

Municipal Technical Assistance Program: Breaking Down Barriers & Increasing Production

Rhode Island Housing
Special Achievement

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Summary

As the state faces a severe housing shortage, Governor Dan McKee and the RI General Assembly have been working on multiple fronts to expand the supply of affordable housing. First by investing resources in helping municipalities remove barriers to housing development through a newly created Housing Production Fund, of which \$4 million was made available for municipal technical assistance. The General Assembly also passed significant changes to Rhode Island's zoning and land use laws to streamline the development process. RIHousing was tasked with administering the new Municipal Technical Assistance Program (MTAP) and has utilized this important new resource to help municipalities identify and remove barriers to housing development, including through the implementation of the new land use law changes. RIHousing designed the program to provide quality assistance, make the assistance process easy and accessible, and provide replicable models that all communities can benefit from.

How It Works

The goal of RIHousing's MTAP is to help municipalities remove barriers to housing development and support increased local housing production.

In early 2023, RIHousing conducted several listening sessions open to all municipalities to understand the types of activities and eligible uses that would be most helpful to them in a technical assistance program. This led to the following eligible activities for MTAP:

- **Needs analysis:** Assistance in identifying where affordable housing could/should be built in the community. Municipalities may target areas of the community and/or specific properties.
- **Updating land use and permitting requirements:** Assisting municipalities with updating/improving their zoning/land use requirements and/or permitting process to remove barriers to housing development.
- **Developing model zoning ordinances:** Assistance in developing model zoning ordinances that increase density, promote a mix of housing types and otherwise remove barriers to housing development.
- **Infrastructure capacity assessment:** Assistance in evaluating the capacity of a municipality's infrastructure (such as water and sewer service) to serve existing and planned development and/or determine infrastructure needs to serve future development.
- **Public engagement and education:** Share techniques and tools to respond to resident opposition that is preventing residential development and engage the community in support of proposed affordable developments or proposed zoning/land use changes that would facilitate housing development.

One goal of RIHousing in designing MTAP was to make the program as streamlined as possible for municipalities, particularly when considering the burdensome procurement processes many

municipalities must follow. RIHousing released an RFP for consultants to participate in MTAP, and vetted and approved 11 qualified consultants that municipalities can choose from. Each municipality would otherwise have had to go through their own procurement process to bring on a consultant to carry out the work plan.

Once a municipality has identified a project, municipalities first submit a simple pre-application to ensure that the project is for an eligible use. After receiving pre-approval, municipalities contact one or more of the consultants to request proposals for their projects. Once they have settled on a chosen consultant and proposal, they submit the proposal and a letter of support from the top municipal official to RIHousing.

We created a dedicated website that provides information on the program, eligible uses, the list of consultants with contact information, and step by step instructions on how to apply. That website can be found at www.rihousing.com/mtap.

In an effort to further streamline the process for municipalities, RIHousing contracts with and pays the consultants directly, so municipalities only have to focus on the actual projects at hand.

New Set of Laws

Amidst the rollout of the MTAP, the General Assembly passed a package of thirteen housing and land use laws, many of which took effect on January 1, 2024. These bills made significant changes to Rhode Island land use laws particularly involving zoning and permitting processes, appeals, inclusionary zoning, adaptive reuse and the comprehensive permit process. An overview of bills can be found here: https://www.rihousing.com/wp-content/uploads/MTAP_Bill-Summaries_082023.pdf

With only about six months until the new land use laws took effect, and many communities facing planning department staffing and capacity challenges, RIHousing recognized that all municipalities would need help making the changes required to local ordinances, processes and planning documents. In addition, for the statutory changes to be most impactful, it was important that the laws be consistently interpreted across the different municipalities.

RIHousing put out a mini RFP to the MTAP consultants for the development of template and guidance documents to assist municipalities with implementing the legislative changes. The timeline for the development of these templates was expedited to ensure that municipalities would have time to apply them to their local process and ordinances by the January deadline.

The scope of work included:

- An overview of the legislative changes
- Identification of changes that must be taken directly from the statute versus areas where municipalities have flexibility to tailor approaches at the local level
- Identification of best practices in the different areas covered by the changes, such as subdivisions, zoning, inclusionary zoning, comprehensive permits and adaptive reuse

- Template language that municipalities could use to make required changes including for land development and subdivision ordinances, adaptive reuse, appeals, comprehensive permits, modifications and variances and inclusionary zoning.

The consultant team also created flow charts to describe the revised development review and appeals process and videos to walk municipal officials through the template tools and the changes required by the new laws. The consultant worked closely with RIHousing, the RI Division of Statewide Planning, and staff from the General Assembly to ensure all groups agreed on the interpretation of the legislation into the templates and corresponding documents. This consensus was critical to ensure that there would be consistent implementation across the state. The documents are hosted on RIHousing's website (www.rihousing.com/mtap-templates) and can be downloaded and edited by municipalities. **The entire process from the signing of the contract with the consultant team to publishing the templates on the website was accomplished in seven weeks.**

The consultant team also identified a number of statutory errors and inconsistencies during the process of carrying out the scope of work. RIHousing shared this information with the General Assembly and several bills are currently being considered which correct those issues.

