately sized and priced housing in close proximity to existing infrastructure and high-quality transportation is a critical step toward dismantling long-standing obstacles to housing equity.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has taken bold legislative action to address its housing crisis. With an estimated need of approximately 200,000 additional rental and homeowner units, major reforms such as the [*MBTA Communities Act*](#), the [*Affordable Homes Act of 2024*](#) (which authorized \$5.6 billion in funding over five years), and earlier initiatives like the [*Smart*](#)

[*Growth Overlay District Act \(Chapter 40R\)*](#) have positioned the commonwealth as a national leader in pro-housing legislation.

Despite bold action and investment at the state level, the successful realization of Massachusetts's ambitious reforms depends on implementation at the local level. Zoning codes must be added to or rewritten, comprehensive plans must be updated, and political will must be built in order to gain momentum around local reform. This is often a politically fraught and technically complex process filled with bureaucratic hurdles.

ADDITIONAL YEAR-ROUND HOUSING UNITS NEEDED, BY REGION, 2025 - 2035



Source: State House News Service

Core Strategy: providing resources to local leadership in order to transform state-level policy reforms into real, on-the-ground change.

Through its Massachusetts Technical Assistance (MA TA) program, Smart Growth America (SGA) has partnered with community-based organizations (CBOs) in Massachusetts to advance local housing and zoning policy reforms. Since the MA TA program's kickoff in 2022, SGA has worked closely with these partners to promote and advocate for, at the local level comprehensive statewide policies that support the development of affordable housing in communities across Massachusetts.

CBOs are vital actors in this space. With deep roots in their communities and trusted relationships, CBOs bring invaluable insight and legitimacy to local conversations around zoning and housing policy reform. They can help ensure that the needs and perspectives of historically excluded communities are centered in the local decision-making process.

SGA's MA TA program is designed to support the critical bottom-up advocacy efforts of these local CBOs. Through research, policy analysis, advocacy tools, education, and communication strategies, the program strengthens CBO efforts to build community coalitions, communicate complex housing and zoning topics, and hold local governments accountable for advancing equitable housing, economic development, transit-oriented development, and transportation initiatives at the local level. This work helps bridge the gap between state leadership and on-the-ground

What is a community-based organization?

As defined by the Urban Institute, community-based organizations (CBOs), also known as community-based development organizations, work to improve living conditions and expand opportunities for low-income communities and communities of color. Their activities often include advocacy, direct services, housing support, and more.

CBOs vary widely in structure and scope, ranging from fully resident-led efforts like neighborhood associations to established institutions such as local YWCAs (Young Women's Christian Association), and more specialized groups like CultureHouse, which focuses on urban design, placemaking, and community-centered pop-up events.

implementation, ensuring that the commonwealth's historic investments in housing reform can translate into real, equitable outcomes for local communities, which are in desperate need of housing in close proximity to both goods and services.

Highlighting key Massachusetts state-wide housing and land use policies and reforms

Massachusetts has emerged as a national leader in advancing pro-housing policies through a combination of legislative initiatives, executive action, and funding programs. In the face of an escalating housing affordability crisis - with an estimated shortage of over 200,000 rental and homeowner units - the commonwealth has taken an aggressive, multi-faceted approach to stimulate housing production, modernize zoning laws, and incentivize equitable development.

Several recent state-level initiatives align closely with Smart Growth America's mission to eliminate zoning barriers and support vibrant, healthy, and resilient communities. These policies reflect SGA's vision for development that encourages a mix of building types and land uses, diverse housing options, and accessible transportation choices.

The Massachusetts Home Rule Act of 1966 (Chapter 43B)

Massachusetts was originally governed under the Dillon Rule, which limits municipal powers to those explicitly granted by the state.¹ However, the Massachusetts Home Rule Act of 1966 essentially introduced a hybrid model that allows cities and towns to enact legislation on many matters, as long as they do not conflict with state or federal law.²

While the state has recently enacted sweeping housing and zoning reforms, local governments still need to formally adopt and/or update local policies that are compliant with these new state laws. The Massachusetts Attorney General's Office enforces this compliance. CBOs can play a crucial role in advocating for timely, effective local housing and zoning policies that align with these state mandates and pave the way for affordable housing development.

