

Action Plan for MBTA Communities

Description Area	Please read the Section 3A Guidelines before attempting to complete this form. Please note: Action Plan Forms must be submitted by a municipal official with authority to act on behalf of the municipality on matters of zoning, such as the municipal CEO or planning director.
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Section 1: Identification

Description Area	The Section 3A Guidelines establish zoning metrics that apply uniquely to each MBTA community based on its local transit stations, existing housing stock, population, and developable land. This section of the Action Plan helps to identify the transit stations that determined each community's category. Appendix 1 of the Section 3A Guidelines lists each community's category and minimum multi-family unit capacity requirement.
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1.1 MBTA Community Name	Boxford
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1.2. Community Category	Adjacent small town
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1.3. Multifamily Unit Capacity Requirement	141
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1.4. Does this municipality have any MBTA rapid transit stations within its boundaries?	No
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1.5. Does this municipality have any MBTA commuter rail stations within its boundaries?	No
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1.6. Does this municipality have any other MBTA transit stations that are located outside of its municipal boundaries that may have "developable station area" within them?	No
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1.7. Please provide the name of the person filling out this form	Ross Povenmire
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1.7a. Title	Director of Land Use
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1.7b. Email Address	rpovenmire@town.boxford.ma.us
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1.7c. Phone Number	(978) 887-6000
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1.8 Please provide the name of the municipal CEO	Matt Coogan
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1.8b Mailing address of municipal CEO Town Hall
7A Spofford Road
Boxford, MA 01921

1.8c Email address of municipal CEO mcoogan@town.boxford.ma.us

1.9. Please briefly describe other members of the core team developing the multi-family zoning district. Boxford Planning Board members
Boxford Housing Partnership members
Merrimack Valley Planning Commission (MVPC)

Section 2: Housing Overview

2.1. Does this municipality have any established housing related goals or strategies from municipal planning documents, such as a Housing Production Plan, Master Plan, or Economic Development Plan?

Yes

2.1a. Please briefly describe any relevant strategies, goals, or objectives, and the work that has been done to date.

Boxford's Housing Production Plan (HPP) 2018-2022, prepared with assistance from MVPC, lists housing related actions (see Action Table, pages 55-57 of the HPP). In partial response to this list of action items, beginning in 2018, Boxford worked to revise the Elderly Housing District to enable the development of 66 duplex unit of elderly housing known as the Willows at Boxford. This project was approved in 2021 and is currently under construction. Boxford also approved in 2021 the construction of a new Community Center/Council on Aging building which is currently under construction. At the May 2022 Annual Town Meeting, Boxford approved CPC funds to assist seniors with home improvements needed to allow them to age in place, and also accepted the provisions of Chapter 59 section 5(57) to allow seniors to reduce their real estate tax burden.

2.2. Is this municipality currently working on any other planning for housing?

Yes

2.2a. Please briefly describe the housing work underway.

Boxford is currently working with MVPC to update its Housing Production Plan.

Section 3: Preliminary Zoning Strategies

3.1. To the best of your knowledge, which of the following zoning strategies is this community most likely to use for compliance? (Select all that apply)

e. Other zoning strategy

3.1e. Please briefly explain the strategy. Optional: Attach any supporting documents that show planning work this community has already done for this strategy. The northern end of town includes undeveloped land adjacent to existing multi family development in the City of Haverhill. This area is close (but not within) MBTA station area in Haverhill and Lawrence, and has relatively quick access to Route 125 (South Main Street) in Haverhill.

3.2. What non-housing characteristics are important for this community to consider in its 3A zoning district? The town of Boxford relies on private wells and septic for water and sewer service. There is no municipal water and sewer service available in the town.