When the templates and other documents were completed, municipalities were allowed to apply for MTAP assistance to tailor the templates for their own community.

Currently

To date there are 38 MTAP projects in progress, representing 32 towns and cities (out of Rhode Island's 39 municipalities). We receive updates every two months from consultants on the projects they're engaged in. Approximately \$3.3 million has been awarded.

The program is suspended to new applications as we work with the Department of Housing to consider potential program changes and allocate additional funding.

Outcomes

The MTAP program has been an excellent tool to build relationships with municipalities while working with them to address barriers to housing development. The program was invaluable to helping municipalities implement the significant changes made to state land use laws in a thoughtful and consistent way. We also believe that the work municipalities are doing with program consultants to develop housing plans, identify areas of opportunity for housing development and identify infrastructure needs, will create future opportunities for collaboration on specific development projects.

We have already received significant positive feedback from municipalities that have utilized the program, particularly complimenting the streamlined process and ability to avoid cumbersome procurement processes.

Visual Aids:



Program Overview

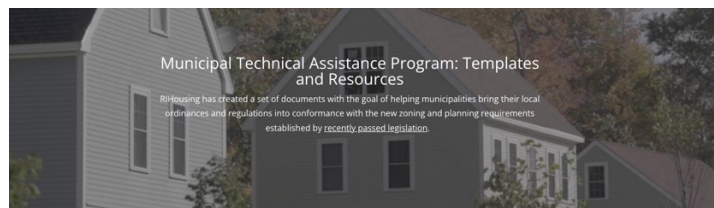
Rhode Island is facing a critical shortage of housing as a result of decades of underproduction of rental housing as well as homeownership opportunities. This has resulted in rapidly increasing housing costs and an extremely low inventory of available homes and apartments, putting safe and affordable housing out of reach for too many Rhode Islanders.

To help address this problem the General Assembly created the Housing Production Fund capitalized with an initial appropriation of \$25 million. Of the initial allocation, \$4 million has been made available for municipal technical assistance through the Municipality Technical Assistance Program. The Program is administered by RIHousing according to guidelines approved by the RI Housing Resources Commission's Coordinating Committee and in collaboration with the Department of Housing. Participation is subject to funding availability.

Eligible Activities

- **Needs analysis:** Assistance in identifying where affordable housing could/should be built in the community. Municipalities may target areas of

www.rihousing.com/mtap



Municipal Technical Assistance Program (MTAP) > Templates and Resources

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In 2023, the General Assembly adopted a package of bills which made changes to various aspects of zoning, planning, and permitting statutes for the purposes of standardizing and streamlining the development process and otherwise reducing barriers to housing development. To assist Rhode Island municipalities in implementing these statutory changes, RIHousing has created a series of guidance documents and template materials to guide municipal officials as they update local land use, permitting and zoning enforceable policies (e.g., zoning ordinances and subdivision regulations). The templates and other resources should only be used in consultation with a municipality's solicitor to ensure that they are used appropriately within the local regulatory framework.

[- Video Tutorial: MTAP Webpage Overview](#)

Introduction and Summary of Guidance Documents

Guidance Documents

[Click here to download all templates and helpful documents.](#)

Land Development Projects and Subdivisions

Development Plan Review

Unified Development Review

Adaptive Reuse

Appeals

Comprehensive Permit

Technical Review Committee

Modifications, Variances and Special Uses

Inclusionary Zoning

www.rihousing.com/mtap-templates/

Sample Projects:

Newport	Build out analysis, Comprehensive Plan Housing Element, Zoning amendments	Use GIS data to identify possible sites for residential development in a housing buildout analysis; updates to Comprehensive Plan Housing Element; and amendments to Zoning Ordinance to increase workforce housing.
Coventry	Peer review traffic study	Traffic peer review of proposed development at Coventry Crossing.
Charlestown	Needs analysis	Assessment of where additional limited housing is appropriate, review of current residential zoning regulations, and proposed amendments to zoning ordinance.
Warren	Housing needs assessment	Develop a Housing Needs Assessment to understand overall housing needs, especially affordable housing, and consider a more regional perspective. This will include methods to close the gap between housing stock and new units needed.
Coventry, Lincoln, Cumberland	Zoning templates and code updates	Coordinate work to update local development policy to address new state enabling legislation working with the towns of Coventry, Cumberland, and Lincoln. The work will be carried out in two tiers.
Middletown	Comprehensive Plan Housing Element	Develop a Housing Element and Action Plan including strategies to meet Middletown's housing goals. This will involve public engagement and housing supply and gap analyses.
Westerly	Housing needs assessment and market study	Housing needs assessment and market study, this will involve stakeholder interviews, review of existing housing reports, and a community housing needs survey.
Coventry	Infrastructure capacity (sewer) at Comprehensive permit site	Engineering review the existing conditions at the Woodland Manor Pump Station for connection of future development for Woodland Manor Phase 3 and Coventry Crossings as well the connection of these developments to the existing sewer system.
Richmond	Infrastructure capacity assessment	Infrastructure capacity assessment along Wyoming/Route 138 infill and growth area. The project will include expanding upon the housing opportunity assessment and conducting multi-modal transportation and circulation analysis and infrastructure assessments.