



Commonwealth Conversations



Common Ground. Shared Leadership.



MassSenate

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Acknowledgements

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We would like to thank the many supporters and contributors to this initiative:

Mass Inc.	Parker River National Wildlife Refuge
A Better City	Ipswich Ale Brewer's Table
Suffolk County Sheriff's Department	Lawrence General Hospital
Suffolk University Law School	UMass Lowell
Martignetti Companies	Conway Town Hall
New Bedford State Pier	Barnes Air National Guard Base
UMass Dartmouth College of Visual and Performing Arts	UMass Amherst- Springfield Campus
New England Ice Cream	MGM Springfield
TPC Norton	UMass Amherst
Mansfield Airport	Charles River Museum of Industry and Innovation
Bristol Community College	Hudson Town Hall
Mother Brooks Arts and Community Center	The Carroll Center for the Blind
Olin College	Warren Conference Center
Quincy City Hall	Roca Inc.
United First Parish Church	The Lynn Museum
Thomas Crane Library	Boda Borg
Union Point	Higgins Middle School
Hansen Elementary School	Southwick Zoo
Community Health Center of Cape Cod	Worcester Polytechnic Institute
Cape Cod Oyster Company	Worcester Police Department
Mass Maritime Academy	Carter & Stevens Farm
WB Mason	Seven Hills Foundation
Dr. W. Arnone Community School	

Very special thanks to the BARR Foundation, and former Secretary of Transportation, James Aloisi.

With special acknowledgement to Kelsey Brennan (Office of Senator Michael Rodrigues), Megan Montgomery (Office of Senate President Stan Rosenberg), Daniel Napolitano (Office of Senate President Stan Rosenberg), Steve Maher (Office of Senate President Stan Rosenberg), and Hiram Shah (Office of Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr).

Introduction

Commonwealth Conversations 2017



Last session, the Massachusetts State Senate conducted a series of statewide public forums, known as *Commonwealth Conversations*, in an effort to better understand the challenges and opportunities facing communities, residents and their families across the Commonwealth.

On January 4, 2017, Senator Michael Rodrigues, along with co-sponsor Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr, offered an order to the Massachusetts Senate calling for the reformation of a special committee of the Senate to conduct regional public forums. It was so ordered and adopted,

“That members of the Senate shall conduct a series of regional public forums and visits to hear and understand the concerns and priorities of the people of the Commonwealth. The forums and visits shall guide the Senate in setting its priorities to support strong and healthy families, vibrant and sustainable communities and a transparent, efficient and effective state government.”

Commonwealth Conversations 2017 was the next step in the Senate’s ongoing efforts to make government more responsive and accessible to the needs and priorities of the people. The Massachusetts State Senate once again embarked on a listening tour spanning nine regions in every corner of the state, from the Berkshires to Cape Cod. Bringing Beacon Hill to Main Street, the Senate sought to engage individuals of all ages, races, and backgrounds to identify common themes throughout the state that could be translated into bipartisan, legislative priorities.

The following report serves as a framework for the Massachusetts State Senate’s vision for the Commonwealth, a vision that carefully considers the input and opinions of individuals and communities across the state, and supports working families.

“The best ideas are often found not within these halls but in our neighborhoods and our coffee shops, in our board rooms and union halls, in our office break rooms and at our family tables.”

-Senate President Stan Rosenberg

Executive Summary

Commonwealth Conversations 2017



Commonwealth Conversations 2017, co-chaired by Senator Michael J. Rodrigues (D-Westport), Senate President Stan Rosenberg (D-Amherst), and Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr (R-Gloucester), once again assisted the Massachusetts Senate in setting clear, bipartisan legislative priorities to advance the needs of the Commonwealth. Thousands of constituents spoke on issues ranging from combatting climate change, to increasing access to early education, and extending broadband service. What we heard was clear: the Massachusetts State Senate must invest in programs that build upon the Commonwealth's shared prosperity, and promote policy that builds an even stronger foundation for Massachusetts families and communities to thrive.

In keeping with these bipartisan values, the Massachusetts State Senate commits to crafting a legislative agenda that will:

1. Strengthen and invest in the state's education system, and work to close economic and racial disparities in education;
2. Develop a more equitable, accessible, and reliable transportation system in line with the vision of the people of the Commonwealth;
3. Engage offenders, families, schools, law enforcement, prosecutors, judges and other stakeholders in a comprehensive reform of the criminal justice system to establish best-practices in reducing recidivism and preventing crime;
4. Support a comprehensive energy plan that combats climate change, and strengthens the state's renewable energy portfolio;
5. Reduce barriers to affordable housing, and work to prevent displacement of individuals and families;
6. Support working families by combatting income inequality, and ensuring access to quality support services;
7. Promote jobs, sustainable local and regional economies, and economic development that supports employers and employees.

