

# Home, sweet home

BY ROBERT KEOUGH

There is quite possibly no word in the English language more evocative than “home.” The very sound of it is rich, warm, comforting; the word lends itself to no end of aphorisms that are, well, homely: There’s no place like home. Home is where the heart is. My home is my castle. Home is where, when you need to go there, they’ve got to take you in. In baseball, home plate is where you start off, and where you try to get to. Home is a refuge, a haven, a sanctuary of protection and nurturance. Home is also the Earth itself: Go to Google, enter “home” and click on “I’m feeling lucky,” and you find yourself on the “Experience NASA” page, where you can click through images of our planetary home from outer space. E.T., phone home.

“Home,” above all, is what this issue of *CommonWealth* is about—what home is going to be like, for ourselves and for our neighbors, now and in the future. It’s about affordability and livability. It’s about the means of life and the quality of life. Is the home we long for within our reach, or beyond it? Are we protecting our homes, or keeping others from obtaining their own? Are we feathering our nests or fouling them?

Unfortunately, people—indeed, localities—have differing views about what constitutes home improvement. Broadly speaking, the state’s large and mid-sized cities view development and growth as desirable, while suburbs and small towns view them as dangers. That differential can be traced to recent experience, both where growth has been happening (suburbia) and where it hasn’t (the city). There are exceptions: Boston is booming, in physical development and in property values, if not necessarily in population; Cambridge is the same. Not only that, but developers will tell you that the gauntlet of abutter opposition they run in the Hub is every bit as daunting as what they encounter in any development-phobic suburb.

But most Massachusetts cities, still struggling to find their place in an increasingly suburban landscape, continue to long for a level of investment and activity by homeowners and businesses that they haven’t enjoyed in years, if not generations. This issue reports promising signs from Lowell, Worcester, and Pittsfield, which are discovering the marketability of downtown living, commuter rail, and the arts economy. More than ever, Lowell and Worcester are finding themselves tethered, by railroad tracks and

by homebuyers migrating north- and westward, to the Boston economy, even as the economy itself continues its march past Route 128, past I-495. It’s turning out to be possible for urban environments with their own distinctive characters to survive, perhaps even thrive, in a satellite relationship with the capital city. Pittsfield is far outside the Boston orbit, but it is betting its post-General Electric future on becoming the urban hub of a Berkshire arts economy whose principal patrons are exiles and vacationers from a far bigger metropolis, New York City. It could be that, in the 21st century, what matters most for cities is their relationships with one another.

These hopeful examples notwithstanding, urban revival continues to be a challenge, especially in places like Lawrence, Holyoke, and Springfield, which have yet to find their post-industrial niche. But it is hard not to think that the central dilemmas of growth and development in Massachusetts lie in suburbia and beyond. That is where the growth—in population and jobs—has been concentrated over the past 25 years, and where the resistance to growth is centered now. If the good news is that cities, at least some of them, have gotten better at realizing their dreams of growth and development, the bad news is that the suburbs have, in many cases, gotten all too good at controlling growth in their communities, to the detriment of middle-class families who yearn for their own little piece of Americana.

## The dilemmas of growth lie in suburbia and beyond.

Urban flight may not be what it once was—to the relief of places like Boston—but there is something elemental about the steady trickle of middle-class families, white and non-white and, increasingly, immigrant, from city to suburb, and now to more-distant suburb. Some, perhaps much, of that has to do with schools, crime, and quality of life—matters to which city officials should not be indifferent, and neither should we as a Commonwealth. Cities need to be livable places for families of all incomes, at every stage of their lives, not just playgrounds for the young and rootless who abandon urban neighborhoods when they have the means and imperative to settle down.

But no urban renaissance will be enough to counteract

the lure of suburbia altogether, nor should anyone expect it to be. On this, urban/suburban analyst Joel Kotkin (“The New Suburbanite,” page 86) is fond of quoting Edgardo Contini, an Italian immigrant and prominent Los Angeles structural engineer in the 1940s and ’50s. “The suburban house is the idealization of every immigrant’s dream—the vassal’s dream of his own castle,” observed Contini. “It is a universal aspiration to own your own home.”

Not every home worth owning is outside the city, but in the latter half of the 20th century the yearning for a home in the suburbs became something like a universal aspiration, and it remains so today. Now, however, that aspiration is driving families farther and farther from Boston, deeper and deeper into the Massachusetts countryside, chewing up land and putting stress on natural resources in a way that alarms environmentalists and public officials alike. The mutually reinforcing phenomena of restricted supply and rising price have turned aspiring middle-class homeowners into frontiersmen. The real estate brokers say: “Drive ’til you qualify.” But we could just as well go back to Horace Greeley: “Go west, young man.”

