



Rural & Small Town Housing Choice Community Designation 2026 Designation Criteria and Best Practices



About the Rural & Small Town Housing Choice Community Designation

The Housing Choice Designation recognizes Cities and Towns that demonstrate certain levels of housing production and adoption of pro-housing best practices. In 2026, the Healey-Driscoll administration is proud to launch the [Rural and Small Town Housing Choice Communities Designation \(RST-HCC\)](#). This new designation is part of the Housing Choice Initiative and [Rural & Small Towns](#) are eligible to apply.

Designation Eligibility

To be considered for the RST-HCC Designation, a Town must meet one of the four Eligibility Criteria below. Evidence related to each criterion must be in the form of building and/or foundation permits and best practices documentation, as applicable, over the last 5 calendar years (2021-2025).

RST-HCC Eligibility Criteria

1. 7% growth **OR** 700 new units (no best practices)
2. 5% growth **OR** 500 new units, **PLUS** 4 of 21 best practices (at least 1 from Affordable category)
3. 3% growth **OR** 300 new units, **PLUS** 7 of 21 best practices (at least 2 from Affordable category)
4. 1.5% growth **OR** 150 new units, **PLUS** 9 of 21 best practices (at least 3 from Affordable category)

Additional Eligibility Conditions and Evidence

- ✓ Rural and Small Towns¹ defined as municipalities with a year-round population of 7,000 or less **OR** less than 500 people per square mile are eligible for RST-HCC Designation consideration.
- ✓ MBTA Communities determined to be noncompliant under Section 3A of the Zoning Act (M.G.L. c.40A) and regulations (760 CMR 72.00) are ineligible for the Designation.
- ✓ Permitting evidence may include U.S. Census Building Permit Survey (BPS) data and/or data directly from a municipality's own issued permits.
- ✓ Permitting evidence must be in the form of building permits and/or foundation permits and does not include occupancy permits or other approvals made before a building permit is issued.

2026 New Units Count Pilot

Homes that have been rehabilitated to improve their livability in the past 5 years can count as a "net new unit" for the purposes of the Designation application after either:

- A. having been cited for building or sanitary code violations **OR**
- B. were subject to cancellation of commercial property insurance due to substandard property conditions **OR**
- C. were otherwise blighted² or substandard³

¹ Find the list of the 181 Rural and Small Towns that meet this definition at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/rural-and-small-town-designation-list-2024/download>

² "Blighted" means the home's condition is detrimental to safety, health, or welfare because the home is out of repair, physically deteriorated, unfit for human habitation, or obsolete.

³ "Substandard" means conditions that, by reason of dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangement or design, lack of ventilation, light, and/or sanitation facilities, are detrimental to safety, health, or welfare.

List of Best Practices

The tables below list all 21 Best Practices (BP) by category, describe each BP, and show the possible number of possible BPs that each may count toward the eligibility criteria.

#	Affordable Best Practices	Possible BP Count
1.	<p>Inclusionary Zoning: Have Inclusionary Zoning (IZ) with density bonuses that provides for reasonable density increases so that housing is not unreasonably precluded.</p> <p><i>This BP will count as two for Rural and Small Towns with IZ policies that meet this standard.</i></p>	1 or 2 BPs
2.	<p>40R/40Y District: Have an approved 40R Smart Growth or 40Y Starter Home district that remains in compliance with the program.</p> <p><i>This BP will count as two for communities that have permitted units in their approved district(s) in the last 5 years.</i></p>	1 or 2 BPs
3.	<p>Transit-Oriented Development: Have created new districts, changed zoning, or dedicated local resources to incentivize transit-oriented development or made local investments to create/improve public transit or multi-modal options connecting housing to other areas, such as, but not limited to, multi-use paths/trails, pedestrian infrastructure, or micro-transit options (such as, but not limited to, Council on Aging or other like-transit options) in the last 5 years.</p>	1 BP
4.	<p>Housing Rehab Funding: Have designated local resources to rehab vacant and dilapidated properties in the last 5 years, such as but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established a local housing rehab program Spent local funds on housing rehab (such as, but not limited to, CPA/CDBG/HOME funds) Dedicated municipal staff to promote and provide technical assistance to housing rehab Worked with a regional entity to increase capacity to implement local rehabilitation programs 	1 BP
5.	<p>Local Rehab Collaboration: Demonstrated at least two of the following in the last 5 years:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Municipal staff participation in Housing Rehab Training Promoted home efficiency or rehab programs, such as Mass Save, the Neighborhood HUB, Habitat for Humanity, or other statewide housing rehabilitation programs Worked with local organizations and home builders to complete rehabilitation projects Other local actions to collaborate with other communities, regional entities, or other collaborative efforts that promote housing rehab 	1 BP
6.	<p>Affordable Housing Approval: Have a demonstrated pattern of approving housing projects that include deed restricted, affordable, units in the last 5 years.</p>	1 BP
7.	<p>Subsidized Housing Inventory: Demonstrate at least one of the following related to Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SHI units that equal or exceed 10% of total year-round housing stock according to EOHLC's SHI Increased SHI units by at least 1.5% in the last 5 years <p><i>This BP will count as two for communities that meet both.</i></p>	1 or 2 BPs
8.	<p>Local Actions that Support Housing: Demonstrate at least three of the following local actions for housing:</p>	1 BP