Communities across the country, particularly those in Home Rule states, can pursue similar bottom-up advocacy efforts to drive local policy change. Encouraged by strong grassroots leadership, local governments can use their local authority to advance more equitable and affordable housing outcomes.

1. Commonwealth of Massachusetts. (2020, January). *What is Home Rule?* <https://www.mass.gov/doc/home-rule/download>

2. Massachusetts Municipal Association. (2021, September 17). *Municipal managers discuss home rule in Massachusetts.* <https://www.mma.org/municipal-managers-discuss-home-rule-in-massachusetts/>

The following landmark initiatives provide critical context for the SGA MATA program:

Smart Growth Overlay District Act (Chapter 40R)

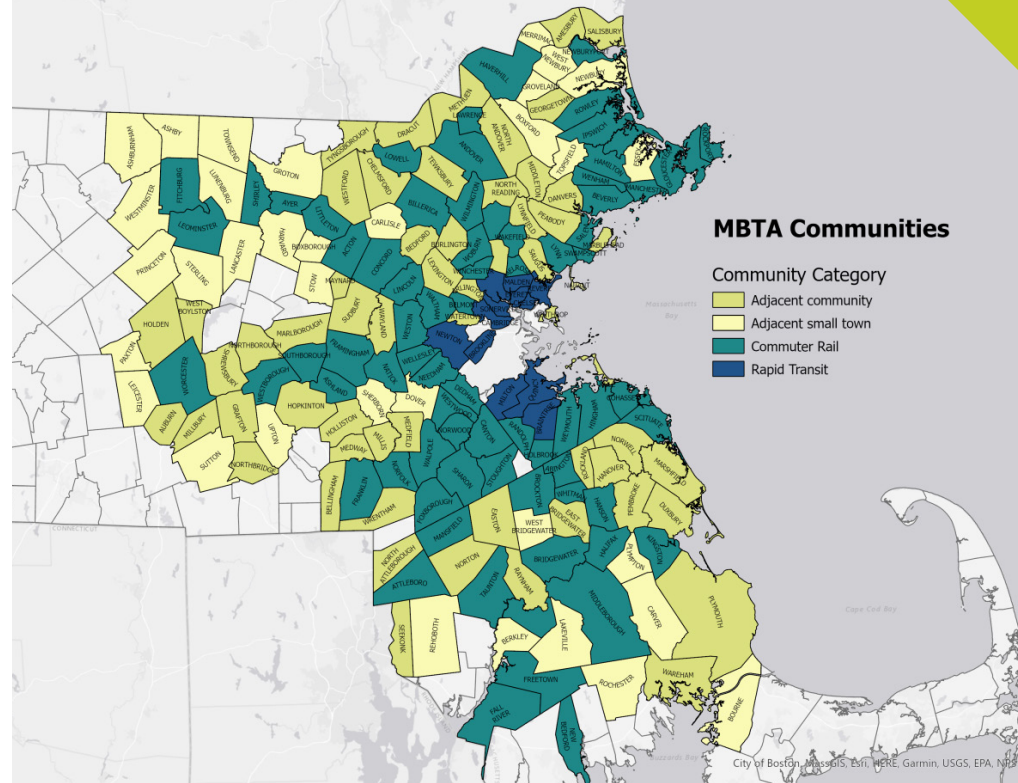
Enacted earlier, the [Smart Growth Overlay District Act \(Chapter 40R\)](#) provides municipalities with financial incentives if they adopt zoning overlay districts that promote dense, mixed-use, transit-accessible development. This legislation helps counteract decades of exclusionary zoning practices that restricted housing options and exacerbated affordability challenges.

Why this matters: Chapter 40R laid critical groundwork for newer reforms like the MBTA Communities Act (see below) by demonstrating that state incentives, paired with strong local planning, can drive meaningful zoning change.

