

Constructing the Story

July 2026

Traditional and Social Media on Housing Policy

The housing conversation is active and trending positive. Authentic, lived experience resonates. To keep the momentum, we need to focus on affordability, address parking concerns, and dismantle misperceptions around “luxury buildings.”

Between January, 2021 and April, 2026, 177 Massachusetts cities and towns considered local zoning changes required by transit-oriented, land-use reform state legislation, the MBTA Communities Act.¹ This report looks beyond the housing reform itself to assess the pro-housing narratives that brought a landmark law into implementation, town by town.

Conversational trends on social and traditional media matter. The years 2024 and 2025 were the first in which more Americans got their news from social media versus traditional media outlets.² Analyzing traditional and social media during this period provided a rich opportunity to answer common questions about what’s working, what’s not working, and what people rely on as a source of truth in making the case for housing production.

Background

The zoning reform requirement under the MBTA Communities Act spanned a variety of Massachusetts municipalities—from progressive cities (Cambridge, Somerville) to suburban and rural communities that trend more conservative (Saugus, Pembroke.) Some communities had multiple existing multifamily districts while many, if not most, had not one zone where multifamily could be built as-of-right.

While occasionally referred to in both reports, our methodology is discussed at length [here](#) by January Advisors, consultants to this project.

Key Takeaways

- 1** Within the housing policy debate, popular pro-housing narratives (most-repeated, most-liked) centered on personal and lived experience.
- 2** Some themes in the advocates’ playbook did not gain traction. In particular, the data-based narrative of a 222,000-home shortage seldom appeared.
- 3** Two anti-housing themes were strong: parking/traffic and the overabundance of “luxury housing.”
- 4** The source of truth for social media is only occasionally expert opinion or data.
- 5** Sentiment generally trended positive on housing production.
- 6** Housing policy discussion on social media is minuscule when compared to the active housing conversation focused on solving challenges and finding support in a harsh housing market.

As intensely varied communities worked through compliance, the debate grew around housing. Housing advocates, including Citizens' Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA)'s Municipal Engagement Initiative team, organized quickly to support local housing production reform. They offered technical assistance and developed a common playbook of pro-housing narratives to train local advocates and build the pro-housing movement. Ultimately, adoption of local reform was high; 166 communities complied by May 2026.

Constructing the Story covers the original intention—analyzing the housing policy discussion. We discovered that while there was ample conversation on housing policy, more than 90% of social media content was not about policy at all but rather the human experience of a housing shortage. The result is a companion report: *Anchoring the Story: Traditional and Social Media on Lived Experience in a Housing Shortage*. *Anchoring the Story* digs into the pain points, confusion, and complexity of navigating Massachusetts's (and our nation's) expensive, tight housing market that is leaving too many behind.

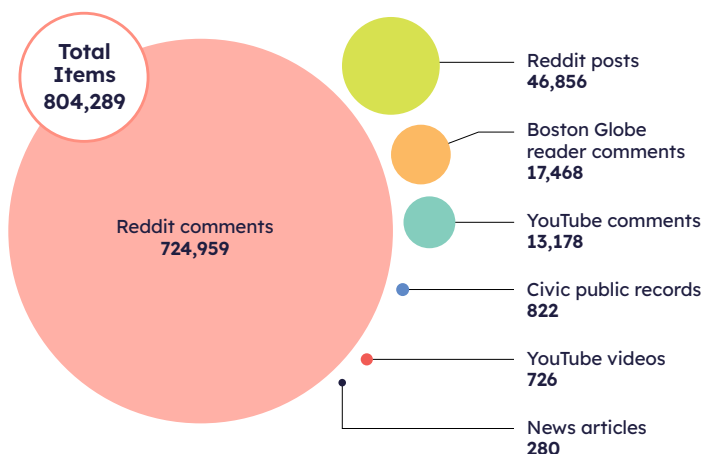
We utilized AI tools for our analysis, combing traditional and social media around the housing debate. Our "corpus" included over 800,000 pieces of content from more than 90,000 individual content creators on social media via a scan of Massachusetts content on housing from January 1, 2021, to April 30, 2026.³

We grouped content into three tiers. This report focuses on policy: Tier 1 (MBTA Communities specific) and Tier 2 (Housing Policy).