Kids First

Commonwealth Conversations 2017



INVESTING IN OUR FUTURE

Ensuring each and every child has access to a high-quality education is of highest priority to people across the Commonwealth. Massachusetts is ranked first in the country for public education, and highly ranked worldwide. However, learning gaps still persist. As a result, the Senate formed the *Kids First Initiative*; the *Kids First Blue Print* serves as the working group's recommendations on how the Commonwealth can raise third grade reading proficiency by 50% over the next 10 years.¹ The Massachusetts Senate firmly believes that education is a right, not a privilege, and will work to reduce learning-gaps, and racial and economic disparity in education.



IMPROVING ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY PUBLIC EDUCATION

Our efforts to improve education will remain stagnant without increased investment in our schools, and commitment to our children. Rural and urban communities alike expressed the need for additional Chapter 70 funding, as well as modifications to the funding formula. Schools with a large undocumented immigrant population, such as Brockton, struggle with Chapter 70 funding, in which undocumented students are currently under-counted in the formula's component for low-income students.

Educators encouraged the Senate to continue supporting the Massachusetts After School Partnership, and summer programming to help ensure low-income children do not start off the school year with a learning gap. Out of school learning time has a direct impact on children's educational success. Low-income families have limited-to-no access to these programs, putting low-income children at a disadvantage. The Massachusetts After School Partnership makes quality programming available to low income and at-risk youth to engage in STEM, increase literacy rates, and assist English language learners.

Children with disabilities have a more difficult time accessing high quality education. Educators and families advocated that the Foundation Budget Review recommendations be implemented, a large part of which deals with IEPs (individualized education plans).ⁱⁱ One Metro West educational advocate testified, “Massachusetts is a leader in providing high quality education to special needs students so that they can reach their full potential, but we need more state resources to continue doing this.” The Senate can increase educational opportunities for students with disabilities by advocating for additional special education teachers, supporting Turning 22, and closing the budget gap for special needs students.



The Massachusetts Senate is committed to maintaining and improving the Commonwealth's status as an educational hub. We acknowledge that access to education intersects with other challenges facing the state, particularly income inequality. We will work as a body to improve educational opportunities for all

children. Furthermore, the Massachusetts Senate reaffirms its commitment to the Kids First Blueprint as a way to increase quality, access, readiness, and integration in public education, and will use its findings to address the concerns we heard across the state.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Young people from every corner of the state participated in the town halls to advocate for more civic engagement opportunities. The Young Democrats of MA Greater Boston Chair asked the Senate,

“How do we make it simpler and easier for people to get more involved? Young people are willing and passionate to learn.”

The Senate is committed to promoting civic engagement education and encouraging a new generation to become more involved in government.

21st century civic engagement requires a streamlined process for communication through technology. Community organizers argued that young people are more likely to get involved when presented with accessible and clear information, and streamlined ways to communicate with their government representatives.

Introducing civic educational curricula into classrooms not only teaches students how government works, but also helps them learn how to advocate for themselves and their communities. Educational advocates argued that civic education allows students to explore their beliefs, and helps foster relevant, respectful debate. Furthermore, white and wealthy students are 3x more likely to achieve “proficient” in civics than black, Hispanic, and poor students.ⁱⁱⁱ Ensuring equal access to civics education could help encourage more diversity in politics.

The Massachusetts Senate recognizes that civic engagement, in addition to laying the groundwork for meaningful civic participation and community involvement, gives students an opportunity to apply what they are learning in the classroom to real life situations. The Senate believes that civics should be an important, integrated part of the Massachusetts educational system.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Residents from around the Commonwealth take pride in the state’s reputation for higher education. At the same time, students continue to struggle with college tuition. The Massachusetts Senate must work with universities, especially public universities and community colleges, to ensure that the quality of higher education is not sacrificed for affordability.

Investing in higher education will have a direct economic impact on the state. According to data provided by the University of Massachusetts, 85% of students who attend a UMass school are from Massachusetts; similarly 85-90% of those students will stay in Massachusetts after graduating. The state used to pay 80% of public higher education costs, but now pays roughly 25%. Students, educators, businesses, and research institutions emphasized the importance of supporting public higher education in order to have a better-prepared and trained workforce that remains in Massachusetts after graduation.

“I believe that investing in young people and students isn’t just an investment in education, but in the future of the Commonwealth”

-UMass Amherst Student



The Massachusetts Senate, recognizing the economic benefits of investing in the state's higher educational institutions, will evaluate ways to lower the costs of tuition and educational expenses, support community colleges as an affordable alternative, and help ensure Massachusetts's students remain in the state upon graduating.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Commonwealth Conversations identified a number of opportunities in which the Massachusetts Senate's legislative agenda could support educational reform. The Senate will work to:

- Adhere to the commitments and goals outlined in the Kids First Blueprint to improve literacy rates as a way to help close the achievement gap in schools;
- Re-examine the Chapter 70 funding formula to ensure schools receive the support they need to educate all students;
- Commit to ensuring children with disabilities are able to access the resources they need to reach their full potential;
- Increase access to civics education as a way to increase meaningful participation in government and community organizing;
- Support the state's public higher educational institutions to ensure that everyone, regardless of income, has access to affordable higher educational opportunities.