MBTA Communities Act (2021)

The [Multi-Family Zoning Requirement for MBTA Communities](#) requires the 177 municipalities served by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) to create at least one zoning district that allows multi-family housing by right, located near commuter rail stations or subway stops.

Why this matters: By directly linking housing production to access to sustainable transportation, the MBTA Communities Act reinforces smart growth principles and advances broader climate goals. It effectively mandates upzoning in neighborhoods near MBTA-serviced commuter rail stations, primarily in the eastern half of Massachusetts. However, local compliance requires navigating complex rezoning processes, often in the face of political resistance or misinformation.



Map of communities serviced by MBTA commuter rail. Source: Mass.gov

There are also a range of approaches to reach compliance, especially given that the law provides leeway for local governments to determine the size of the mandated multi-family zoning district. Strong local advocacy is essential to ensure that municipalities meet these requirements to deliver more much-needed housing near transportation while prioritizing equity, affordability, and community needs.

Affordable Homes Act (2024)

Passed in early 2024, the [Affordable Homes Act](#) represents one of the most significant housing investments in Massachusetts history. The act authorizes \$5.6 billion over five years to fund the production and preservation of affordable housing, modernize infrastructure, and support housing-related

climate resilience. In addition to major funding allocations, the act introduced nearly 50 policy initiatives aimed at easing regulatory barriers, streamlining permitting processes, and incentivizing municipalities to prioritize housing development.

Why this matters: The Affordable Homes Act signals a deep, sustained commitment to housing abundance at the state level. Yet, its success and the extent to which it supports housing in close proximity to transit and services hinges on local governments embracing needed zoning changes and planning updates—making grassroots advocacy and community-based organizing essential to full implementation.

Gateway Cities Designation

Massachusetts' [Gateway Cities](#) are 26 historically industrial urban centers that served as economic engines for working- and middle-class families throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries. Like many small to mid-sized American cities that peaked in prominence in the 1800s, particularly in the industrial Rust Belt, these cities experienced economic hardship as job opportunities declined, resulting in disinvestment and persistent social and economic challenges.

Gateway Cities, however, hold significant potential for revitalization today. With existing infrastructure, dense urban fabrics, and historic downtowns, they are well-positioned to satisfy the growing demand for walkable, smart growth-oriented neighborhoods and vibrant local economies. Other states with similar communities can look to Massachusetts as a model for how to reinvest in former industrial hubs and adapt them for 21st-century needs.

Eligibility for Gateway City designation is based on:

- A municipal population between 35,000 and 250,000 residents;
- Median household income and educational attainment levels below the state average.

Gateway Cities are also eligible for programs like the [Housing Development Incentive Program \(HDIP\)](#), which offers tax incentives to developers who build market-rate and affordable housing in these communities. By channeling strategic investments into Gateway Cities, Massachusetts aims to unlock their potential as engines of regional growth, economic inclusion, and equitable housing access.

Why this matters: Gateway Cities are uniquely positioned for revitalization. With existing infrastructure, walkable downtowns, and the capacity for smart, infill growth, these cities can meet rising demand for vibrant, transit-accessible neighborhoods. Their eligibility for targeted programs (such as the HDIP) reflects Massachusetts' commitment to equitable reinvestment. As other states confront similar post-industrial transitions, Massachusetts offers a compelling model for turning legacy cities into drivers of regional growth, housing opportunity, and economic inclusion.

Housing Choice Initiative Communities Designation

The [Housing Choice Initiative](#) rewards municipalities that actively produce new housing units and adopt best practices in land use, zoning, and planning. Designated Housing Choice Communities become eligible for prioritized access to state funding, incentives, and technical assistance.



Door-to-door canvassing. Source: Lowell Alliance

To achieve designation, communities must demonstrate:

- At least a 5 percent increase in new housing units (or at least 500 new units) over the previous five years; or
- At least a 3 percent increase in new housing units (or at least 300 new units) over the previous five years, and show adoption of 7 out of 15 best practices related to sustainable development and housing policy.