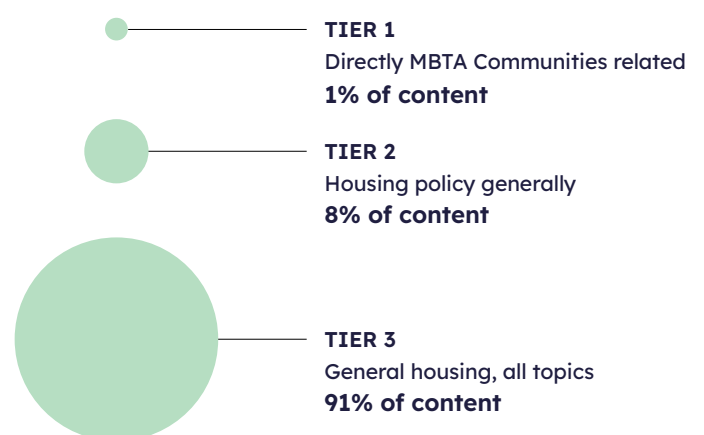
... "My town is already in compliance, although it has been pro-growth for a while. It's not that hard, folks. Nothing bad is going to happen if you allow some modest multi-family homes." — r/massachusetts, 115 upvotes

... "I got priced out of [the] Boston area a long time ago and now I'm getting priced out of Worcester. Worcester!! I'm moving to South Carolina in a few months. I don't really have a choice. I will NEVER get ahead living here." — r/boston, 80 upvotes

Content Analyzed by Source



Content Analyzed by Subject



Findings

Within the housing policy debate, popular pro-housing narratives (most-repeated, most-liked) centered on personal and lived experience.

The two most popular pro-housing narratives were firmly rooted at a human level.⁴ Missing middle housing—meaning homes of varying types—duplexes, triplexes, ADUs, etc.—and “starter homes” trended the most positively, particularly in terms of organic adoption. For example, “missing middle” held an organic adoption rate of 92%, meaning it has a high percentage of use without prompting in content generated by the public (i.e. Reddit posters) versus coming from professional media or advocacy websites. Another popular narrative was the importance of creating opportunities for first-time homebuyers, which had an 86% organic adoption rate.

Additionally, communities doing their “fair share” was popular framing. In part, this could be because this framing is useful for more than one situation. Already dense communities want others to do their “fair share” while less dense communities say “we need to provide our fair share.” This was the idea behind the legislation: all communities near transit need to contribute to the state’s housing supply to solve both housing and climate challenges. Finally, narratives assuring that the law was constitutional and enforceable built momentum in popularity over time, possibly reflecting the rare but widely reported instances of communities refusing to pass zoning reform that occurred by 2024.

Just a week after we closed our study period, David Modica’s questions at Marblehead Town Meeting became MBTA Communities’ first viral moment, garnering over 5 million views plus coverage in the Wall Street Journal and Boston Globe. Ultimately, Modica’s framing aligns with our findings, particularly his emphasis on Marblehead doing its fair share.

... “So, but like when we’re preserving the character of Marblehead, it’s like it’s bad. We’re selfish. We’re doing a bad thing. Like we’re not doing any housing.”

— David Modica, Town hall attendee

... “These towns benefit from the MBTA, which is funded by statewide taxes, but don’t [want] to pay their fair share by engaging in the democratic process that is compromise.”

— Boston Globe comment, 72 likes

... “I am all for sustainable development, transit oriented planning and continued densification. If there was an option available to me in the city at my budgeted pricepoint... I would have taken it. Instead it was a 2br condo high in the sky...or a single detached in the suburbs. This missing middle would have likely expanded my city options, it just wasn’t available.”

— r/urbanplanning, 84 upvotes

Some themes in the advocates' playbook did not gain traction. In particular, the data-based narrative of a 222,000-home shortage seldom appeared.

For many housing advocates, standard operating procedure included citing a 222,000-home shortage to quantify the statewide housing deficit and define a goal. Yet the tactic seemed to fizzle, at least on social media. In the housing-policy conversation on social media, the 222,000-home shortage figure appeared 13 times—fewer than once per 5,000 policy posts and comments. In news coverage, it appeared in 35 of 280 articles (12.5%). Given the good intention of grounding policy and advocacy in data, it would be interesting to further explore why this foundational data point faltered. Did the number lack meaning without context? Did the number seem so insurmountable that people tuned it out? Are data-driven numbers more useful for shaping policy than creating narratives that resonate?

Narratives framed as “rebuttals” to anticipated criticism—for example, the law not being an “unfunded mandate”—were less successful for advocates. Other pro-housing narratives similarly failed to resonate:

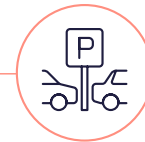
- MBTA Communities is not an unfunded mandate
- There is bipartisan support for housing
- There are consequences for non-compliance with MBTA Communities

Again, our analysis identified the frequency of narrative adoption, not why narratives succeed or fail. It is noteworthy, however, that the successful narratives were more closely grounded in concrete, common, and emotional experience (e.g. the challenges of first-time homebuying) while the

less successful narratives relied on more specialized, “left-brained” or academic framing (e.g. the state needs 222,000 homes, while any individual only needs one.)

