

Livable Dedham housing forum explores ways to create more housing options for seniors in Dedham

Contributed to
The Dedham Times

On June 4 over 50 residents and elected leaders joined Livable Dedham for the second installment of its Spring Housing series: Aging in Community at the Dedham Middle School.

The focus of the presentation and discussion led by the Smart Growth Alliance, was on Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs).

ADUs are legal apartments within or attached to owner-occupied homes on a single lot, often called "in-law apartments" or "granny flats."

According to Diane Barry Preston, Livable Dedham's co-founder, the organizers chose the topic based on data from Dedham residents.

"We know from our 2016 survey of 600 residents that 71% of Dedham's older adults want to stay in Dedham as they age. But in order to do so, our town will need to make some changes, to expand support services and even our bylaws. Our survey told us almost a quarter of those who want to stay in Dedham will need financial help to modify their homes or they'll need to downsize to smaller homes. Since Dedham's housing stock is currently not as varied as we need, we want to spark a discussion tonight about ADU's as a possible tool to help our older residents have more options."

Dottie Fulginiti, Director of Local Leadership, Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance, congratulated Dedham residents for joining an important conversation about housing happening across the Commonwealth.

She explained that many other communities are asking their town leaders to create zoning bylaws that will allow more ADUs, to help residents of all ages.

Larry Field, Deputy Director, Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance, discussed a 2018 study that reviewed 100 cities and towns around Boston to gain a clear understanding of ADU regulations and production.

The study found that loosening local zoning laws to allow for the development of more accessory dwelling units (ADUs) would help ease the region's housing shortage without creating any significant problems.

Although communities often

have initial concerns about the impact of ADUs on surrounding neighborhoods, research has shown there is little impact when they are built, and even communities with generous bylaws see only a handful of ADUs being added each year.

Field noted it is a worthwhile tradeoff, since ADUs offer tremendous flexibility as residents age and circumstances change. A family might originally add an ADU for in-laws, and eventually the parents could move into the ADU as they need less space.

Adding an ADU can also help older adults supplement a fixed income so they can afford property taxes, insurance, home modifications and maintenance, allowing them to stay in the community.

Residents who attended the Forum got a quick lesson on Dedham's bylaws.

Dedham currently allows ADUs if the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) grants a Special Permit, but Building Inspector Ken Cimeno explained that Dedham's bylaw is so restrictive that most homes in Dedham aren't qualified to apply for that Special Permit.

Jim McGrail, Chair of the ZBA and a member of the Planning Board, agreed that the ZBA receives very few applications - just 1 or 2 a year.

Dedham's bylaw only allows ADUs to be considered when the lot size is 10% bigger than the minimum required for building a new home.

This means the flexibility of ADUs is currently restricted to those who have larger homes and lots, and prohibitive for the majority of residents who live on smaller lots, often those residents who could most benefit from having them.

In the discussion that followed the presentation, Greenlodge resident Drew Pepoli shared his experience working with the current bylaw. He and his wife have been trying on and off for the past 3 years to establish a legal ADU in their house, but their lot is smaller than the requirement so they not only need a Special Permit, they would need a Variance to the Special Permit.

Pepoli explained that by the time they are done, they will have spent close to \$5,000 on

attorney fees and surveys, all in an attempt to get a stove legally added to a suite that his in-laws live in.

Why does he want to add the ADU?

"This is for my in-laws who are aging, and who also take care of our kids two days a week. We're just trying to keep our daycare expense lower than our mortgage!"

Diane Barry Preston expressed appreciation to all of the elected officials who attended the Forum.

"Creating age-friendly housing options to meet our growing demand will take collaboration between multiple boards and committees. It is wonderful to have so many elected leaders taking the time to work on this important issue for our community."

In total, the Town Moderator and eight of Dedham's Boards were represented, including the Planning Board, Select Board, Housing Authority Board, Parks and Recreation Commission, Board of Health, School Committee, Library Trustees, and Commission on Disability, as well as a dozen Town Meeting Members.