By tying funding incentives to tangible progress and best practices, the Housing Choice Initiative seeks to create a virtuous cycle where policy leadership is rewarded and capacity for equitable growth expands.

Together, these state-level policies have created an unprecedented window of opportunity for new housing development across Massachusetts by modernizing outdated zoning codes and incentivizing equitable growth. Yet their success ultimately hinges on local implementation. Smart Growth America's technical assistance efforts are designed to meet this challenge by equipping community-based organizations (CBOs) with the knowledge, tools, and networks needed to translate state-level ambitions into on-the-ground progress. The next section explores how CBOs can play a pivotal role in advancing these reforms, ensuring they reflect local priorities and lead to inclusive, community-driven outcomes.

Why this matters: By linking incentives directly to demonstrated action, the Housing Choice Initiative encourages a cycle of proactive policymaking and equitable housing growth. It reflects a broader state strategy to modernize local zoning codes, remove barriers to new housing, and drive development that meets today's urgent affordability and sustainability needs. But while the framework is set at the state level, real progress depends on local implementation. That's where Smart Growth America's technical assistance comes in—supporting community-based organizations with the tools, knowledge, and capacity to ensure these reforms succeed on the ground and serve the people they're meant to benefit.

Identifying Community Partners: Laying the groundwork

To identify partner organizations for the Massachusetts Technical Assistance (MA TA) program, Smart Growth America (SGA) conducted a comprehensive scan of community-based organizations (CBOs) across the state. The process prioritized groups located in designated Gateway Cities and Housing Choice Initiative Communities with a demonstrated local housing need. The goal was to strengthen the capacity of these organizations to advocate for equitable, community-driven housing development, including affordable transit-oriented development.

Following this scan, SGA conducted targeted outreach and launched a competitive application process. Selection criteria emphasized alignment with Smart Growth values, such as equitable transit-oriented development and climate resilience, and emphasized organizational leadership by women, Black, Brown, and LGBTQ individuals. Each selected organization received a tailored Scope of Work reflecting its organizational capacity, priorities, and goals related to advancing local housing advocacy.

SGA ultimately provided technical assistance to four community-based organizations, focusing on supporting local advocacy efforts and communication strategies around local housing and land use reform. The overarching aim was to support grassroots efforts to drive timely and effective implementation of new state housing mandates and accelerate the development of affordable housing across Massachusetts.



Door-to-door canvassing. Source: Lowell Alliance

CultureHouse (Somerville, MA): Advancing smart growth and community-driven design in Greater Boston

Based in Somerville, a dense, transit-connected city just northwest of Boston, CultureHouse is a nonprofit organization that transforms vacant and underutilized spaces into vibrant neighborhood hubs through a community-centered design process. With SGA's support, CultureHouse enhanced its internal frameworks to better align with smart growth principles and more intentionally connect their public space revitalization work with affordable housing and equitable development goals through the following actions:

- Embedding zoning and land use education into CultureHouse's community engagement process;
- Refining their five-step community engagement model (Research, Community Engagement, Design-Build, Operation, Impact Report) to better gather actionable feedback;
- Creating educational materials on complex housing topics such as zoning reform, public-private space differences, and equitable development best practices.

As communities in the Greater Boston area continue to amend their land use policies to meet the requirements of the MBTA Communities Act, CultureHouse is well-positioned to support neighborhood revitalization efforts that center community needs and affordable housing. SGA's partnership with CultureHouse has evolved into a longstanding collaboration rooted in these shared goals, including future participation in SGA's Equity Summit and other national events. As part of the event, SGA and CultureHouse also partnered to design a pop-

up community space that fostered engagement and connection among the event's nearly 200 participants from across the country, demonstrating how creative placemaking can support inclusive, community-driven collaboration.