#	Affordable Best Practices	Possible BP Count
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Currently have an Affordable Housing Trust (AHT) or Community Preservation Act (CPA) Committee Have an AHT with an active local funding program Allocated over 10% CPA funds for housing projects in the last 5 years Re-use or redevelopment of local donated or surplus land for housing in the last 5 years Collaboration with state agencies to promote the redevelopment of state surplus land into housing that resulted in successful RFP/Auction in the last 5 years Adopted local option property tax relief programs for income-eligible seniors as provided for by statute (MGL c. 59 section 5) or through a home rule petition Adopted a Community Impact Fee for short-term rentals (MGL c. 64G, section 3D) that is committed in writing to use a portion of such revenues for affordable housing Implemented policies or initiatives to promote missing middle housing in the last 5 years Implemented other locally identified creative pro housing strategies not listed here in the last 5 years 	

#	Other Best Practices	Possible BP Count
9.	<p>Multi-Family Zoning: Have at least one multi-family zoning district or form-based zoning that allows for multi-family housing (allowing 2 units or more, not including ADUs) as of right (in addition to any 40R or 3A district/s) that does not restrict development by age of occupant or number of bedrooms.</p> <p><i>This BP will count as two for Rural and Small Towns that meet this standard.</i></p>	2 BPs
10.	<p>City/Town-Wide Multi-Family Zoning: Have city- or town-wide multi-family zoning (allowing 2 units or more, not including ADUs) as of right.</p> <p><i>This BP will count as two for Rural and Small Towns that meet this standard.</i></p>	2 BPs
11.	<p>Mixed-Use Zoning: Have at least one zoning district that allows residential/mixed-use development as of right (which is not part of a 40R district), such as but not limited to a downtown, village center, or like district.</p>	1 BP
12.	<p>Cluster Development: Have at least one zoning district that allows Cluster or Open Space Residential Development (OSRD).</p>	1 BP
13.	<p>Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU): Have adopted or amended local zoning bylaws since the implementation date (2/2/2025) of MGL c. 40A section 3 and 760 CMR 71.000, the state's ADU law and regulations.</p>	1 BP
14.	<p>Zoning Incentives: Have implemented at least one of the following pro-housing policies that remove zoning barriers to produce housing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not require more than one parking space per unit for multi-family units Reduced minimum lot sizes and set-back rules Allow for greater building height and density Allow for an as-of-right Flood Plan review Do not prohibit the construction of manufactured homes Other local zoning changes that remove barriers to permit and promote new homes <p><i>This BP will count as two for Rural and Small Towns that implement two or more.</i></p>	1 or 2 BPs

#	Other Best Practices	Possible BP Count
15.	Resilient Buildings: Have development standards or programs that incentivize decarbonization, including energy efficiency for new construction and/or rehabilitation, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-impact development (LID) practices • Stretch Code • Renewable energy integration • Participation in the Energy Star program 	1 BP
16.	Climate Resiliency Planning: Have created or updated a climate resiliency plan in the last 5 years that includes a vulnerability assessment, adaptation strategies, mitigation actions, governance and coordination strategies, and monitoring and evaluation processes.	1 BP
17.	State-Led Housing Program Participation: Participation in at least one of the following in the last 5 years: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Development Incentive Program (HDIP) • Have an Urban Center Housing Tax Increment Financing (UCH-TIF) district • Adopted or updated an Urban Renewal Plan that includes a significant housing production element • Other EOHLC, Mass Housing Partnership (MHP), MassHousing, MassDevelopment, or CEDAC-led program or initiative that focuses on housing production, ending homelessness, or improving community livability <p><i>This BP will count as two for Rural and Small Towns that participate in two or more.</i></p>	1 or 2 BPs
18.	Housing Production Plan: Have an EOHLC-approved or -certified Housing Production Plan (HPP) at the time of designation application. <p><i>This BP will count as two for certified HPPs.</i></p>	1 or 2 BPs
19.	Housing Plan Implementation: Implemented at least three strategies identified in an EOHLC-approved HPP. (The 3 strategies must be different than the BPs listed here.)	1 BP
20.	Land Use Board Training: Provided education and training in the last 5 years for land use board members (Planning Board, Board of Appeals, Select Board, and/or City Council) from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen Planner Training Collaborative (CPTC) • Massachusetts Housing Partnership's (MHP) Housing Institute • Citizens' Housing and Planning Association's (CHAPA) Housing Summit or Massachusetts Housing Leadership Academy • Community Development Partnership's Lower Cape Housing Institute • Urban Land Institute's (ULI) Urban Plan Public Leadership Institute • Southern New England American Planning Association (SNEAPA) • Regional Planning Agencies (RPA) 	1 BP
21.	Regional Collaboration: Participated in a regional planning effort with other Cities and Towns or collaborated with neighboring Cities and Towns to tackle regional matters related to housing in the last 5 years. Note that working with your RPA to conduct a municipal-specific plan does not count for this best practice.	1 BP

For more information about the Housing Choice Initiative, see www.mass.gov/housingchoice, or contact McKenzie Bell at McKenzie.Bell@mass.gov and Filipe Zamborlini at Filipe.Zamborlini@mass.gov.