Two anti-housing themes were strong: parking/traffic and the overabundance of “luxury housing.”

Traffic and parking surfaced more than four times as often as fears of declining property values and 100 times as often as fears of increased school enrollment.



Traffic and parking surfaced more than:

4x
as often as fears of
declining
property values

100x
as often as fears of
increased school
enrollment

... **“I currently live in one of those luxury apartments. Not a single thing luxurious about it other than the cost lol.”**

— r/massachusetts, 162 upvotes

... **“PLEASE define affordable???? A one bedroom apt for 2000 PLUS utilities is NOT affordable... Why are there no apartments for 1000 per month?... The builders are in it to make a profit. The landlords are in it to make money too.”**

— Boston Globe comment, 46 likes

This may indicate an opportunity for developing a playbook around parking at the project level. Increasingly in Massachusetts, regulation is already shifting; municipalities are lowering parking requirements and, in many cases, eliminating parking requirements altogether. This could mean that resistance shifts even more heavily toward each new project during permitting and community engagement, leaving every housing development to defend its specific plans (vs. comply with a local policy) for parking and traffic mitigation. This may be particularly fraught in an environment where, based on our analysis, sentiment is quite negative, grounded in fears of scarcity, and emotional.

A second, frequent anti-housing theme is the overabundance of luxury housing, commonly derided as new construction that does not serve local needs or the needs of households with moderate and low incomes. The theme appears grounded in economic, affordability frustrations—new housing will at best serve wealthy households while the squeeze only grows for everyone else. The theme particularly occurs on Reddit and has been growing in popularity since 2021. It is also a common frustration in the general housing (Tier 3) conversation as people struggle to find housing and consider moving out of Massachusetts. This strong anti-housing current offers an opportunity to develop a counterargument.

“How about the people who already live here who contribute to the Haverhill economy? There are plenty of luxury apartments in Haverhill but so few low-income spaces.”

— r/haverhill, 7 upvotes

The source of truth for social media is only occasionally expert opinion or data.

In the vast majority of social media posts and responses, outside references are not cited as foundations for statements or claims. Because it is a platform where linking is typical behavior, Reddit provided the most useful datapoint on this question. Around 10% of content around either the MBTA Communities Act or housing policy cited an outside source. When discussion was directly about MTBA Communities, the level rose to 21%.

The most commonly cited domain was mass.gov. The Boston Globe and Wikipedia ranked next, followed by the City of Cambridge’s website. Cites to housing-advocacy organizations (CHAPA, Abundant Housing MA, Up For Growth) were absent from the top 100 cited domains in the housing policy social media dialogue.

“Luxury is just a marketing term for new. These new buildings normally have terrible quality and are notorious for jacking up the second year’s rent.”

— r/boston, 253 upvotes

“For instance, eliminating parking minimums would be helpful for the greater Boston area, but out here in Worcester, our public transportation isn’t just a joke, it’s a whole Marx Brothers set...We need to solve public transportation before we remove the need for developers to build parking for the vehicles necessary to live and work in these communities.”

— Response to post in r/massachusetts, 8 upvotes

Sentiment generally trended positive on housing production.

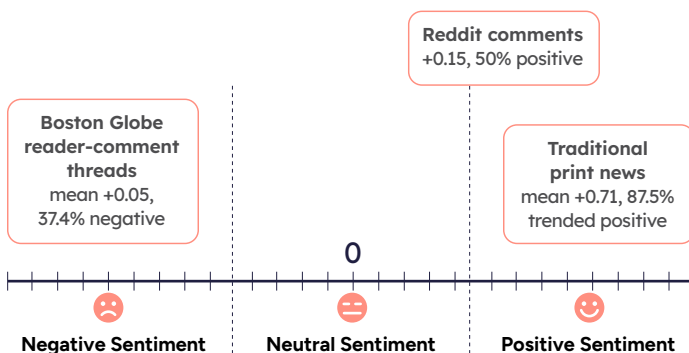
We analyzed sentiment relying on VADER, a commonly-used lexicon-based sentiment tool which scores each word against a positive/negative dictionary. There are issues with VADER's ability to understand context and sarcasm, so these results are more useful when comparing platforms.

Across 724,959 Reddit comments by 93,204 commenters, sentiment toward housing leaned positive (mean +0.15, 50.0% positive vs 27.5% negative).

Traditional print news ran more positive: 87.5% trended positive, mean compound +0.71. This included 280 articles, 150 of which were in the Boston Globe.