Transportation

Commonwealth Conversations 2017



FUELING ECONOMIC GROWTH

Individuals in every corner of the state unequivocally argued that improving the state’s transportation system is the mainstay of a strong economy. Access to public transit reduces barriers to job growth and educational opportunities. Massachusetts currently ranks 45th in the country for transportation.^{iv} As such, the Massachusetts Senate is committed to ensuring a more equitable, accessible, and reliable transportation system.

THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF TRANSPORTATION



Senator Brownsberger waits at the Massachusetts Avenue T stop for a train to Assembly Row at the Metro Boston stop.

Without reliable access to transportation, the communities farthest from Boston will struggle to increase job opportunity and advance their economies. Individuals from every region, most notably Western Mass, the SouthCoast, and Cape Cod, stated that restricted transportation to Boston inhibits job opportunity and economic growth for their region. One Western Mass resident described rail service as a “game changer for the region, and an economic driver that would address many of the other issues [facing the region].”

The Massachusetts Senate will work to ensure a more equitable transportation system, and advance the economic interests of communities that lack easy access to the Boston job market.

MASSMOVES REPORT

Each regional tour included a transportation-focused session sponsored and led by the BARR Foundation. These sessions, known as *MassMoves*, were designed specifically around transportation issues in each region in an effort to build a vision for sustainable mobility across the entire Commonwealth.

MassMoves will release a separate report to provide state, regional, and local decision makers with citizen perspectives on a 21st-century transportation system. The report will include a vision, goals, and common values for the system, as well as recommendations, and an implementation strategy.^v



Criminal Justice Reform & Public Safety

Commonwealth Conversations 2017



WORKING TOWARDS FAIRNESS FOR ALL

Individuals nationwide are advocating for criminal justice reform that takes a more compassionate, commonsense approach to reducing recidivism. The Massachusetts Senate, in continuing its efforts to ensure restorative justice practices, sought feedback from individuals across the state. As part of criminal justice reform, the Senate must promote fair practices that do not target minorities, or low income individuals and families; reduce recidivism through restorative justice; and support preventive programming to break the school to prison pipeline.

ENSURING FAIRER LAWS AND ELIMINATING UNDUE BURDEN

Reducing unnecessary burdens placed on minorities and low-income families through the criminal justice system remains a priority for the people of the Commonwealth. Individuals involved in the justice system, law enforcement officers, and groups working within the system similarly expressed concern over the inequality of criminal justice policies.

The Massachusetts Senate heard overwhelming support for pretrial and bail reform. A South Shore resident, and Massachusetts Bail Fund volunteer, stated that “60% of people held in Massachusetts jails are being held for pretrial, 70% of which are because they couldn’t afford bail.” Advocates testified that increasing funding for ankle bracelets, and establishing a risk-assessment standard when administering bails could lower this rate. The Senate was urged to examine parole and probation fees, solitary confinement, lowering larceny felony thresholds, and mandatory sentencing practices for drug related offenses.

The Massachusetts Senate is committed to protecting all residents of the Commonwealth, regardless of race or economic status. We believe racial and economic disparities in the criminal justice system must be addressed, and will support measures that seek to combat this.

ALIMONY REFORM

Individuals from several communities have asked the Massachusetts Senate to consider modifying the 2011 Alimony Reform Act. This law, which allows payors to seek payment modification when they reach full retirement age, does not now apply to individuals paying alimony under court orders issued prior to the 2011 law. Presently, payors with alimony agreements in place before the 2011 law may appeal for a modification based on a “change in circumstance.” However, reaching retirement age is not currently considered, by itself, a material change in circumstance for these payors.

SUFFOLK COUNTY HOUSE OF CORRECTIONS

Common Ground and Shared Leadership

Massachusetts sheriff's departments across the state are pioneering innovative programming and effective practices to reduce recidivism. The Massachusetts State Senate, wanting to learn more about the challenges facing correctional facilities and barriers to reducing recidivism, spent the afternoon at the Suffolk County House of Corrections with Sheriff Steven W. Tompkins.

De Facto Medical and Mental Service Providers

According to information provided by the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department (SCSD), 40% of its incarcerated population self-reported substance use, and 30% self-reported mental health issues. Suffolk County regularly performs inmate detoxification, which typically reveals additional mental health issues. This creates a high caseload for the 24-hour medical and mental health teams; the mental health team alone cares for half of the SCSD population with mental health diagnoses (about 600 people a day).

Pre-trial detainees make up approximately 86% of Suffolk County's incarcerated population. Like other correctional facilities in the state, the number of detainees has risen despite a decline in the sentenced population. The unpredictability of pre-trial detainee rates makes it difficult to implement programming to reduce recidivism, which Suffolk County prioritizes.



Senators on a tour of the Suffolk County House of Correction during the Metro Boston tour stop.

