

# Boston will require new buildings to hit net zero standards

It's the second time in a year the Boston Zoning Commission has voted on the net-zero proposal

By **Catherine Carlock** Globe Staff, Updated January 29, 2025, 6:04 p.m.



Boston University's new Data Science Center, in the foreground, is one of the most energy-efficient new buildings in Boston. New rules adopted on Wednesday will require many new buildings in the city to reduce reliance on fossil fuels. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

The Boston Zoning Commission on Wednesday approved the long-debated rules that require newly constructed buildings to reduce energy use and fossil fuel reliance.

The so-called Net Zero Carbon Zoning initiative is a key element of Mayor Michelle Wu's climate agenda, and will take effect starting July 1. All newly proposed real estate projects

with more than 15 units of housing, spanning 20,000 square feet or more, or additions of at least 50,000 square feet will be required to meet the net-zero emissions standard.

“Boston is one of the most climate vulnerable cities in the country, if not the world, in terms of sea level rise and storm surge,” said Brian Swett, Boston’s chief climate officer. “It is in our best interest to show leadership on what it means to get to a decarbonized built environment as quickly as possible.”

The commission voted 8 to 3 in support, after initially rejecting the proposal last summer, when several commissioners expressed [concerns about boosting development costs](#) at a time when the region badly needs more housing construction. Some of those commissioners reiterated similar concerns on Wednesday, emphasizing that the city already has structures in place — such as the Building Energy Reduction and Disclosure Ordinance and the specialized stretch energy code — to address emissions reductions.

“We need more housing of all levels being built in Massachusetts and in the city of Boston,” said commissioner Drew Leff. “Why do we need to make it even more complicated? ... This is sort of like we’re putting extra burden on people to have to follow this additional law.”

For residential projects looking to comply by purchasing offsite renewable energy, the additional requirements could boost energy costs by between 3 and 8 percent, though those costs are expected to decline over time, city officials said. For affordable housing projects, the city of Boston may offer additional city support to cover the “additional but very manageable costs,” said Housing Chief Sheila Dillon.

The proposal drew support from a broad spectrum of developers, from community development corporations in Allston-Brighton and Fenway to prominent commercial builders Millennium Partners, Samuels & Associates, and Tishman Speyer. Abe Menzin, a principal at Samuels, said the developer appreciated the city’s phased-in approach for certain buildings. Hospitals and general manufacturing facilities won’t be required to hit

net-zero operational emissions until 2045, while newly built laboratories have until 2035.

“We are comfortable that the operating cost premiums for zero net carbon buildings, while they do exist, are manageable, and small in relation to the energy savings of these buildings,” Menzin said.

And this time, a majority of Zoning Commission members supported the idea.

Compliance could play out in multiple ways — with a builder designing a project with low-carbon materials, installing solar cells, or buying renewable energy to reduce electricity emissions. There’s also an option to pay into a city fund — a rate of \$234 per ton of carbon dioxide — to support decarbonizing projects in environmental justice communities across the city.

Beyond emissions reductions, the Net Zero Carbon Zoning initiative requires small and large projects to report data on embodied carbon — that is, the carbon dioxide emissions that come from the materials used to build a new structure. Manufacturing construction materials, like concrete and steel, [contributes to 15 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions](#), according to the US Environmental Protection Agency. Gathering data on embodied carbon can be a first step toward ultimately reducing it, Swett said.

“The construction industry itself really has a significant impact on carbon emissions locally and globally,” Swett said.

At One Boston Wharf, a future Amazon office in Boston’s Seaport District, WS Development is using a low-carbon cement created by Sublime Systems [as part of its effort to reach net-zero carbon emissions](#). Sublime, a Somerville-based MIT spinoff, creates [what it calls](#) “clean cement” via electrified manufacturing.

“It’s exactly the type of climate tech and innovation that Boston and Massachusetts want to be known for,” Swett said. “Buildings don’t have to have this much embodied carbon,

and concrete is one of the biggest drivers. So there's real opportunity for innovation, for business development, for new ways of building buildings that can come out of Massachusetts.”

Incorporating emissions requirements into the city's zoning code is “a very novel use” of municipal authority, said Amy E. Turner, director of the Cities Climate Law Initiative at Columbia Law School. The combined impact of BERDO and the new zero requirements “definitely establish Boston as a leader in this space.”

The requirements come amid a slowdown in housing construction in Greater Boston. James Rooney, CEO of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, said in a statement that while the Chamber supported a net-zero emissions goal, it's important to recognize the decline in development.

“As our residents and businesses face a housing crisis, we cannot afford to slow down or add costs to any developments that may lead to new housing,” Rooney said.

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