

# THE ARLINGTON ADVOCATE

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## Forum tackles 'smart growth' Housing Corporation hosts annual meeting

By Jennifer Mann

Staff Writer

Rather than choosing between the lesser of two evils, town planning officials often have to pick between the better of two goods.

If one has three acres of land, ripe for development, is it better to build as a way to bring in more affordable housing, or leave it be and preserve the area as open space?

The question has increasingly vexed many citizens of Arlington, who acknowledge the town has already reached peak density levels.

Experts on planning and development explored the issue during the Housing Corporation of Arlington's annual meeting and panel discussion last Wednesday at Town Hall, co-sponsored by the Arlington Land Trust. They asked how a town can meet competing needs when it is already "built out."

Douglas I. Foy, secretary from the Office for Commonwealth Development under Gov. Mitt Romney, and panelists discussed whether "smart growth" might be the answer.

Foy, who praised Arlington for having "already done a lot of smart things," said one of the key elements is breaking down barriers between transportation, environmental and housing plans.

"Any housing agenda in a community like this is intimately tied to the transportation agenda," he said. "Housing and environmental goals (also) have to be viewed as intertwined, inexplicably linked together."

It can be done with an aggressive open space strategy, the secretary said, as well as zoning laws and policy decisions that pull development into the places where it is needed most. The concept underlies the state's Chapter 40R law, which is a vol-

untary program that awards grants to private and public entities that build near transit stations.

Chapter 40R "is in my view, the gold standard," Foy said. "I would urge towns to look at 40R very seriously."

Not all at the meeting agreed with the assertion, however. Town Moderator John Worden, speaking as a resident, contended 40R creates less regulatory controls for a town and local historical commissions, and is unneeded in places like Arlington, where detailed zoning laws already guide growth.

The secretary, in response, emphasized Chapter 40R is voluntary.

The former 25-year president of the Conservation Law Foundation added there are other "smart growth" strategies, such as building schools and libraries close to town centers, and encouraging walking to places of education and commerce — something he said Arlington, in many ways, already does.

"I believe this is a nation of neighborhoods. Most of us grew up in neighborhoods," he said. "Nurture your neighborhoods by having your children out in them."

As a recommendation, he added, Arlington should explore building "up" on existing locations on Massachusetts Avenue, to encourage mixed-use development, but also maintain available open spaces. Another possibility, Foy said, is to create accessory zoning, allowing homeowners to build potential rental space onto their homes, which could also help them fight escalating mortgages and encourage a diverse community.

Arlington resident and panelist Clarissa Rowe, who also supported accessory zoning, said it would additionally be helpful for the town to start looking at planning in a regional way.

"We really need to think about not just where Arlington's borders end, but also

where Belmont's borders end," said the president of Arlington Land Trust. She added affordable housing should not be considered in its traditional terms, serving just the lowest income residents or municipal workers.

"It is not just the firemen and the policemen, it is our own children," she said, referring to the growing number of young adults who cannot afford to live in the communities where they grew up.

Panelist Joseph Kriesberg, president of the Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations, said a smart growing community should not limit diversity to income level, but also extend it to race and ethnicity.

"I think that is a part of smart growth that a lot of people don't want to talk about, yet it's the elephant in the room," he said.

One thing all panelists agreed on: The only "dumb growth" is no growth at all.

Panelist David Luberoff, executive director of the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, said a stunt in development can lead to higher housing prices, and place a community at an "economic disadvantage."

"If all of our communities decided not to grow ... our kids couldn't buy the house next door, and they wouldn't want to," he said.

*The "Smart Growth in Dense, Suburban Communities" panel also included Ralph Willmer of Vanasse Hangen Brustlin in Watertown, and Marc Draisen, executive director of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, who acted as moderator. Also at the meeting, the Housing Corporation of Arlington awarded the Deacon Frank Mandosa Community Service Award to Cambridge Savings Bank "for their dedication to affordable housing in Arlington."*