Restorative Practices

Under Sheriff Tompkins, the Department has focused on reducing recidivism through programs such as the Common Ground Institute (CGI). CGI is a vocational training and re-entry program that teaches inmates marketable skills in a classroom setting, and allows them to apply what they've learned through the Department's Community Works Program. By the end of the 10 week course, participants are trained in carpentry, landscaping, custodial maintenance, and are Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) certified. In addition to providing job training, the CGI also partners with businesses to help facilitate job placement once graduates have completed their sentences.^{vi}

The Massachusetts State Senate saw firsthand the need for services in prison to reduce recidivism. Under Sheriff Tompkins's leadership, Suffolk County has become a model for restorative justice practices that reduce recidivism, result in high rates of employment for ex-offenders, and approach justice with compassion and care. Following this model, the Senate will craft its criminal justice priorities to ensure correctional institutions receive the support they need for restorative programming.

JUVENILE JUSTICE: BREAKING THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE

Advocates argued that, while reducing recidivism is an important part of criminal justice reform, preventative programming for at-risk youth is the key to reducing crime.

Children who are suspended or expelled from school are 3x more likely to drop out of school. In Massachusetts, children who drop out of school are 3x more likely to be incarcerated. The process of suspension and expulsion to incarceration is known as the school to prison pipeline.^{vii} This explanation was offered many times over the course of our nine town halls. The Senate must start with juvenile justice reform to reduce incarceration rates amongst adults.



Expanded learning opportunities are critical to breaking the school to prison pipeline, and keeping children in school. Currently, only 20% of Massachusetts's youth has access to high quality expanded learning opportunities, leaving the remaining youth unsupervised and underserved outside of school hours.^{viii} Expanding access to after school and summer programs would help keep kids in school, and provide them with social connections they might otherwise seek elsewhere. This in turn could lower youth incarceration rates.

In addition to providing programming for at-risk youth, advocates

called on the Senate to address racial disparity in the juvenile justice system. In Massachusetts, black youth are 3x more likely to be arrested and 6x times more likely to be detained than their white peers.^{ix} Juvenile justice advocates statewide asked that the Senate work with schools and law enforcement to combat this.

The Massachusetts Senate recognizes the need for preventative programming to break the school-to-prison pipeline, as well as the need for age-appropriate services for juvenile offenders such as detention diversion advocacy programs. We as a body must recognize the racial disparity that exists in criminal justice, especially juvenile justice, and introduce laws to expose and combat this bias.



Worcester Police Chief Steve Sargent discusses juvenile justice preventative programming at the Worcester Police Department

RECOMMENDATIONS

Commonwealth Conversations identified a number of opportunities in which the Senate's legislative agenda could support criminal justice reform and public safety. The Senate will work to:

- Pursue comprehensive reform of the criminal justice system and regulations that place undue burden on low income families and minorities;
- Explore programming and initiatives to assess racial and economic inequality within the criminal justice system, and promote education and training policies to address it;
- Support correctional institutions' efforts to reduce recidivism through mental health and rehabilitation services, and restorative programming;
- Explore partnerships between sheriff's departments, and businesses and organizations within the community to increase employment opportunities, and support individuals who are reentering society;
- Work with families, schools, law enforcement, and other juvenile justice stakeholders to increase preventative programming for at-risk youth.



Protecting The Environment

Commonwealth Conversations 2017



OUR ENVIRONMENT, OUR FUTURE

Communities testified that climate change was dominating the discussion of local gatherings, council meetings, and advocacy groups. The desire for increased state environmental leadership in light of recent federal government actions was a common theme from each of the nine town hall forums. The Massachusetts Senate was encouraged to augment its efforts to combat climate change and increase renewable energy resources.



Advocates across the state encouraged policies to promote these goals and increase the state's renewable energy sources, including carbon pricing, fixing gas leaks and limiting new gas pipelines, and deploying more solar energy. As one SouthCoast environmental advocate underlined, the Commonwealth must “work locally to preserve and protect what we have accomplished here in Massachusetts.”

CLIMATE CHANGE

Massachusetts has developed a strong reputation as a leader in climate change policy. Many constituents urged the Senate to double down on its efforts to meet the greenhouse gas emission reductions set by the Massachusetts Global Warming Solutions Act (GWSA).

The Baker-Polito Administration's Executive Order, Establishing an Integrated Climate Change Strategy for the Commonwealth, was developed in consultation with the Massachusetts Senate and borrows heavily from the climate adaptation management plan legislation passed unanimously by the Senate three times last session. The Order built upon the state's efforts by promoting local-state partnerships in achieving statewide carbon reduction goals per the GSWA. It also helps cities and towns assess and mitigate the risks associated with climate change.^x

Individuals at each town hall outlined the urgency of cutting greenhouse gas emissions, and testified on the environmental and economic benefits of carbon pricing. Putting a price on carbon may incentivize businesses to transition to clean energy sources rather than relying on fossil fuels. The money collected from the fee could either be rebated in full to consumers and businesses, or partly reinvested to promote clean energy initiatives and infrastructure improvements.