Section 4: Action Plan Timeline

Description Area This section creates a framework to input preliminary plans for a zoning adoption process. On the table below, please use Column 1 (from the left) to describe a task, Column 2 to input a start date, and Column 3 to input a finish date. Every community must provide a timeline for the below-listed tasks. Additional space is provided for any other tasks that a community wishes to list. DHCD will review proposed timelines for feasibility before approving an Action Plan. Public outreach
Developing zoning
Applying DHCD's compliance model to test for density and unit capacity
Holding planning board hearings
Holding legislative sessions and adopt compliant zoning
Submit District Compliance application to DHCD

Description Area	Task
Description Area	Start
Description Area	Finish
Short Answer	Applying DHCD's compliance model
	Feb 01, 2023
	Sep 30, 2023
Short Answer	Holding Planning Board hearings
	Sep 01, 2023
	Apr 01, 2023
Short Answer	Developing zoning
	Jan 01, 2024
	Apr 01, 2025
Short Answer	Public outreach
	Apr 01, 2025

Nov 30, 2025

Short Answer

Holding legislative sessions and adopt zoning

Sep 01, 2025

Nov 30, 2025

Short Answer

Submit District Compliance application

Dec 01, 2025

Dec 31, 2025

If there is any other feedback you would like to share about the compliance process, please use this space to provide it.

The Town of Boxford municipal leaders and staff have engaged in good faith with the MBTA Communities process, including attending webinars, meetings, and submitting the MBTA Communities Information Form. The Town has also invited speakers from the regional planning agency to better understand how to comply with Section 3A requirements. An invitation was extended to the State Office of Community Development to present to the Select Board on cable TV, but this was declined. Despite these efforts, many questions and concerns remain.

Boxford is categorized by Section 3A as an "adjacent small town." It is a semi-rural community zoned almost exclusively for agricultural/residential use with a minimum lot size of two acres. The existing housing stock predominantly consists of detached single family homes. With very limited exception, each residence is served by a private well and septic system located on the same lot. The town has taken great care and pride in preserving its semi-rural character, including preserving farms and large areas of open space. Imposing 3A requirements on Boxford is contrary to this locally driven land-use planning and is likely to adversely affect the community.

Section 3A requires Boxford to accommodate 141 units at a gross density of 15 units per acre. The town is poorly equipped to do so. There is no public sewer and water. The police and fire services are not equipped to serve multi-story buildings. There is no public transportation. Other municipalities in the region, however, do have the transportation facilities, police and fire service, public sewer and water services, and other supporting infrastructure needed to support increased housing at high density. The housing goals of Section 3A can be achieved by placing new, higher density housing development in areas that can best accommodate it.

The requirements of Section 3A are opaque in many ways. The definitions of "housing suitable for families" is not specific with regard to the number of bedrooms, bathrooms, or square footage required for each unit to be counted. The definition of "gross density" appears to include consideration of extensive areas beyond the building footprint. To require Boxford to allow, as of right, a gross density of 15 large units on an acre is tantamount to requiring the town to allow three and four-story apartment blocks, before factoring in the space needs of supporting infrastructure. After including additional space needed for wells and septic systems, parking, pedestrian circulation and common area, and other supporting infrastructure, the apartment blocks will need to be raised even higher to achieve the gross density requirement. A zoning district that realistically allows, as of right, the required gross density, must allow the concomitant building height with no clear limit. In this and other ways it is difficult for Boxford to clearly identify the impacts of Section 3A on the community.

The existing wetland and title 5 requirements would make it prohibitive for Boxford to become a 3A district that would be in compliance, not without resorting to multi-story apartment buildings out of character with the community. Boxford relies on private wells and on-site septic waste disposal systems to serve individual residences, necessitating large lots and strict bylaws for the protection of water resources, wetlands and the environment. In addition to these reasonable development limitations, Boxford has many areas of wetlands and poor soils that are not suitable for development and are protected by regulation. To achieve a gross unit density of 15 units per acre in Boxford is to stack units vertically in multistory apartment-style buildings so that as much land area as possible can be left available for septic, wells and other infrastructure. None of Boxford's long-range planning to date contemplates the density in the Guidelines, and such densities pose special needs for town services and infrastructure, including increased fire and police services, traffic control, roads, and school capacity.