Westside Legends (Pittsfield, MA): Building a pathway for BIPOC wealth creation and housing equity

In Pittsfield's historic Westside neighborhood—*a community deeply impacted by redlining, urban renewal, and decades of systemic disinvestment*—Westside Legends is leading a grassroots effort to expand affordable homeownership opportunities for BIPOC residents. Founded by two born-and-raised West Siders, the organization began with community-building initiatives such as neighborhood pop-up events, development of a community garden, Homeownership Preparation classes, and a Property Buy-Back Program – all aimed at creating meaningful pathways to wealth-building and stability for the neighborhood's most vulnerable residents.

During the first round of technical assistance, Smart Growth America (SGA) supported the formation of the Westside Working Group, a coalition of local residents and community partners convened in the summer of 2023. For over six weeks, the group met weekly to collaboratively develop a roadmap for equitable investment in Pittsfield's West Side neighborhood, grounded in the priorities and lived experiences of the community.

The collaboration culminated in the *Westside Working Group's Recommendations Report*, which outlined six actionable strategies for advancing inclusive housing and economic

development. The recommendations center resident voices and emphasize the need for ongoing community participation in local decision-making processes. They provide a framework for guiding investment, building trust, and promoting systemic investment in a neighborhood that has traditionally been overlooked by historic planning and policy processes. As Marvin Purry, Co-Founder and Treasurer of Westside Legends, shared, “While all parties involved could have let this issue fracture any development and stop any progressive action, the opposite occurred. The relationship between the City and Westside Legends has become a strength, built on trust.” Monthly meetings with City officials continue to strengthen this partnership and build momentum for long-term impact.

In a second round of technical assistance, SGA supported Westside Legends in deepening its capacity as a burgeoning non-profit affordable housing developer. This phase of support focused on strengthening the organization’s internal strategy, identifying new opportunities for growth, and navigating a rapidly evolving funding landscape shaped by the state’s \$5 billion Affordable Homes Act. Key outcomes included:

- **Portfolio review:** A comprehensive analysis of Westside Legends’ land holdings, completed projects, and active construction sites to identify strategic opportunities for growth and alignment with long-term goals.
- **Business model enhancement:** Revisions to the organization’s business plan to reflect its evolution from a grassroots initiative into a full-fledged nonprofit housing developer.

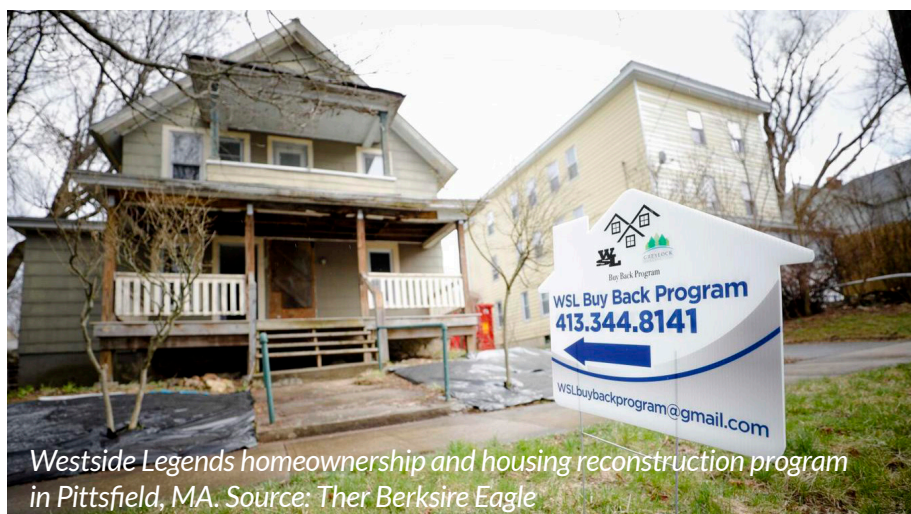
Westside Working Group Recommendations Report:

Over two months in 2023, Smart Growth America and Westside Legends convened the Westside Working Group to develop recommendations to support affordable housing preservation and creation, economic development, and wealth generation. The six recommendations include:

