

# After Milton vote, the question remains: What now?

The divided town faces a complex planning process, with the eyes of much of the state on them

By [Andrew Brinker](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 15, 2024, 8:26 p.m.



For many Milton residents, compromise feels a long way off. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

A heated campaign over a new land-use plan that would've paved the way for more than 2,400 new apartments in Milton came to a head Wednesday night when [voters rejected the new zoning](#) that was required under a controversial state housing law.

It was supposed to be a decisive vote, the end of a month of friction in the town of 28,000. But the results of the election brought little clarity.

Organizers of the campaign against the rezoning had told residents the town could devise a less-intrusive plan than the one that was on the ballot Wednesday. But in the wake of their triumph, those opponents offered no concrete replacement.

Now, more than a month past the state's deadline, a sharply divided Milton is back to square one, facing the politically delicate task of writing yet another zoning plan, while living under legal limbo and the threat of a lawsuit from Attorney General Andrea Campbell for failing to comply with the state's most ambitious housing law in decades.

“What I don't think people realized is that something comes after the referendum,” said Milton Select Board member Ben Zoll, who supported the zoning plan. “Residents didn't like the plan, and they voted it down. Now we have to come up with the consensus to pass a new plan so we are not breaking the law, and I have a hard time seeing the realistic path to doing that anytime soon.”

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If anything, the path to new zoning that satisfies a sharply divided public is harder now, after one of the [most controversial elections in recent Milton history](#), than it was last year when Town Meeting approved the version that was just overturned.

And it's not even clear when they can. The deadline to submit articles for Milton's Spring Town Meeting — in May — is Saturday. That now seems like an impossible deadline to meet, which means that it could be late fall, or even next year, before a new plan could go up for a vote.

Denny Swenson, one of the No campaign organizers, said there is no need to rush, noting it will take some time to craft a plan that will satisfy the divided town. She hopes that if state officials see Milton working on a new plan, they will withhold punishments.



The state classifies Milton as a “rapid transit” community because the Mattapan Trolley runs along its northern edge. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

“We want to do this the right way,” Swenson said. “That means taking the time to make sure the plan works for everybody.”

At the same time, Milton has quickly become the epicenter of the state's housing debate, which means both Beacon Hill and other communities are [watching its next move closely](#).

Governor Maura Healey and Campbell criticized the vote Wednesday as a violation of state law, though it is not clear how hard they plan to come down on Milton. Healey administration housing officials suggested they would be willing to work with the town to reach compliance.

“We’re in uncharted territory a little bit here,” said Housing Secretary Ed Augustus. “At the end of the day, we still want to see [Milton] be in compliance. And the door is still open and the support is there to help them come up with a plan they can pass . . . and is compliant with the law.”

But that patience only goes so far. If Milton cannot reach a consensus, housing advocates said, the state may have no choice but to twist the town's arm. Augustus, for example, said he is looking to potentially withhold additional state grants from Milton for defying the law, on top of the more than one dozen the state has already warned the town about. Campbell has not indicated if she plans to sue Milton.

“The voters of Milton made a choice knowing fairly well what the consequences would be, and now they need to live with the consequences of those choices,” said Jesse Kanson-Benanav, executive director of Abundant Housing Massachusetts, a pro-housing advocacy group.

The last thing the state wants, said Kanson-Benanav, is for Milton's vote to undermine the state law, known as the MBTA Communities Act, more broadly.

Milton was among a dozen municipalities that were required to create the new zoning by the end of 2023. Scores of other communities in the MBTA's service area must adopt their rezoning plans by the end of this year. And opposition is brewing in some of those municipalities, where opponents were watching Milton closely. Several opposition

groups from different towns cheered Milton's vote for what they saw as taking a stand against the state, which they hope their communities will do as well.

“Despite the threats and intimidation and the strong-arming from the State, I guess it's still true . . . the citizens have rights, and last night they took them back!,” Don't Boston My Cape Ann, an anti-MBTA Communities group, [wrote on Facebook Thursday](#).

“Please take a moment today to reflect on the hard work the people of Milton did to resist compliance and to vote down a one-size-fits-all unfunded mandate from the state that would forever change their town.”

Back in Milton, for many residents, compromise feels a long way off. Wounds are still fresh from the election, which ignited ugly social media arguments. There were reports of campaign signs being stolen from yards the night before the vote. Some Yes voters are determined to leave their signs up as an “I told you so” if consequences from the state become clear.

And the details of a new zoning plan feel daunting. That responsibility falls to the Planning Board, which last year was so divided it couldn't draft a compliant plan at all. Some members even protested outside the polls Wednesday against the zoning plan that ultimately was written by the Select Board and [approved by Town Meeting](#).

“They weren't interested in any plan,” Cheryl Tougias, a Planning Board member, said of her fellow board members who were unhappy with any multifamily zoning plan that was suggested. “If those people are of the same opinion now, we're going to be at a standstill again. And then what happens?”



John Keohane, a volunteer from "Residents for Thoughtful Zoning" campaigned against the town's MBTA Communities zoning plan ahead of Wednesday's election. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

And some on the No side are counting on concessions from the state, which classifies Milton as a “rapid transit” community because the Mattapan Trolley runs along its northern edge, before they engage on a plan. Reclassifying the town’s status so it is not considered served by “rapid transit” could require less new housing, which might make a plan more palatable. But last year state officials declined a request to reclassify Milton, and haven’t considered reclassification as an option for any town. And even so, the divisions run so deep that even an experimental zoning plan tailored to a lesser zoning requirement created infighting on the Planning Board last year.

In other words, there may be many chapters to go in this story. Theresa Clearman, a Milton resident, was getting groceries Thursday, and after a testy few weeks, her mind was on the future.

“Where do we go from here?” she said.

*Matt Stout of the Globe staff and correspondent Ava Berger contributed.*

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