The Massachusetts Senate will continue to work to reduce carbon emissions, expand renewable energy, and support local-state partnerships that help prepare municipalities for climate change. In conjunction with the Governor and Speaker DeLeo, the Senate continues to support the Commonwealth's commitment to the Paris Climate Agreement.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE



Advocacy groups statewide asked that the Massachusetts Senate include environmental justice in its environmental policy agenda. Climate change disproportionately affects lower income communities because they lack the resources to prepare for severe weather. Unstable infrastructure and poor housing conditions; preparedness for environmental conditions such as extreme heat; and economic stability to recover from disaster, such as restocking food supplies, are all factors in this disparity. Local-state partnerships are an essential part of reducing the disproportionate burden of climate change that affects low

income communities.

The Senate remains committed to ensuring undue burden does not fall on lower income communities, and will work with municipalities and local and regional groups to ensure fair environmental policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Commonwealth Conversations identified a number of opportunities in which the Massachusetts Senate's legislative agenda could enhance environmental sustainability. The Senate will work to:

- Continue to craft a comprehensive energy plan that diversifies, as well as balances, the state's renewable energy portfolio;
- Strengthen local-state partnerships and develop a long term framework that promotes clean, efficient, and affordable energy;
- Encourage efforts and promote policies that maintain a strong commitment to meeting the goals laid out in the GWSA and the Paris Climate Agreement;
- Collaborate with communities that are disproportionately affected by climate change, and ensure environmental justice is included in the Senate's environmental policy agenda.

Affordable Housing

Commonwealth Conversations 2017



Commonwealth Conversations survey respondents overwhelmingly identified affordable housing as the most pressing issue facing the Commonwealth. This concern was reaffirmed by testimony heard in the town hall forums. Individuals and families, primarily from more urban and seasonal resort communities, struggle to find attainable housing.

Hearing directly from displaced families, the Massachusetts Senate was urged to reduce barriers to affordable and workforce housing, promote mixed-use development, ensure cities and towns are able to collect room occupancy taxes on transient accommodations, and assist first time homebuyers. Otherwise, according to one Boston resident, “It will soon be impossible to work and live in the city.”

HOMELESSNESS

Massachusetts has made measurable progress in combatting homelessness, and the Massachusetts Senate supports the call to action of so many individuals who encouraged continued support for public housing and initiatives combatting homelessness.

Massachusetts, as one Boston resident stated, can “abolish homelessness in the Commonwealth. We can do that. We have the resources we need.” Massachusetts has reduced the number of families living in hotels and motels by 64% from 2015-2016.^{xi} Policy that supports subsidized housing and places individuals from shelters into homes can help the Commonwealth end homelessness in the state.

The Massachusetts Senate will strengthen its efforts to end homelessness in the Commonwealth by supporting housing assistance programs and promoting proactive policies that help people stay in their homes.

Massachusetts will need 500,000 new housing units by 2040 to accommodate residents, as projected by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council.

REDUCING BARRIERS

Communities urged the Massachusetts Senate to reduce barriers to affordable and workforce housing production through multi-family and accessory dwelling unit construction. Doing so would help the state meet the housing needs of the projected population head on. Individuals argued that this would increase the attainable housing stock in the state, and provide relief to those currently struggling with the rising costs.

The Massachusetts Senate, taking projected growth and individual testimony into consideration, understands that there is not enough affordable and workforce housing in the state. Greater Boston residents noted that more luxury housing is built as transportation continues to develop in new areas of the city. The average rent in Greater Boston increased 25% between the years 2009 - 2016, and by 59% in city's inner core.^{xii} Multi-family housing construction could contribute to a long term solution to accommodate the growing population, and prevent displacement.

Worcester and Boston residents alike asked the Senate to ease regulations on accessory dwelling unit construction. This would provide affordable housing relief to the elderly, disabled, and young people, and offer more affordable options for those seeking to live with family and caretakers.

An explanation offered by the Boston Foundation states, “Land, construction and development costs in Massachusetts are so high and zoning against high-density developments is so pervasive that builders simply can’t produce housing that working and middle-income families can afford.”^{xiii} This is not unique to Greater Boston. Communities across the Commonwealth struggle with red tape that prevents multi-family housing and clustered development construction.

The Massachusetts Senate recognizes the pressing need for affordable housing, and will examine ways to reduce barriers to affordable housing construction. The Senate commits to supporting policy that prepares for the projected need for housing, and prevents displacement of families.



UNION POINT: SMART CITY SHOWS BENEFITS OF SUSTAINABLE, MIXED USE DEVELOPMENTS

Residents of Weymouth and neighboring communities have transformed the former South Weymouth Naval Air Station into a sustainable, multi-use clustered development known as Union Point.

Union Point currently has 330 multi-family units, with 500 additional units under agreement. The ground floor of each unit is dedicated to commercial use, including retail stores, restaurants, taverns, professional services, etc. All units are transit-oriented and reside within a half mile walking distance of the South Weymouth Commuter Rail station. The development is in the heart of the South Shore, which has seen almost nothing but single-use development for the last 50 years.