1. Expanding civic engagement through support for community-led forums, inclusive outreach strategies, and greater accessibility to public decision-making processes
2. Creating an Equitable Development Roundtable to foster cross-sector collaboration and long-term accountability
3. Developing a targeted vacant lot remediation strategy, including the creation of a community land trust to return underutilized land to productive community use
4. Launching City-supported educational programming to support BIPOC wealth generation, including financial literacy, homeownership readiness, and small business development
5. Reforming zoning to allow for infill and mixed-use development, including adoption of by-right approvals, gentle density permit processes, and expanded ADU access
6. Updating Pittsfield’s outdated 2009 Master Plan, with an explicit focus on equity, housing access, and neighborhood-scale investment

- **Funding strategy:** A curated overview of funding streams newly available or expanded through the Affordable Homes Act, with a focus on sources designed to support community-based, BIPOC-led organizations.
- **Solar technology case study:** Research and analysis of a recently developed affordable housing project in a nearby Massachusetts community that leveraged public funding sources to integrate solar technology into the development design, providing a model for Westside Legends to adapt in future projects.

Through this partnership, Westside Legends is laying the foundation to become a resilient, community-centered housing developer, meeting local needs while modeling sustainable, climate-conscious practices. The evolution of its program portfolio—from homeownership and pop-up events to new housing construction and solar technology integration—demonstrates the transformative potential of grassroots leadership when supported by technical support and long-term vision.



Westside Legends homeownership and housing reconstruction program in Pittsfield, MA. Source: Ther Berkshire Eagle

Lowell Alliance (Lowell, MA): Building momentum from the ground up

Lowell Alliance represents a critical yet often under-resourced type of community-based organization: one that is deeply rooted in the daily experiences of its most vulnerable residents, while still emerging as a voice in the complex world of housing and zoning policy advocacy. With a mission focused on systems-level change and community-driven solutions for Lowell's lower-income and ethnically diverse populations, Lowell Alliance's values and goals aligned closely with the goals of SGA's Massachusetts Technical Assistance program.

In mid-2024, Lowell Alliance launched a housing organizing campaign that engaged more than 700 residents in three lower-income neighborhoods through door-to-door canvassing and community conversations. These outreach efforts surfaced a range of urgent housing challenges, including high rent burdens, overcrowding, and long waitlists for affordable options. The campaign culminated in a community housing meeting and the formation of two resident-led working groups, one focused on tenant rights and another on fair and affordable housing policy. Lowell Alliance recognized a collective need to better connect residents' lived experiences to local housing policy.

SGA's technical assistance engagement with Lowell Alliance began with a review of the City of Lowell's zoning ordinance, recently updated comprehensive plan, and draft housing production plan.

The goals and actions laid out in both policy documents reflect city leadership's recognition for the growing need of more - particularly affordable - housing, with goals and actions that include amending the city's zoning ordinance to allow for more multi-family housing development by-right, greater flexibility for construction "Missing Middle Housing" types such as triple-decker apartments, townhouses, triplexes, and other varieties of small-scale multi-family housing.

Although city planning staff have laid out a forward-looking vision, meaningful implementation depends on decisions made by the City Council, which must balance diverse and sometimes conflicting community perspectives. In this context, SGA's support helped Lowell Alliance strengthen its policy fluency and build strategic tools to engage more effectively in local decision-making.

- **Policy education:** Provided foundational training on the development and implementation of local housing and zoning policies. This included an advocacy roadmap outlining key elected officials, agencies, and institutions that influence housing outcomes in Lowell. In anticipation of Lowell potentially establishing an Affordable Housing Trust Fund, SGA researched and shared a case study on the Worcester Affordable Housing Trust Fund, offering an example that Lowell Alliance can draw from as it advocates for Lowell's city leadership to adopt and implement its own.
- **Advocacy tools:** Created templates for public testimony and other engagement materials that can help residents and advocates push for critical reforms. These include expanding where multifamily housing is allowed "[by-right](#)" development and reducing parking requirements in areas designated for transit-oriented development.



