



SQUARE FEET

## *Massachusetts Offered a Solution to Housing Shortages. Is It Working?*

The Affordable Housing Act designated Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, the Berkshires and other resort towns as "seasonal communities," making it easier to build homes there for workers.

By Jim Zarroli

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The Thornewood Inn in Great Barrington, Mass., was once the quintessential New England bed-and-breakfast, with its cozy four-poster beds and a wraparound porch, drawing tourists from Boston, New York and beyond.

But these days, many of the Thornewood's rooms are filled not with leaf-peepers and antique-hunters but with the people who wait on them.



The Thornewood Inn in Great Barrington, Mass., is a former bed-and-breakfast that catered to vacationers and has been converted into worker housing. Patrick Dodson for The New York Times

They're people like Adam Figueiredo, 32, who was working at a coffee shop in town when he was looking for a place to live this summer. After months of not finding anything he could afford, Mr. Figueiredo came across the Thornewood. It had been converted into a kind of modern-day boardinghouse by Community Development Corporation of South Berkshire, a nonprofit group that develops affordable housing, and opened this year. Rent for a room, which comes with a private bathroom and a shared kitchen, start at \$900 a month, in a town where the average rent is \$2,500, according to Zillow. Nearby, the Windflower, another inn once popular with tourists, was also repurposed as housing for workers and opened in 2023.



Adam Figueiredo recently started working at Great Barrington Dispensary and lives in affordable housing at the Thornewood. Patrick Dodson for The New York Times

Both properties are much needed in Berkshire County, where high housing costs and a tight market in towns like Great Barrington and Stockbridge have made it challenging for workers in sectors such as education and health care to find a place to live. The apartment vacancy rate in the county is 3.7 percent, down from 6.2 in 2018, and evictions have nearly doubled, according to the UMass Donahue Institute, which studies housing.

“It’s hard to buy a home on \$50,000 a year, or even afford rent at this point,” said Marybeth Mitts, a member of the Lenox Select Board. Ms. Mitts said housing in her town had “changed radically since the pandemic.”

“A lot of the available housing stock started to get purchased because people were leaving Boston and New York and coming out to the lovely Berkshires,” she said.



Marybeth Mitts, a member of the Lenox Select Board, said housing in her town had “changed radically since the pandemic.” Patrick Dodson for The New York Times

Growth in population leveled off by 2023, but the market remains tight. The number of new building permits issued in Massachusetts has “increasingly lagged the national average” since the Great Recession that started in 2007, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. The UMass Donahue Institute estimates that the state will face a shortfall of 222,000 homes by 2036.

In Berkshire County, new construction has been even more anemic, said Brad Gordon, executive director of UpSide413, a nonprofit organization that provides housing services. Many towns have sought to preserve their rural character by passing zoning rules requiring two- or three-acre sites for new homes, making it expensive to build, he said. The lack of sewage and water services has further limited new construction.

Last year, Gov. Maura Healey signed the Affordable Housing Act, aimed at encouraging more construction. The bill allows accessory dwelling units to be on the same lot of a single-family house, allowing homeowners to build, for example, a cottage in their backyard that could be rented out. State officials say more than 90,000 new housing units have been built or are under development since the law passed.



Church Street in Lenox, Mass. Last year, Gov. Maura Healey signed the Affordable Housing Act, aimed at encouraging more construction. Patrick Dodson for The New York Times

The bill also designates resort areas, such as Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, as "seasonal communities." Among other things, the designation allows towns to build housing specifically for workers without violating discrimination laws.

Eight towns in the Berkshires where more than 40 percent of homes are occupied by part-time residents also received the seasonal-housing designation. But towns need to opt into the program to take advantage of the provisions, and none in the Berkshires had done so as of this month. The Berkshire Eagle reported last month that only six people in the county had applied to build accessory housing units.

Officials from several towns, including Lenox and Stockbridge, told The New York Times that they were still weighing the bill and declined to comment.



