

## Conversation on Housing: Panel Discussion on Small Houses Summary

The Town of Foxborough hosted a second “Conversation on Housing” on February 11, 2020 as part of the Foxborough Housing Production Plan (HPP). The evening featured a panel discussion on small houses, with panelists:

- Joe Lynch, a real estate developer local to Foxborough whose residential projects include large single family homes and smaller homes delivered through Chapter 40B Comprehensive Permits.
- Andrew Consigli, principal at Civico development (with a background in both architecture and construction). His firm builds small, attached homes across the region.
- Jeremy Lake, a senior associate at Union Studio Architecture and Urban Design, a regional leader in small house community design.

The subject of the evening’s panel was small housing, specifically the prospect of building 1,000-2,000 square foot homes that could be grouped together and sold at relatively inexpensive prices to members of the Foxborough community. Foxborough’s Planning Director, Paige Duncan, and John McCartin, Regional Housing and Land Use Planner at the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), moderated the discussion.

Approximately 70 people attended the event, many of whom were senior citizens. A recording of the event can be viewed [here](#).

After introductions from the Town and MAPC on the purpose evening and the HPP process generally, each panelist introduced themselves, their practice, and shared initial thoughts on the subject. Following that, panelists were asked a series of questions by moderators and by the audience. Some important take-aways from that discussion follow:

- Land prices drive Foxborough housing prices.
  - Land available for sale at the time of the event was scarce, and cost roughly \$200,000 per acre.
  - Construction costs were roughly \$150-200 per square foot (just for home itself).
  - Before site work, utilities, roads, and developer profit, costs for a typical 2,500 square foot home on a one-acre lot already exceed \$600,000.
  - Reducing home size and decreasing the land cost per unit would allow for homes sold at lower prices.
- This conversation was explicitly about reducing costs for unsubsidized housing offered on the private market, rather than producing deed-restricted Affordable Housing facilitated by a subsidy and subject to price limits.
  - Moderators discussed a target price of \$400,000 for a new small home. This was acknowledged as more expensive than some attendees might think of as affordable, but was less expensive than the market price for new homes and could be a “stretch goal” for the market.
- Construction costs can only decrease so much.
  - Smaller homes eliminate a lot of costs, but there are diminishing returns as a design gets smaller, due to high cost items all houses need. (“A kitchen is still a kitchen, a bathroom is still a bathroom.”)
  - In Foxborough typically \$150-200/sqft for residential construction
  - \$200/sqft represented the high-end market
  - Personal elevators are less expensive than they used to be. This opens up doors for new types of living for seniors.

- The market for small houses involves many groups:
  - Seniors/empty nesters downsizing
  - New families
  - Single people (both younger and older), particularly single women (evidenced in past cottage projects)
  - Couples
- Design considerations:
  - Odd sites are an opportunity for creative infill.
  - Using sloped sites to tuck parking under structures.
  - Matching materials, window proportions, colors, and rooflines to mimic surrounding context. (These can also be used to make density feel “less dense”.)
  - Design around existing trees to make the community look established.
  - Consolidate parking
  - Put intimate interior spaces (bedroom/bathroom) on one side of the house and less intimate spaces on the other. Stagger houses on site to increase privacy.
  - Design guidelines can help. (They have to be crafted with care.)
  - “Respect the scale” of the surrounding community
  - When designing to match the context, be careful you’re not replicating things people don’t actually like or want (path dependency).
  - Work with and listen to the community on design. The developer/architect may have the wrong assumptions. Designs can benefit from participation.
- Community Amenities:
  - Shared reservable space to allow people to host friends and family for get-togethers.
  - Green space
    - Make central
    - Design septic systems to work as amenity spaces
- Lots of communities are having this conversation. Foxborough is not alone in trying to solve these housing challenges. There is no silver bullet.
- “Missing Middle” housing (between single-family housing and large multifamily) is not allowed by zoning in most towns, removing traditional models for inexpensive housing delivery. It’s good that Foxborough is proactively addressing any potential problems of past zoning decisions.
- Existing multifamily zoning codes (not necessarily in Foxborough, but in the region generally) force dense developments to be large-scale, pushed together, and out of context with historic buildings. Better zoning codes could accommodate more units per acre without clashing with the character of existing neighborhoods.
- Housing for seniors
  - Many senior participants wanted all rooms on a single floor (like a bungalow)
  - Panelists noted this would increase costs (requiring more foundation) for a cottage style home
  - Most cottage designs have one bedroom on the first floor and additional bedrooms above
  - Some senior participants said they only need the one bedroom.
  - Some participants said they didn’t need a basement. Panelists said in past projects, seniors ended up wanting the basement (to store their possessions after downsizing). In any event, due to the frost point in the region, foundations must be deep, so the basement is not a significant additional cost.
  - Flats (either apartments or condos in an elevator building) are another option raised by one of the panelists.
    - A panelist asked attendees who would live in an apartment building (by show of hands). Very few people raised their hands.

- What would be needed to make this sort of housing happen?
  - Zoning petition brought to town meeting
  - A “Friendly 40B” process where the Town works with a developer to seek approval through a 40B Comprehensive Permit. (Foxborough meets the 10% threshold of Affordable Housing units on the Subsidized Housing Inventory, so a developer cannot seek a 40B Comprehensive Permit without working with the Town.)
- Some participants did not like the results of the 40B project near Stop and Shop (one of Joe Lynch’s). They felt the density was inappropriate. One panelist suggested density was not the problem, but the form could be improved to make the density worked better in Foxborough. A moderator also noted the units in this project were all sold out. A participant said those buyers were coming from areas outside of Foxborough.
- Some participants do not like the duplexes built under Foxborough’s “R-15” zoning, often replacing ranches that were once inexpensive. They asked how that could be stopped. A moderator said it would require a zoning petition, going to Town Meeting, and obtaining a two-thirds vote.
- Attendees asked about other towns allowing denser development with shared common space. Panelists said there were very few with that sort of zoning.
- An attendee asked about development along Route 1. A moderator responded that the Master Plan does not currently call for residential development along Route 1.
  - A panelist noted the most activity they see in zoning reform in towns outside of Boston is related to land around train stations, due in part to extra state funding available to towns through Chapter 40R and 40S.
  - An attendee asked if that was a possibility for the future near the Foxboro MBTA station.
- A participant asked about Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU) and the potential for those in Foxborough. A moderator noted there is an ADU ordinance in Foxborough, but the rules may be too restrictive, and rethinking those rules are part of this process.
- One attendee said the community needs to break out of its old thoughts and feelings about housing.