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HOUSING SOLUTION

THERE ARE 351 reasons why Massachusetts is short of reasonably priced housing. That's the number of cities and towns in the state, many with zoning restrictions to limit new housing. The Legislature needs to approve a bill that would address a common excuse — increasing school costs — that communities give to discourage construction.

This bill would complete the state's "smart growth" housing strategy, part of which was approved last year. That 2004 law authorizes one-time bonus payments to communities that create smart growth zoning districts, where housing is clustered on compact sites instead of sprawled on 2-acre lots.

A report from the Census Bureau yesterday shows the effect of restrictive zoning. Even with strong demand generated by low mortgage rates, the number of housing units in Massachusetts grew by only 1.9 percent since 2001. Prices, already high, jumped by 11 percent between 2003 and 2004, according to the Realtors' association. No wonder many college graduates leave Massachusetts, as documented by the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce. They can't afford to live here.

The Commonwealth Housing Task Force, a coalition of business, academic, and advocacy groups, is behind the push for a smart growth housing strategy. The state Senate has approved the school payment incentives, but the

House of Representatives is holding back.

"We want to make sure this is the big reason towns are not building housing," said Representative Kevin Honan of Brighton, cochairman of the Housing Committee, in a telephone interview yesterday. He said that House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi would soon be meeting with the Boston Foundation, one of the driving forces behind the task force, to discuss the issue. Honan added that other issues, such as water and sewage costs, might also inhibit development.

With 351 different communities, many issues may come into play. But the task force has found that 238 would incur extra school costs if they created smart growth districts. These continuing expenses would give pause to any community. The extra costs need to be defrayed by a reliable stream of state aid.

This week, in an attempt to spur economic development, the House joined the Senate in approving a sales tax holiday for the weekend of Aug. 13-14. This might provide a quick minor stimulus, but the dearth of reasonably priced housing represents a long-term threat to the economy of Massachusetts as young, skilled workers are forced to move elsewhere.

The Commonwealth Housing Task Force has produced a solid plan to deal with a crisis that has been growing for years. It — even more than the sales tax holiday — deserves approval from DiMasi and the House.

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