Community event. Source: Lowell Alliance

- **Communications support:** Designed talking points and visual materials that break down complex policy topics into accessible language. These resources were tailored to resonate with Lowell's diverse communities, including many residents who are non-native English speakers or new to civic engagement.

Through this partnership, Lowell Alliance is building a stronger, more strategic advocacy platform. By equipping staff and residents with the knowledge, tools, and confidence to engage in housing policy, the organization is helping ensure that the city's pro-housing vision is informed by the people most affected. This work is laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and equitable future in Lowell, where residents are not only heard but also empowered to shape the solutions their communities need.



Community event with Citizens Housing and Planning Association.
Source: Greater Newburyport Housing Choice Coalition

Greater Newburyport Housing Choice Coalition (Greater Newburyport, MA): Strengthening regional collaboration

The Greater Newburyport Housing Choice Coalition (GNHCC) works across several neighboring communities in northeastern Massachusetts near the New Hampshire border, including Newburyport, Newbury, and West Newbury. In this generally higher-income region, GNHCC mobilizes support for local housing policies and zoning reforms that advance inclusivity and housing equity by promoting the development of much-needed affordable housing.

The coalition plays a key role in advancing local compliance with statewide housing incentive mandates, including the MBTA Communities Law, the [Accessory Dwelling Unit \(ADU\)](#) requirement of the Affordable Homes Act, and [Housing Production Plan](#) requirements. Leveraging its unique regional perspective, GNHCC coordinates tailored advocacy strategies

across its member municipalities to expand opportunities for multi-family housing throughout the Greater Newburyport area.

SGA supported their efforts through:

- **Zoning ordinance review and analysis:** Conducting a high-level zoning ordinance review of Newburyport, Newbury, and West Newbury to identify hidden or overlooked barriers to housing development and state compliance.
- **Tailored Recommendations and Proposed Reforms:** Based on zoning review and analysis, recommendations for each of the three Greater Newburyport communities include expanding existing Overlay Districts, aligning density bonuses with affordability requirements, and refining key zoning definitions.
- **Research on overlay district case studies:** Conducted research on three peer communities in Massachusetts—comparable to those in the Greater Newburyport area—that have successfully implemented overlay districts to enable localized increases in multi-family housing.

The GNHCC serves as a regional advocacy partner with a strong understanding of the housing landscape across several neighboring municipalities. It is well-positioned to coordinate advocacy efforts both top-down with community leaders and bottom-up through mobilizing grassroots engagement efforts, maintaining a focused and sustained push for housing reform. Through SGA's technical assistance, additional opportunities were identified within local zoning ordinances to further inform and strengthen GNHCC's ongoing regional advocacy efforts.

Equitable development convening: Sharing lessons and building momentum

As part of the three-year Massachusetts Technical Assistance (MA TA) program, SGA hosted two in-person convenings focused on equitable development and creative communication of complex housing and land use policies. The first convening, co-hosted with Westside Legends in Pittsfield in Fall 2023, featured a curated bus tour of affordable housing projects, community green spaces, and public art in Pittsfield's Westside and brought together cohort members, local leaders, and statewide practitioners to share best practices in community-driven development. The second convening, held in Washington, DC, in the Spring of 2025 as a shoulder event to SGA's annual Equity Summit, expanded the audience to include national experts and Smart Growth advocates, offering a platform for shared learning and network building.

Together, these convenings reinforced a central takeaway: local leadership, when supported by technical assistance and capacity-building, is key to turning state-level policy reforms into meaningful, on-the-ground change. a mix of building types and land uses, diverse housing options, and accessible transportation choices.



Smart Growth America's Massachusetts Equitable Development Convening. Washington, DC. March 2025.



Smart Growth America's Massachusetts Equitable Development Convening. Pittsfield, MA. October 2023.