In a short time, Union Point has become the biggest opportunity for mixed-use development due to two important factors: proximity to Boston and access to the commuter rail. The demographic drawn to Union Point is unique for the area it occupies. It consists mainly of new professionals looking for mobility options, and active empty nesters looking to downsize into a mixed use community close to Boston.

Sustainable, mixed-use developments, such as Union Point, can help increase affordable housing options in the state. The Massachusetts Senate will use these concepts in an effort to promote affordable and sustainable development.



SHORT-TERM RENTALS

Cities and towns, especially those with high levels of tourism such as the Cape & Islands, the Berkshires, and Boston, urged the Massachusetts Senate to modernize the state's 20th century room occupancy laws to address emerging transient accommodation services. The current Massachusetts room occupancy statute has been on the books since 1969, and applies to hotels, motels, B&B's, and lodging houses. Currently, 175-plus cities and towns have opted into local room occupancy taxes, but are unable to collect taxes on transient accommodations such as AirBnb within their communities.

Including transient accommodations in the room occupancy laws would offer clarification for municipalities that choose to opt in to room occupancy taxes, and could bring in an estimated \$20M in state revenue during the first year. According to the Fenway Civic Association, "Short term rentals are increasing housing prices. People are using Airbnb instead of renting long term. We must give Boston full local option to regulate short term rentals."

The room sharing economy is the latest example of a rapidly growing, technology-driven industry that is changing the way business is run in the Commonwealth. The Massachusetts Senate must embrace emerging innovators such as Airbnb, and craft policy that ensures clarity and fairness under the law.



CHALLENGES FACING HOME OWNERS

Individuals and families from a diverse set of backgrounds offered testimony on the difficulties facing first time homebuyers. Homeownership in the US is at the lowest rate in nearly half a century; this is especially true for age groups that are delaying buying their first homes in favor of more affordable housing options.^{xiv} 37% of Massachusetts Millennials ages 18-34 are living at home with their parents; this is the 9th highest rate in the country.^{xv}

Many individuals testified that a first time homebuyer's savings program would help ease the burden of purchasing a home. Not only would offering a small state tax incentive assist homebuyers, but it would also produce economic growth. Homebuyers are especially beneficial to the retail community, and generate revenue as they purchase all the amenities for a new home.

The Massachusetts Senate heard from individuals in every area of the state affected by the foreclosure crisis. According to the Warren Group, over 70,000 Massachusetts residents have lost their homes due to foreclosures since 2005. The Senate was asked to provide additional state support for victims of predatory lending through mandatory mediation to prevent new foreclosures, and ensuring clear legal steps in a foreclosure process.

The Massachusetts Senate recognizes the economic benefits of assisting first time homebuyers, and will work to craft policies that ease the burden of saving for a home. We also recognize the need to protect homebuyers once they have purchased a home, and will work to protect families from foreclosure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Commonwealth Conversations identified a number of opportunities in which the Massachusetts Senate's legislative agenda could enhance environmental sustainability. The Senate will work to:

- End homelessness in the state through support for public housing, and initiatives that help place families from shelters into homes;
- Address the need for housing to accommodate projected growth in the state, and prevent displacement of families;
- Reduce barriers to multifamily housing and cluster development to increase affordable and workforce housing stock in the state;
- Explore the potential for cities and towns to collect room occupancy taxes for transient accommodations;
- Assist first time homebuyers through a first time homebuyer's savings program, and help prevent families from being foreclosed on.

Last session, the Senate formed the Special Committee on Housing to recommend a series of policy changes addressing the housing crisis. The Committee, seeking input from housing experts, non-profits, tenant organizations, real estate groups, etc., released a report detailing recommendations. The Senate remains committed to achieving the goals laid out in the Committee's report.^{xvi}

Protecting Working Families Increasing Access to Services & Resources Commonwealth Conversations 2017



The Massachusetts Senate was called to action to address challenges facing working families, from income and wealth inequality to the opioid epidemic. The Massachusetts Senate recognizes that income and wealth inequality remains highly pervasive in the Commonwealth. The Senate must work to craft affordable and sustainable long-term solutions to help individuals combat the cycle of poverty, and ensure families have continued access to support services.

RIISING COSTS OF HEALTH CARE

Health care workers, retirees, individuals with disabilities, and those receiving MassHealth expressed concern over the rising costs of health care, and the uncertainly facing the state's health care system. Massachusetts needs long term financing solutions to sustain MassHealth, which currently makes up 40% of the state budget.



Senators tour the new trauma center at Lawrence General Hospital

Individuals with disabilities expressed concern that their conditions will not be covered by health insurance, or that the price of insurance will become unaffordable. One teen in Boston testified that hearing aids are not covered by her insurance, and the out of pocket costs are upwards of \$5,000 per year. Individuals both in the health care industry and those who testified at town halls are committed to ensuring that the poor, the elderly, and the disabled do not bear the burden of the rising costs.

Many individuals supported a single payer system to ensure access to care for all Massachusetts residents. A woman who told a deeply personal story about losing her wife, only to be left with thousands of dollars in

medical bills was among those that testified. A single payer system, as many testified, would cover those who need insurance the most, and ensure that money is never a factor for receiving medical care. As these individuals argues, single payer would also help reduce the administrative costs associated with health care, a large factor in the increasing prices.