The Compliance Model developed for analyzing the eligibility of potential parcels for inclusion in an MBTA zoning district requires a facility with computers and ArcGIS software not typically possessed by municipal staff in small communities. The complexity of the Compliance Model therefore disempowers local planning staff and community leaders in favor of outside consultants and specialists. This also will tend to alienate local staff and community leaders from embracing and supporting the Section 3A process.

The Town of Boxford is actively planning for the future. The Town has engaged over the years in numerous efforts at long-range planning, including the development of Master Plans, Municipal Vulnerability Plans, Housing Production Plans, and Open Space and Recreation Plans, among others. In all of these plans, there is a conscious effort to balance the needs of the community, including both increasing and diversifying housing inventory, while preserving the Town's character and identity. With regards to Housing, the Town's Housing Partnership Committee is actively working on projects to address housing cost and affordable housing production, including the creation of a housing trust and a feasibility study to create affordable housing on public lands. The Town will also be working with the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission to update our Housing Production Plan. The Town of Boxford recognizes the need for housing within our region, but the guidelines do not acknowledge communities such as Boxford that are rural in character and lack any of the infrastructure necessary for smart growth and transit-oriented development. The density requirements in Section 3A are significantly higher than what the Town has contemplated in the planning efforts mentioned. The Town would like to be part of a regional effort to increase housing production, but at a density more in line with the rural character of Boxford.

The Section 3A process relies upon town meeting approval of a zoning amendment. It will be a challenge to pass a zoning bylaw at a Boxford

Town meeting that complies with the requirements of Section 3A. As mentioned, the density requirements in Section 3A would be a dramatic change from local land use patterns. It will be a challenge for the Town of Boxford to create a zoning ordinance in compliance with Section 3A, particularly when considering the limits and constraints in terms of limited infrastructure and services, reliance on septic and well systems, and the abundance of wetlands and conservation lands. The Town will rely on outside technical assistance, particularly through the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission, to better understand how and whether the Town of Boxford will be able to comply with Section 3A.

We hope the State will continue to focus on integrated planning to achieve more housing in rural areas while also strengthening soil conservation, floodplain preservation, aquifer and water quality protection, water supply management, habitat restoration, and agricultural preservation, among others.

Snellings, Emma (OCD)

From: Ross Povenmire <rpoenmire@town.boxford.ma.us>
Sent: Monday, March 20, 2023 11:44 AM
To: Snellings, Emma (OCD)
Cc: Carlucci, Nathan (OCD)
Subject: RE: Request for Clarification on Section 3A Action Plan - Boxford

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Flagged

CAUTION: This email originated from a sender outside of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts mail system. Do not click on links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Hello Emma, I foresee Planning Board hearings during the location of the districts as well as during the Form 7 zoning amendment process. This is likely to straddle a long period of time. I suggest changing the Action Plan time frame for holding Planning Board hearings to read as follows: September 1, 2023 – April 1 2025.

Ross

From: Snellings, Emma (OCD) <emma.snellings@state.ma.us>
Sent: Monday, March 20, 2023 10:14 AM
To: Ross Povenmire <rpoenmire@town.boxford.ma.us>
Cc: Carlucci, Nathan (OCD) <nathan.carlucci@state.ma.us>
Subject: Request for Clarification on Section 3A Action Plan - Boxford

External Sender

Hello,

Thank you for submitting an Action Plan for Boxford. During our review of the Action Plan it was noted that the Timeline includes planning board hearings before the compliant zoning is developed. This timeline task was intended to represent the planning board public hearings that are held in preparation for Town Meeting. Please confirm or revise the dates of the task below by replying to this email to amend your Action Plan. Once received, your Action Plan will be adjusted if necessary and its review can be finalized.

- Holding Planning Board hearings: September 1, 2023 – April 1, 2023

Thank you,
Emma

Emma Snellings (she/her)
Regional Planner
Department of Housing and Community Development
emma.snellings@mass.gov