



Testimony submitted to the Joint Committee on Housing
In Support of H.673/S.723 An Act relative to housing production
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The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts supports H.673/S. 723 An Act relative to housing production. These bills are a significant effort to encourage more units of housing to be built that are affordable to more of our population and alleviate the extreme shortage of housing for low- and moderate-income families. There must be a change in the statewide framework for housing production in order to support our commitment to house everyone and to meet the needs of a population that is looking increasingly for modestly-priced rental units.

The League is very concerned about the large numbers of families and individuals who are homeless. For decades the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Budget has included a great deal of money to take care of people who are homeless, and we support continuing this effort at a level to provide housing to all in need. It has been discouraging that the homeless numbers have continued high in spite of concerted efforts by the Department of Housing and Community Development and many non-governmental organizations. A significant contributing factor to homelessness is the rising cost of housing, particularly in areas where the economy has been producing jobs, leading to a higher demand for housing. No matter how much is added to the state's budget for assistance to the homeless and subsidized units, we can't win this battle to house our people until we add more affordable housing units through the ordinary construction market.

We stress that housing production is an issue that affects our population in general, not just those in crisis. In addition to families, younger workers just getting started and paying off student loans need modest rental units that are hard to come by. Our future-oriented businesses and the state as a whole cannot afford to discourage young educated workers from living here because of the lack of suitable housing. Another group often ready for multifamily rental housing are the retired couples and individuals who want to leave their single-family homes and locate closer to transit and city and town centers; good options for them would expand the home ownership market for the younger generation. Therefore, increasing the stock of multifamily rentals would better meet the housing needs of two growing segments of the Massachusetts population, young singles and retiring elders.

We believe that the current housing needs justify appropriately increasing density and lowering barriers to development. The League commends the principle that communities across the state should share in the effort to substantially increase the number of housing units because potential renters and owners live and work everywhere. New businesses are being established around the state and employees are better off living close to their jobs. Older folks often want to stay in the same community when they sell their homes. The bill's distinction between density expected in rural towns (8 units per acre for multifamily zones) and other communities (15 units

per acre for multifamily zones) should make it workable. Open space residential housing (formerly cluster development) and accessory units in formerly single family housing add options for communities. The bill lowers barriers for developers by providing that these zoning options are available “by right,” without special permits or other hurdles, and generally could be passed by a simple majority of the community’s legislative body. The provision that communities passing new multifamily housing or Smart Growth districts would qualify for Smart Growth school cost reimbursement starting in fiscal year 2020 is an essential piece of the legislation.

The League recognizes that other bills proposed for this legislative session have similar provisions and that there may be somewhat different solutions that will appropriately address the housing dilemma we face. However, we urge the Committee to adopt a final bill that carries the main principles of H.673/S.723. We believe that any solution must involve the whole state for the sake of fairness between communities and wider opportunities for our residents. The state has a responsibility to encourage communities to move forward and alleviate fears of unsustainable growth through measures such as school cost reimbursement and planning assistance. As we make zoning changes that can produce the much needed housing that our residents can afford, we should be guided by Smart Growth principles and safeguard our natural resources.

We urge the Joint Committee on Housing to report H.673/S.723 favorably and quickly out of committee as the next step to address the Commonwealth’s housing problem and to secure enactment this session.