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SMART AID FOR HOUSING

NOW THAT the state budget has been approved, the Massachusetts Legislature needs to fine-tune a plan that will encourage cities and towns to end the shortage of reasonably priced housing. Most promising is a bill that offers communities a small amount of new aid to offset extra school costs that will result from the new housing.

This proposal addresses the major weakness of a plan approved last year that helps communities establish Smart Growth Zoning Districts. The state would offer one-time bonuses for housing built in these districts, which would require greater densities of construction than usually allowed by cities and towns. Housing prices should moderate if enough new homes are built in these districts.

A single payment will not address the continuing increase in school costs from children in the new housing. The Commonwealth Housing Task Force, a private coalition that first proposed the Smart Growth Zoning plan, analyzed the potential costs and presented the findings at a legislative committee hearing earlier this month. The task force released a report explaining its conclusions yesterday.

It found that, while some communities would get enough state aid under the plan to cover the costs of new students, 238 of the state's 351 cities and towns would not. For them, the additional costs would average

\$5,000 per year for every home built in a Smart Growth district. To insure the success of the Smart Growth housing plan, the state needs to pick up the extra cost, which should total no more than \$36 million a year.

The state Senate included a plan to provide this money in an outside section of the budget. At the insistence of House Speaker Salvatore F. DiMasi, this and other policy initiatives were stricken from the budget before it cleared the Legislature last week.

DiMasi was right to discourage the custom of attaching major initiatives to the annual spending document, but an improvement in legislative procedure should not become an indirect way to bury good ideas. The Smart Growth housing plan is the best proposal yet to deal with the shortage of reasonably priced housing in and around Boston — a regional crisis. And a vehicle still exists: Senator Harriette L. Chandler, Democrat of Worcester, filed the school aid plan as a separate bill.

DiMasi has expressed concerns about the prospects for future economic development. The housing shortage is an impediment to long-term growth in Massachusetts.

Kim Haberlin, a spokesman for DiMasi, said yesterday he was looking forward to talking to key House members about the bill. DiMasi ought to encourage his fellow representatives to get the bill out of committee and onto the House floor for speedy approval.

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