The exception was Globe reader-comment threads, which leaned negative (mean +0.05, 37.4% negative). However, it appears that a handful of users drove that negativity. One commenter posted 369 of 17,468 Globe comments (2.11%), and the top 10 commenters together accounted for 12.09%.

Sentiment Scoring



(Note that VADER scoring ranges from -1 (most negative) to +1 (most positive). For this work, VADER thresholds were the following: positive = compound > 0.05, negative = compound < -0.05, and otherwise neutral.)

“I am writing this because I was hoping someone could help me and point me in the right direction or help explain things I may not know. I just got approved for a 4 bedroom section 8 mobile voucher. I was wondering if anyone knew of any landlords that [are] willing [to] accept my voucher and I was wondering if anyone knows where I could find a list of who does. I know it's a law they must accept it but all they have do is say it was for something else. I just want to be able to give my kids the house they deserve. They all currently share 1 bedroom.”

— r/boston, u/Technical-Zucchini-5, 34 upvotes

Housing policy discussion on social media is minuscule when compared to the active housing conversation focused on solving challenges and finding support in a harsh housing market.

As noted, when we talk about housing, most often we talk about day-to-day, personal challenges—finding a home, affordability, housing subsidies and programs—rather than housing policy.

The problems social media surfaces are a window into daily challenges of a housing shortage and worthy of our attention. It should be no surprise that the most common topic is rent and affordability. The shape of housing conversation on Reddit reflects its growing stature as a trusted information resource. Frequently, someone posts a question (Can my landlord refuse to return my security deposit? Where can I use my housing voucher?) or identifies a need (My sister is homeless, what support is out there?). Recognizing how active this information resource is, we analyzed both content and accuracy. In the companion report, *Anchoring the Story*, we explore this further.

Conclusions/ Recommendations

Our analysis offers several guideposts for advocates. First, framing around lived experience resonates. The narratives that feature common language and relate to everyday lives get traction. Using data in an argument or counterargument may be the path to shaping policy or convincing specific audiences; however, it appears to resonate far less in social media and one, would assume, one-on-one conversation.

The strength of parking and “luxury housing” narratives raises the questions of why these beliefs resonate and what framing or policy changes would address concerns. A limitation of our methodology is that it surfaces strong themes while it does not tell us why those beliefs are held. In particular, the luxury housing narrative—that new housing not only doesn’t serve average people but also creates an upward spiral in housing costs—creates a wide barrier to pro-production strategies. Further analysis using traditional methods such as focus groups may be a way to tease out underlying emotions and perspectives.

Finally, the positive sentiment on social media should be a cause for optimism. Every forum for discourse has its flaws and biases. Housing researchers and advocates have recognized public forums like town meetings are frequently not representative of a community’s residents.⁵ The general level of support for housing within such a large slice of the population on social media suggests what advocates have long believed. The need for more housing is understood and widely accepted.

Endnotes

- 1 M.G.L. Chapter 40A, Section 3A enacted January, 2021, commonly referred to as MBTA Communities Act or 3A. It should be noted that by May 2026, 166 communities complied with the law.
- 2 Reuters Institute, Digital News Report 2025 p. 119 https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Digital_News-Report_2025.pdf
- 3 It should be noted that several social media sources such as X or Meta are “walled gardens” which could not be analyzed for this report.
- 4 Throughout this report, a narrative is “popular” or a “winner” when it ranks high on organic adoption rate (the share of mentions that originate in user-generated content rather than professional media or advocacy websites) and engagement-weighted volume (total upvotes, replies, and reshares accrued by items containing the narrative). A narrative is a “loser” when it appears infrequently relative to the size of the housing-policy conversation, regardless of who introduces it.
- 5 See for example Einstein, Katherine Levine, David M. Glick, and Maxwell Palmer. 2019. *Neighborhood Defenders: Participatory Politics and America’s Housing Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Acknowledgments

© Citizens’ Housing and Planning Association, Inc.
Report Date: July, 2026

Credits

Research for this report provided by:



This report was written by Jennifer Gilbert, Musicant Cohen Executive Director of CHAPA’s Housing Policy Action Center.

The Housing Policy Action Center is made possible by the generous support of Myra Musicant & Howard Cohen. [CHAPA Partners](#) are also essential funders for CHAPA’s year-round work.

Leveraging CHAPA’s place as a convener and bridge-builder, the Housing Policy Action Center strives to:

- Ask questions that matter
- Deliver rigorous research, partnering with top-notch academics and thinkers
- Activate ideas through CHAPA’s practitioner network
- Move the conversation forward into policies, programs, and systems that sustain a better Massachusetts