

Boston Sunday Globe

Founded 1872

RICHARD H. GILMAN *Publisher*

MARTIN BARON *Editor* RENÉE LOTH *Editor, Editorial Page*

HELEN W. DONOVAN *Executive Editor*

RICHARD J. DANIELS *President & General Manager*

SMART HOUSING INCENTIVE

HOUSING PRICES are flattening in the Boston area, but they remain among the highest in the country and constitute an impediment to economic growth. The Massachusetts Senate passed a bill last week to improve the "smart growth" policy intended to lower prices by spurring construction of homes. The House should follow suit to give the workers and families needed for a strong economy an opportunity to live affordably in the area.

Communities in and around Boston ought to use their land carefully to maximize housing production while minimizing highway congestion and protecting open space. A smart growth strategy is hard to implement, however, when the area is fragmented among scores of cities and towns.

State government needs to intervene. It took a step in the right direction last year when the Legislature approved a plan to offer communities payments for housing construction in smart growth districts — those where zoning rules are loosened to allow a minimum of eight houses per acre. Districts would be located in town centers or near public transportation to minimize auto use.

These payments would not compensate communities for the continuing costs of educating students who would live in the housing. Less affluent communities would not face new expenses because they already receive

ample state education aid, which grows with an increase in enrollment. But many other districts would incur new costs, and this disincentive to smart growth needs to be removed for all communities.

The bill passed by the Senate would commit the state to pay for the extra education costs, less any state education aid and the local taxes generated by smart growth development. This should assuage fears in cities and towns that construction of moderately priced houses will result in unsupportable burdens.

An article on the back page of this section explains the consequences of unaffordable housing: a decline in the working-age population; an increase in the proportion of very young or very old people, who tend to need more government services; and a consequent decline in economic vitality. House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi has made economic development a priority. He needs to push strongly for this bill.

The smart growth housing initiative is the brainchild of the Commonwealth Housing Task Force, a coalition of religious, business, and philanthropic groups concerned about the viability of the state economy. The coalition patiently prodded the Legislature to pass the first half of the plan last year and worked hard to get this improvement through the Senate. Smart growth won't be a reality until the Legislature approves — and Governor Romney signs — the school aid incentive.