

Letter to the Editor – The Stow and Bolton Independent (April 2, 2025)

Proposed 3A Multi-Family Zoning District – Not Ready for Prime Time

Stow's Planning Board (PB) has proposed an ill-conceived "Multi-Family Overlay Zoning District" immediately east of the Lower Village Business District (LV-BD) - between the cemetery and Maynard's town line. It was selected to fulfill Stow's entire multi-family housing obligation under Section 3A of the MBTA Communities Act.

This district would allow the development of 139 housing units, "by right," on 9.3 acres (15 units per acre). This could conceivably result in the densest development ever allowed in Stow. No Special Permits are required and there are few protections for existing homeowners and abutters. Although 3A housing is a town-wide obligation, the PB seems to believe it's "just and proper" for one residentially zoned neighborhood to shoulder the town's entire compliance burden. Existing zoning already reserves this neighborhood for "typical rural, single-family homes." Yet, homeowners are now asked to forgo their peaceful, rural way of life so the rest of Stow can remain untouched by this mandate.

The PB has, to date, made no sincere attempts to reach out, learn, understand, or discuss the negative impacts this overlay district could have on our way of life. Traditional norms involving equity, shared sacrifice, and the rights of individual property owners seem to have fallen by the wayside. Stow has no legal obligation to put a 3A district in a residential zone already densely occupied. The statute clearly allows 3A districts to be located anywhere in Stow, including spreading them among multiple locations. But the PB doesn't want a district located in a more underdeveloped area of Stow. Although there are many other more suitable areas, none have been seriously evaluated. There's several reasons for this.

1. There is a mistaken (yet widely held) notion that a 3A zone could spur more economic activity in the LV-BD and even re-create a walkable version of a New England-style village (that never was). I can't help believe there's a touch of magical thinking going on here. Plus, nobody seems to have bothered to consider the increased risk to pedestrian safety that will inevitably arise.
2. The PB has used narrow and skewed evaluation criteria to screen potential 3A locations, while ignoring the most important criterion: "First, do no harm." Planners are obliged to eliminate (or minimize) harm to those likely to be negatively impacted. The PB should rectify this.
3. Citizens have long prioritized the following four things they love about Stow. They love the "*abundance of nature*," the "*strong sense of community*," the "*rural setting*,"

and the “*quietude and serenity of the area.*” The PB seems to have forgotten that residents and abutters in East Lower Village possess similar sentiments and enjoy them in abundance in our neighborhood(s).

Stow citizens seek ways to enjoy, maintain, and improve the quality of their lives. This proposed Multi-Family Zoning District potentially denies us these dreams. I urge the PB to think deeper, broader, and with more sensitivity to LV homeowners who, like me, feel unfairly targeted by this troublesome proposal. It doesn't have to be this way, and it shouldn't.

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