The Taggart House is one of many historic mansions for rent in Stockbridge, where 44 percent of homes are owned by second-home owners and outside investors, according to state data. Patrick Dodson for The New York Times

As Mr. Gordon sees it, a certain ambivalence toward the construction of affordable housing has long existed in the region. Many people say they understand the need for more housing, he said, “but if that was something that was next door to them or in their neighborhood, I don’t think that percentage would be as high, unfortunately.”

Efforts to build more housing have sometimes faced opposition. In 2019, for example, residents in Lenox voted down a mixed-income housing project on a town-owned parcel near another new housing development, arguing that it would strain the town infrastructure. A second, 65-unit project, called the Forge, was approved — close to a highway and farther from the town's center.

Patrick White, who grew up in Stockbridge and is chairman of the Stockbridge Affordable Housing Trust, said the housing squeeze threatens to alter the area's character. Visitors have long been drawn to Stockbridge for its Gilded Age mansions, a certain Norman-Rockwell charm and attractions like Tanglewood, the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.



Patrick White, who grew up in Stockbridge, worries that the town is at risk of becoming another Provincetown, a Cape Cod community with a tiny population of full-time residents. Patrick Dodson for The New York Times

But Stockbridge has always had a sizable year-round middle-class population as well — and that's changing, Mr. White said.

“Nine out of 10 sales in Stockbridge are now going to seasonal residents, because the real estate around here has gotten so expensive,” he said. Forty-four percent of homes in Stockbridge are owned as second homes and by outside investors, according to state data.

Mr. White worries that Stockbridge is at risk of becoming another Provincetown, a Cape Cod community with a tiny population of full-time residents. If things don't change, no one will be left to teach children, put out fires or serve in local government, he added.

"Everything stops working if you don't have people here from September through May," he said.

The housing crunch in the state's resort towns has also been exacerbated by short-term rentals. Homeowners would rather rent to vacationers during peak season over residents year-round because it generates more income, said Edward M. Augustus Jr., the state's secretary of housing and livable communities. (Nantucket residents voted last week to back a measure that would allow them to rent their properties without a minimum length of stay.)



Eammon Coughlin, a town planner for Lenox, addressing residents before a vote on amendments to articles about short-term rentals and accessory dwelling units. Patrick Dodson for The New York Times

"That year-round rental might have gone to a municipal employee or somebody who's working in a year-round service industry and now has lost that opportunity," Mr. Augustus said.

Even with the slow start, though, Mr. Augustus said he believed that many towns would eventually vote to adopt the seasonal housing designation — in large part because of the growing worker shortage.

Schools in particular say they have trouble attracting teachers and other workers. “We live in a community where a starting teacher would find it very difficult to buy a house or even be able to rent year-round,” said William E. Collins, the superintendent at Lenox Public Schools.

In Great Barrington, Fairview Hospital has had to increasingly recruit from outside the area, said Anthony Scibelli, system vice president and chief operating officer.

“We have people that drive in from Connecticut and New York and from farther into the county,” he said.



“Everything stops working if you don’t have people here from September through May,” Mr. White said, referring to how the housing squeeze threatened Stockbridge’s ability to attract and retain workers. Patrick Dodson for The New York Times

In the meantime, some employers have had to get creative about the housing squeeze. Josh Irwin confronted a thorny problem a few years ago when recruiting a chef for a restaurant he owns in the Berkshires’ New Marlborough.

The candidate “kind of put the ball in my court: ‘You find me a place to live, ’cause I’ve had no luck yet,’” Mr. Irwin said.

So Mr. Irwin did something increasingly common among business owners in the area. He bought a small cottage on a nearby lake for his employees to live in. Mr. Irwin had also planned to turn Windflower into worker housing, but the plan was later carried out by Construct, a housing nonprofit.

The housing problem has become only more urgent, Mr. Irwin said. Some businesses have had to reduce hours or close because they can't find workers.

"It's hard to ignore it when you go to your neighborhood coffee shop and the door's locked, and there's a sign out front saying, 'Sorry, no staff.'"