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DEVENS IN THE NEWS:

Nashoba Valley Voice, Lowell Sun, Sentinel & Enterprise - September 11, 2025 at 12:46 AM EDT

Editorial: Shades of Devens in governor's bid to boost housing

<https://www.nashobavalleyvoice.com/2025/09/11/editorial-shades-of-devens-in-governors-bid-to-boost-housing/>

Whether by design or coincidence, less than a week after a study found that Massachusetts lagged the rest of the country in the issuance of building permits, Gov. Maura Healey announced proposed regulations to trim environmental review times for qualifying housing projects from one year to 30 days. According to an analysis by U.S. Data Labs, a platform developed by the Pioneer Institute providing state-level data on policy areas, Massachusetts issued 14,338 building permits in 2024, or 201 per 100,000 residents — the sixth-lowest rate in the nation. That's well below the national average of 281 permits per 100,000 residents. Massachusetts not only trailed most of the nation but also neighboring states. Maine issued 6,034 permits in 2024, or 429 per 100,000 residents. Vermont and New Hampshire also outpaced Massachusetts per capita, at 409 and 352 permits per 100,000 residents, respectively. Nationally, Idaho led with about 881 permits per 100,000 people, while Texas authorized the most permits overall at more than 225,756.

The governor indicated last week that more than 90,000 housing units have been completed or entered development since she took office, but that's still far short of the state's estimated need for 220,000 homes by the end of the decade. Healey first highlighted the 90,354-unit figure in August on the anniversary of last summer's housing bond law, which she said laid important groundwork for boosting supply.

Healey framed the draft regulations as a "nation-leading" effort that would make it faster and easier to build homes in Massachusetts and bring down housing costs for all residents, which have soared in the state since the pandemic due to limited inventory. "It's our job to make sure government moves at the speed of business, and cutting these regulations will reduce review times from more than a year to 30 days and supercharge the building of homes across Massachusetts," Healey said in a statement.

The governor appears to be taking a page out of the Devens Enterprise Zone playbook. Devens Enterprise Commission, the zone's one-stop permit authority and land-use agency, has played a major role in transforming the former Army base into a business development dynamo. DEC — as it's now known — has attracted over 120 businesses employing more than 6,000 workers; it's also home to approximately 1,000 full-time residents. As the one-stop permitting and regulatory board for Devens, DEC not only cuts administrative red tape, it also provides services of municipal boards such as planning, health and zoning, while also acting as its historic commission.

If Healey's expedited plan can accomplish a semblance of Devens' commercial development, it would certainly accelerate housing production in this state. Healey's initiative doesn't give developers carte blanche. Projects must meet a set of seven criteria in order to move quickly through a review by the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act Office.

In order to qualify for the fast-track review, housing developments must designate at least 67% of their project for a residential purpose, with the remainder for commercial uses; meet certain unit per acre thresholds for

different types of housing; and comply with specific energy efficiency standards. New developments must also be constructed outside of floodplains and other highest hazard areas, and redevelopment projects must build outside the highest hazard areas and follow “resilient design principles,” according to the Healey administration. Projects must have enough water supply, wastewater capacity, and energy infrastructure; limit the extent of new traffic, with higher thresholds if located near transit; and could only alter up to five acres of undeveloped land or up to 10 acres with a tree preservation and replanting plan. Developers whose projects meet these requirements can file a shorter environmental notification form rather than a detailed environmental impact report. That change, according to the Healey administration, could shorten review processes from one year or more to just 30 days.

“Predictable and appropriately constrained review timelines help multi-family developments move efficiently from concept to construction to ribbon-cutting, creating more supply and helping to limit developers’ exposure to the type of cyclical market risk that impedes project starts,” Michael Cantalupa, chief development officer at real estate developer The Davis Companies, said in a statement provided by the governor’s office.

Massachusetts Climate Chief Melissa Hoffer said the draft regulations the Healey administration filed with the Secretary of State’s Office “will deliver more units, faster, and smarter, with long-term energy cost savings for homeowners and renters.”

“We don’t have to choose between building the housing we desperately need and protecting the forests, farmlands, wetlands, and biodiversity that makes Massachusetts one of the best places to live in the country,” Hoffer said in a statement.