The Massachusetts Senate formed a working group to engage in a robust multi-state engagement effort to explore ways other states are responding to health care cost drivers. To date, through a partnership with the Milbank Memorial Fund, the senators have conducted meetings with Minnesota, Oregon, Washington, and Texas, with a focus on social determinants of health, integration of behavioral health, prescription drug prices, and long term services and supports. The working group is continuing to evaluate policy options, and determining areas where further engagement with other states on best practices may be useful.

The Massachusetts Senate will continue to support its working group's efforts to explore best practices in responding to health care cost drivers. The Senate will examine different ways to create a more sustainable health care system that does not disproportionately burden the elderly, individuals with disabilities, and lower income families.

OPIOID EPIDEMIC

Massachusetts, ranking 5th in the nation for opiate overdose deaths, needs to do more to combat the opioid epidemic.^{xvii} The Massachusetts Senate understands the urgency of supporting treatment facilities and preventive initiatives to end the epidemic in Massachusetts.

Nancy Paull, CEO of Stanley Street Treatment and Resources (SSTAR), a substance abuse, integrated primary and behavioral health care organization in the SouthCoast, testified on the challenges of running a treatment facility. She stated, “When a person comes to me for detox, I can only admit 1 in 5 people that show up at my door. Last month, we had over 100 new people asking for inpatient care. I had to deny 4 out of 5 of those people because of a lack of beds. Two weeks ago one of those young women died.”

Increasing the amount of beds available across the state will save lives; this is especially true in areas with the highest rates of overdose and deaths in the state, such as Fall River.

The town halls brought forth support for “Champion Programs,” or police-assisted recovery programs that help place individuals with substance abuse disorders into treatment. These programs, as seen in Gloucester and Brockton, help diminish the perception that addicts cannot turn to law enforcement for help.



Frank Huntley testified on the impacts of opioid abuse at the Central Mass Town Hall.

Photo credit: Croteau, Scott. MassLive (2017).

Both mental health professionals and individuals affected by the epidemic emphasized the importance of prevention. As one Metro West residents stated, “We cannot treat our way out of the epidemic.” We must recognize the link between mental health and substance abuse, and ensure strong mental health services are accessible to all. Increasing resources for mental health care, especially at the adolescent level, must be a priority in the fight against the opioid crisis.

The Massachusetts Senate recognizes that combatting the opioid crisis is a two-part task that requires both increased access to substance abuse treatment and behavioral health care, along with youth and adult substance abuse prevention. Neither of these can be accomplished without local, state, regional, and national commitment and support. The Senate will promote policies that care for the whole person- social, emotional, and physical- in order to promote good behavioral health to treat and prevent substance abuse.

FOOD SECURITY

Safety net programs, especially those that address food security, are a critical part of reducing income inequality. Nonprofit, local, and state workers, and families that rely on safety net programs were a strong presence at each town hall. The Massachusetts Senate was encouraged to continue supporting food security initiatives.

Food security, as one North Shore resident testified, “affects people suffering from opioid addiction, students, unemployed individuals, the elderly, and more.” The Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP) is a part of the Massachusetts Food Bank’s efforts to create a hunger free state, and provide consistent, nutrient-rich meals to individuals and families in need. The Massachusetts Senate’s support of this program helps ensure that food banks are readily accessible to individuals and families.



A North Shore resident gives testimony at Higgins Middle School in Peabody.

Closing the SNAP gap is another way the Massachusetts Senate can ensure food security in the Commonwealth. The SNAP gap is the difference in the number of people enrolled for SNAP benefits versus MassHealth. Over 680,000 people in the Commonwealth are likely eligible for SNAP benefits, but are not enrolled in the program.^{xviii}

Individuals statewide argued that the SNAP gap can be drastically reduced with a simple fix: creating a common application for SNAP and MassHealth benefits. According to food security workers and advocates, this would not only ensure hundreds of thousands of people receive food assistance, among them 100,000 elderly residents, but it would also reduce duplicate data sets and increase government efficiency. SNAP is 100% federally funded; consequently, closing the SNAP gap would generate an estimated \$2B in economic stimulus for the state and local economy.^{xviii}

The Massachusetts Senate believes that no individual or family should go hungry, and stands in support of programs that help ensure basic needs for every resident of the Commonwealth.

IMMIGRATION

Concerned citizens from regions across the state, immigrant and non-immigrant, as well as many public school teachers called on the Senate to establish statewide standards for the ways in which Massachusetts will and won't use state and local dollars to participate in immigration enforcement. People spoke both about ways to offer protections to law-abiding, undocumented immigrants, and protecting public safety by ensuring all residents feel safe reporting crime to local law enforcement officers.

Immigrants' contribution to the economy and the importance of H-1B visas were also underlined in many town halls. Massachusetts particularly benefits from the program because of its volume of high-tech companies looking for workers. Companies who frequently employ H-1B visa workers expressed concern over federal actions to curb the program, and asked that the state help ensure these highly skilled technology workers are able to remain in the US.