How has housing supply been restricted, and prices inflated? In this issue, we present two scholarly answers, one historical, the other economic, both courtesy of Harvard’s

Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston. Urban historian Alexander von Hoffman gives us the tale of Arlington, a town he singles out only for being typical, to show how the suburbs turned sour on growth post-1970, and learned to use such municipal management tools as zoning, permitting, and “design review” to keep the market for multi-family housing, in particular, from responding to demand (The Long View, page 103). And economist Edward Glaeser, director of the Rappaport Institute, crunches the numbers—drawn in part from brand-new data on local land-use regulations in eastern Massachusetts compiled in partnership with the Pioneer Institute—and quantifies for the first time how increases in minimum lot sizes, especially, result in less housing production and higher prices for homes throughout the area (Considered Opinion, page 99).

There’s certainly an element of pulling up the drawbridge in the suburban resistance to new housing, especially for moderate-income families, who are seen as costing in services (especially schools) more than they contribute in property taxes. But we also ought to recognize that the reluctance to accept additional growth, especially in places that have been growing rapidly in recent

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years, is perfectly reasonable, if not necessarily admirable. As Kotkin argues, for those already ensconced in suburbia, there's nothing in it for them except more traffic and higher municipal costs. So towns slam the doors shut, forcing suburb-seekers into ever-more-distant territories. This, says Kotkin, is why "the anti-sprawl sentiment is the very thing that accelerates sprawl."

On top of that, for suburbs and small towns, growth means change, and there will always be a sizeable contingent that simply would rather not. And not just among old-timers. If people buy a home—especially at today's astronomical prices—in a place they like the way it is, why would they want it to change?

Almost by definition, change means risk. Dartmouth College economist William Fischel makes the case that homeowners, who are influential in all local politics but decisive in bedroom communities, are inherently risk averse, for the simple reason that the biggest investment of their lives—their homes—is unsecured against loss of value. You can insure your home against fire, but you can't insure it against changes in the neighborhood that make your home worth less, or less than it could be. To Fischel, there's nothing irrational about the fears typically ascribed to NIMBYism. It's not the predictable consequences of development that make homeowners lie awake at night, it's the impacts that they can't predict. Better simply to avoid them altogether. Call it the Nancy Reagan Doctrine of Land Use: Just say no.

Fischel, for one, doesn't think this is altogether a bad thing. Protecting the value of one's home is what gets homeowners to care about local services that they don't benefit from directly. Property values give the childless and the empty nesters a reason to support the public schools, for instance. But what homeowners have to protect is not just the resale price of their property. A big new development next door might even raise the value of my home, but I might not like living here as much. Why take the chance? Just say no.

**T**hat brings us to one final, and similarly sacrosanct, usage of the word "home"—home rule. This is, of course, a misnomer in Massachusetts. As Harvard legal scholars David Barron, Gerald Frug, and Rick Su have argued in these pages ("Overruling Home Rule," *CW*, Winter '04), home rule in Massachusetts is more myth than fact. The Legislature holds all the legal cards, determining how municipalities will govern themselves, fund their operations, even hold elections. With municipalities required to take home rule petitions to the Legislature for approval of all sorts of minor affairs, they are particularly jealous of the few powers deemed to them—chief among them, land use.

But the mythology of home rule can be powerful in and of itself. The state may be, legally speaking, all powerful, but on land-use issues, in particular, the state is deferential to a fault. The one exception is Chapter 40B, but that itself is a historical anomaly. In 1969, urban Democrats resentful of the state's Racial Imbalance Act teamed up with suburban liberals to do some social engineering of their own, imposing on suburban communities affordable housing requirements that trumped local zoning ("Anti-'snob zoning' law turns developer's tool," *CW*, Spring '02).

It's hard to imagine what it would take for the state to be as assertive today. On even big initiatives like the new

## The two-thirds rule helps the just-say-no contingent.

Smart Growth Zoning Districts, or Chapter 40R, the state bows to local authority: Adopting dense zoning for affordable and transit-oriented housing—the most ambitious zoning reform in a generation—is left to local discretion, a purely voluntary option. Now, state planners are left waiting by the phone, looking for all the world like Maytag repairmen, the loneliest guys in town (see "House Rules," page 38).

One way that state overbearingness and local timidity combine to defy good sense is in the statutory requirement of a two-thirds vote of local authorities—town meeting or city council—for zoning changes. This requirement gives the just-say-no contingent of any locality an almost automatic veto over significant change in development patterns. The consequences are particularly evident in the case of Kingston town meeting rejecting the development of a new suburban village surrounding the MBTA commuter rail station despite majority support ("Growth smarts," *CW*, Winter '03), but they can be found lurking in the shadows of many another development project ground to dust or compromised away.

In imposing the two-thirds requirement, the state has stacked the deck in favor of the status quo, in apparent mistrust of the locals (or, as I heard one lawmaker suggest at a State House hearing, to guard against the stacking of town meeting—a legitimate concern, but hardly a reason to empower local naysayers). So here's a modest proposal: unstack the deck by allowing majority rule on zoning matters, which would at least give change a chance. (The proposed Land Use Reform Act would allow municipalities to substitute majority rule for supermajority approval of zoning changes, but, like most state land-use initiatives, only if they choose to do so. See *Argument & Counterpoints*, page 109.) Cooler heads can hardly be expected to prevail if hotheads are given veto power. If there is to be home rule, in any form, let it at least be majority rule. ■