

Beverly has built a lot of new housing lately. Now some there say it's time to slow down.

City officials are mulling a tighter cap on new building heights after a wave of development in the North Shore city.

By [Andrew Brinker](#) Globe Correspondent. Updated January 20, 2023, 8:38 a.m.



Apartment buildings line Rantoul Street in Beverly. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Can one community have too much housing?

In Massachusetts, a state that is hundreds of thousands of homes short of what's needed to keep costs in check, the answer would seem a resounding no.

But in Beverly, a place that in recent years has built more than most other communities on the North Shore, there is a growing movement of residents and public officials who are hoping to pump the brakes on new housing development - or at least projects they view as particularly dense - over concerns that the city of 42,000 is growing too quickly.

[Those worries crystallized last summer](#) when a developer announced plans for a five-story apartment building on a main downtown street. And now they've prompted a City Council proposal to cut maximum building heights across the city from five stories down to three, or 35 feet.

Matt St. Hilaire, the city councilor behind the ordinance, said he hoped to spark a conversation about development and housing in Beverly moving forward.

"We are long overdue for a conversation about our future," said St. Hilaire, who represents a ward on the east side of the city. "What are we looking to achieve? Do we have the resources to support the pace of our current growth? And how much more growth do we want? I don't know that we can handle another thousand units over the next 10 years."



As in many of the communities that ring Boston, housing production in Beverly began to slouch during the 1990s, falling well behind the pace of population growth and eventually coming to a near standstill in the early 2010s. Between 2010 and 2014, Beverly built [just 168 new units.](#)

But that began to turn around in 2014, with a new mayor - Michael Cahill - who saw housing as a top priority. Since then, Beverly has built or permitted nearly 1,400 new units, according to data provided by the city's Planning Department, meaning housing production there has almost returned to 1980s levels.



Construction at Rantoul Street and Railroad Avenue in Beverly on Jan. 11, 2023. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

But the pace of growth has aggravated some residents. St. Hilaire said the influx of new housing has brought new residents to the city and stretched its resources thin. He said he regularly fields complaints about poorly-maintained streets and public properties - including a bridge that connects the city's west side with downtown that was shut down last year by the state due to disrepair - which he attributed to the city failing to properly plan for growth.

There are some residents and housing advocates, though, who worry that limiting the density of new housing development will only increase rental costs.

Rachel Hand, executive director of homeless aid organization Family Promise North Shore, said in a letter to the City Council that there are longtime residents of Beverly who are losing their apartments because of rent increases, and that "a proposal such as this one is only going to make this already dire situation worse."

At a City Council meeting on the proposal late last year, Steve Moffet, a Beverly resident, called lowering building heights "reductive," saying it works against the city's housing objectives.

"It's the goal of both the city and the state to create more affordable housing and to create it in such a way that's environmentally of the least impact," said Moffet. "An arbitrary three-story limit undercuts both those goals."

Cahill, who is still mayor, said he supports evaluating the city's growth trajectory, and that he has also heard concerns about traffic and Beverly's ability to handle more residents. He proposed a more modest downzoning that would only lower building heights on Cabot Street, one of two major downtown streets, in the interest of preserving its character. Rantoul Street, which runs parallel to Cabot Street, has seen a rash of new apartment buildings pop up in recent years.

Lowering building heights citywide would be too imposing, he said, given the gravity of the housing crisis.

"That's a broad brush that doesn't really fit in with our neighborhood dynamics," said Cahill. "It's fair to have concerns about our city's infrastructure and how much development we can support, but we still need density in some parts of the city. We've got to build housing somewhere."

But even in the places that are building, that has proven a tough sell, in part because rents in cities such as Beverly remain relatively high despite the new production, a fact Cahill attributes in part to neighboring communities that have built little.

Saugus, for example, [reduced its maximum building heights last year](#), citing overdevelopment concerns, while earlier this month the mayor of Peabody [announced plans](#) for the city to purchase an So-acre plot of land to block a housing development that had been planned there.

"There is a frustration with some residents here that we are doing our share, and other communities are really dropping the ball," said Cahill. "It means, to a certain extent, that our rents can't go down unless they pitch in too. But we won't stop investing in housing, because that will only make things worse."

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