The Massachusetts Senate hears the people's overwhelming support for ensuring the safety and advancement of all residents in the Commonwealth. We are committed to crafting policies that achieve these goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Commonwealth Conversations identified a number of opportunities in which the Massachusetts Senate's legislative agenda could support working families. The Senate will work to:

- Reduce poverty through sustainable, long term initiatives to improve economic mobility;
- Review current health care funding, and explore sustainable, long-term solutions that decreases the costs of care, and ensure the elderly, disabled, and low income families are not disproportionately burdened by rising costs;
- Support substance abuse treatment facilities, and ensure help is readily available to those who seek it;
- Advance substance abuse prevention initiatives, and ensure at-risk individuals, especially youth, are able to access behavioral and mental health services;
- Support safety net programs, especially those working to ensure food security and close the SNAP gap;
- Ensure a fair and balanced statewide immigration policy, and work to ensure H-1B workers are able to continue working in Massachusetts.

Promoting Jobs and the Economy

Commonwealth Conversations 2017



Senators sampled products from homegrown Cape Cod small businesses

The Massachusetts Senate strives to build a strong and modern workforce in every corner of the state. From family-owned zoos to oyster companies, employers and employees weighed in on how the state could best offer support. The Senate heard firsthand from small businesses and minimum wage employees on the challenges facing today's workforce, including access to technology, especially high-speed broadband, and a wage that both supports working families and small business owners.

WAGES FOR EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES

Employees and employers alike weighed in on minimum wage during *Commonwealth Conversations*. Healthcare providers informed the Senate that increasing wages is critical to retain human service workers, and ensure the elderly and disabled continue to have access to care. Minimum wage workers from every sector and region of the state also presented testimony on the benefits of increasing minimum wage.

The Senate met with small business owners from every field and community who expressed concern over rising minimum wages. An ice cream shop owner testified at the Northeast Town Hall that increasing the minimum wage would effectively shut down her business, which largely employs high school students. Several businesses offered the solution of a training wage, or a tiered wage based on tax filing status.

The Massachusetts Senate, aware of the challenges facing employers and employees alike, will work to support families in every field and community. The Senate will work with employers and employees from all business backgrounds to ensure hard-working individuals are able to make a living, and to support small businesses that struggle to stay open.

HIGH-SPEED BROADBAND

Access to technology, especially high speed broadband, is critical for businesses to compete in today's economy. The Massachusetts Senate met with homeowners and small business owners across the state to learn more about the impacts that lack of broadband service has on the housing market, education, and small businesses.

Full expansion of high speed broadband into all communities is imperative. Over 40 communities, primarily in the western part of the state, are underserved with access to broadband; many of these residents compare broadband's importance to electricity. The Last Mile Infrastructure Grant Program, announced by the Baker-Polito Administration this past March, is the latest initiative to close the gap in broadband service. In order to increase economic opportunity for communities farthest from Boston, cities and towns must have the technology they need to compete.

The Massachusetts Senate acknowledges the economic impact of broadband service, and supports expansion and initiatives working towards this goal for all parts of Massachusetts.



Senators listen to concerns from rural regions in Western MA.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Commonwealth Conversations identified a number of opportunities in which the Massachusetts Senate's legislative agenda could encourage economic development. The Senate will work to:

- Cooperate and coordinate with cities and towns to develop a cohesive economic development plan that fosters business development and increases the economic viability of communities in every corner of the state;
- Foster public-private and state-local partnerships that support sustainable local and regional economic development;
- Advance policies that support a skilled and modern workforce, and ensure each community is equipped with the tools necessary to create business development;
- Review existing policies to reduce unnecessary burdens on employers, and ensure families and individuals are able to thrive.

Conclusion

Commonwealth Conversations 2017



Although *Commonwealth Conversations 2017* has come to a close, the Massachusetts State Senate remains committed to translating the energy of thousands of participants into action through the guidelines set in this report. As a champion for responsive, accessible government and the Commonwealth's most valuable asset – people like you – the Massachusetts State Senate serves as a strong, proactive force to develop and support policy that ensures Massachusetts remains a viable place to live, work, and raise a family.

There were many other topics brought to our attention, each of which we will give great care and consideration to. Some of these include:

- Ensuring resources for domestic violence services
- Supporting veterans services
- Mortgage cancellation debt relief programs
- Strengthening laws against animal cruelty
- Supporting hazmat teams
- Introducing LGBTQ, medically accurate sex education curricula
- Expanding gender identity
- Automatic voter registration
- Electronic privacy
- Services for medically fragile children
- Cable access television
- Support for our local libraries
- Wireless radiation
- Services for child victims of abuse

Thank you to all those who participated in our public events, and to the towns, businesses, and organizations that hosted us. It has been an honor to hear your vision for the Commonwealth. The Massachusetts State Senate will always be grateful for the time and trust you placed in us to tour our great Commonwealth, and we look forward to achieving these goals.

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