Jessica Porter, Planning Board Member, explained that the Planning Board has discussed modifying the ADU bylaw and might have a change recommended in time for Fall Town Meeting.

She asked attendees if they'd have any concerns about adding more ADUs in Dedham, but people were generally supportive.

Many were aware of illegal ADUs already in their neighborhood, and also aware that illegal units were more likely to contain hazardous elements since they have not been inspected by the Building Department.

Livable Dedham aims to help Dedham residents of all ages and abilities have access to high-quality, affordable housing, and community-based support services.

The Spring Housing Series was created last year to build awareness, encourage discussion, and create momentum around increasing housing options in Dedham, where 41% of residents are projected to be age 55 or older by 2030.

Livable Dedham is a member of the AARP/WHO Network of Age-Friendly Communities and a grateful recipient of generous funding from Tufts Health Plan Foundation and the AARP. Please visit www.livablededham.org or contact livablededham@gmail.com for additional information about age friendly communities and to stay informed about new housing options.

The Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance (MSGSA) promotes healthy and diverse communities, protects critical environmental resources and working landscapes, advocates for housing and transportation choices, and supports equitable community development and reinvestment.

Visit www.ma-smartgrowth.org for more information.

Livable Dedham is grateful to Dedham TV for their coverage of the event (available at www.livablededham.org).

House passes employee rights legislation

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On June 5, Representative Paul McMurtry, along with his colleagues in the Massachusetts House of Representatives today passed legislation to protect public sector employees' rights following the U.S. Supreme Court's Janus v. American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCM) ruling.

The bill enables Massachusetts employee organizations to charge non-members a reasonable fee associated with representing them legally through the grievance process.

"I am proud to support this piece of bipartisan legislation that protects our hard-working public employees and workers' rights which have been fought for across generations" Said Representative McMurtry "We here in the Commonwealth continue to stand up for our police, teachers, firefighters and others who we rely on to keep our communities safe and thriving."

Additionally, the bill will:

- Provide new hires with an opportunity learn about the benefits and services available to them;
- Protect worker organizations from coordinated outside attacks by empowering them to set policies regarding dues and membership;
- Ensure that employee organizations are able to provide confidential legal advice and other communications by providing up to date employee contact information; and
- Enable employee organizations to conduct meetings at scheduled times at the workplace provided they pay for any associated rental or maintenance fees.

In the decision, the Supreme Court ruled that agency service fees which public employee organizations charged non-dues paying workers were unconstitutional, upending decades of labor practices supported by previous court rulings. Unlike their private sector counterparts, public sector labor unions are obligated to offer all employees, regardless of union membership, full and fair representation in all collective bargaining activities, employee discipline or grievance proceedings, and arbitration processes. Despite this, the Janus decision curtailed the ability of employee organizations to recoup costs of non-dues payers, creating a free rider issue and severely damaging their ability to fairly negotiate on behalf of their membership.

The bill will now go to the Senate where it is expected to receive overwhelming support.

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Why Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)?

*ADUs allow multi-generational housing so families can live together while maintaining independence.

*ADUs allow older adults to supplement a fixed income so they can better afford taxes, insurance, home modifications and maintenance, which increases their ability to "age-in-place."

*ADUs add diverse housing stock, helping to provide more affordable options for adults of all ages.

*ADU rental pricing tends to be more stable than apartments rented from professional property managers, which is particularly helpful for people on fixed incomes.

*ADUs offer an opportunity for downsizing and a discreet, low impact way to add housing to neighborhoods.

"Accessory dwelling units are a great way to allow homeowners to adapt to their family's evolving needs over time while maintaining privacy and independent living. They're a great option for a young person staying at home, a caretaker for aging parents, multigenerational living, or just to help a senior homeowner cope with rising property taxes through rental income."
- André Leroux, MA Smart Growth Alliance Executive Director

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