Looking ahead: Laying the groundwork for change in your community

Across all three partnerships, the 2024–2025 MA Technical Assistance (TA) program underscores a clear but urgent truth: while state and municipal leadership can open doors, local advocacy drives real, lasting outcomes.

Massachusetts is leading with some of the most forward-thinking housing and climate policies in the country. But progress depends on empowering local organizations to educate neighbors, organize grassroots advocacy, and work with municipal leaders to remove the restrictive regulatory barriers that continue to hinder the development of affordable, inclusive housing across most of the nation.

What can you do?

Whether you live in Massachusetts, another state rolling out pro-housing reforms, or a place just beginning to explore these issues, there is always room for grassroots advocacy to shape housing policy and land use reform.



Smart Growth America and Westside Legends in downtown Pittsfield, MA

Start by observing your own neighborhood and asking questions:

- Why are duplexes allowed in one part of town but not in areas that need more housing?
- Why are lot sizes so large in single-family neighborhoods when our community is growing in population and needs more homes?
- Why can't I convert my attic, basement, or garage into a small apartment, whether for a family member or for some extra rental income?

The answer to these questions often lies in your local zoning ordinance: the rules and regulations of a community's built environment. Zoning determines what can (and just as importantly, what cannot) be built and where. If you're up for it, take a look at your local ordinance online or connect with a local organization that can help interpret it.

Talk to your friends and neighbors:

These everyday questions can spark powerful conversations. For example, pointing out that smaller-scale housing like duplexes or triplexes isn't allowed in your neighborhood can help others understand why adult children, aging parents, or essential workers can't afford to live nearby. It's a basic issue of supply and demand, where limited supply and rising demand drive up costs, therefore pushing people out of their communities.



Community event with Citizens Housing and Planning Association.
Source: Greater Newburyport Housing Choice Coalition

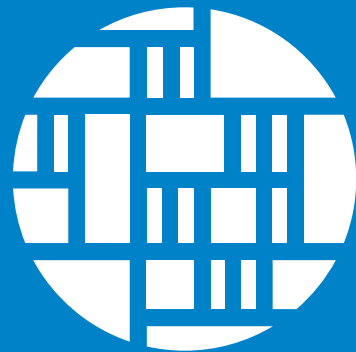
Build coalitions.

Real change starts locally. Connect with neighbors, join community-based organizations, or even start your own. Together, you can advocate for zoning reforms that support inclusive, affordable, and livable communities. That could mean testifying at public hearings, meeting with elected officials, or educating neighbors about the connection between land use and housing opportunity—just like Westside Legends did in Pittsfield.

Smart Growth America remains committed to supporting local leadership as a crucial engine of change. While statewide reforms create opportunities, it's bottom-up, community-driven advocacy that brings those opportunities to life.

Appendix

1. [Westside Working Group Recommendations Report](#)
2. [Post-Event Wrap-Up: Driving Equitable Development in Massachusetts](#)
3. [Implementing Smart Growth Principles at CultureHouse](#)
4. [Policy Scan of Community Land Trusts \(prepared for Westside Legends\)](#)
5. [Funding Source Scan \(prepared for Westside Legends\)](#)
6. [Proposed Internal Strategy \(prepared for Westside Legends\)](#)
7. [Solar Technology Integration Case Study \(prepared for Westside Legends\)](#)
8. [Massachusetts Statewide Affordable Housing Trust Fund Toolkit \(prepared for Westside Legends\)](#)
9. [Greater Newburyport - Zoning Analysis and Takeaways \(prepared for Greater Newburyport Housing Choice Coalition\)](#)
10. [Massachusetts Overlay District Case Studies \(prepared for Greater Newburyport Housing Choice Coalition\)](#)
11. [Public Testimony Template \(prepared for Lowell Alliance\)](#)
12. [Local Advocacy Roadmap \(prepared for Lowell Alliance\)](#)
13. [Housing and Zoning Reform Talking Points \(prepared for Lowell Alliance\)](#)
14. [Gateway Cities: Affordable Housing Trust Fund Case Studies \(prepared for Lowell Alliance\)](#)



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