Members of the public can provide feedback on the draft regulations until 5 p.m. on Oct. 31. Virtual information sessions and public hearings on the regulations are scheduled for Oct. 14 and Oct. 15.

While a welcome addition to the housing-production tool box, Healey’s initiative still requires developers to jump through several regulatory hoops before breaking ground. And other questions, including whether these expedited developments can circumvent local zoning restrictions, must be clarified. But we’ll give the governor at least an “A” for further exploring ways to solve this seemingly intractable problem.

Governor Healey Unveils Nation-Leading Plan to Cut Environmental Regulations to Fast-Track Housing Development -Reforms will cut environmental review times from 1+ years to 30 days for housing projects to expedite housing and bring down costs

[Governor’s Press Release, September 9, 2025](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS:

October 16, Oxbow NWR Pollinator Meadow Workday
[National Wildlife Refuge Week](#)

Harvard Press – September 19, 2025: In its seventh year, Devens framework committee perseveres despite

MassDevelopment snubs: For the third time in as many years, MassDevelopment, the state agency responsible for the commercial and residential development and municipal operations of Devens, has seemingly rejected a request that it rejoin the committee it helped create to explore options for future governance of the state-run Devens enterprise zone.

In a terse letter to Victor Normand, chair of the Devens Jurisdiction Framework Committee, MassDevelopment CEO Navjeet Bal repeated the position of her two predecessors that MassDevelopment will join the study of alternatives for permanent government at Devens, but not before July 1, 2030, the date state law says it must begin. Chapter 498, the law that sets forth that process, gives MassDevelopment, the select boards of Ayer, Harvard, and Shirley, and the Devens Enterprise Commission, the region's regulatory agency, three years to prepare a report that recommends a permanent government structure for the ongoing operation and administration of Devens. The report is due to the state Legislature no later than July 1, 2033.

Bal's message was a response to a June 6 letter from the framework committee that MassDevelopment reengage with the committee and send representatives to its monthly meetings. The letter also sought MassDevelopment's support for a deep dive into Devens finances—revenues and expenses, assets and liabilities, and a 10-year forecast—that the three towns and other stakeholders will need to decide which forms of governance are in their best interests.

The scope of the financial analysis the committee seeks is specified in a five-page request for proposals hammered out by framework committee members. A copy was included with the letter Normand sent Bal. "MassDevelopment is a key data and information resource whose participation in the [framework committee] and with the [request for proposals] is needed," Normand wrote in his letter to Bal.

Bal's response, however, makes only passing reference to the RFP and makes no mention of the framework committee, its work, or a role for the committee in preparation of the 2033 report.

"We look forward to working with the group identified in the Devens legislation [the towns and the DEC] on these important questions as we get closer to the July 1, 2030 date," Bal wrote. "In the meantime, we will not be able to commit MassDevelopment resources and personnel as you have indicated in the draft RFP."

Bal's letter arrived in July, during the framework committee's summer break. Normand distributed the text to committee members, but read it aloud Sept. 10 at the committee's first post-vacation meeting.

"The question becomes, what is the next step and what is the goal of the framework committee?" Ayer Town Administrator Robert Pontbriand asked. Otherwise the committee will be forever in a "perpetual hamster wheel" of trying to get MassDevelopment back to the table, and failing time after time. Over the past seven years, the committee has learned to work together, he said, but that collaboration "has not been reciprocated" by MassDevelopment.

A record of collaboration

Normand, in an interview with the Press this week, said the committee can point to many collaborative achievements. He described the RFP as a "watershed" document, that specifies in detail what financial data—from MassDevelopment and other sources—will be required for future planning. Snubbed by MassDevelopment, the committee intends to form a subgroup to pursue grants. Some have proposed that each town appropriate a sum of money to hire a qualified firm to do the work.

A second achievement, Normand said, was the committee's proposal for Vicksburg Square, which has the backing of the select boards of the three towns as well as the DEC and the Devens representatives. The proposal was ignored by MassDevelopment. The agency is expected to offer a proposal of its own, including a Super Town Meeting to open the Vicksburg Square district to residential development.

Finally, in two months the committee will reach another milestone, completing work on what it calls its "disposition framework matrix." The matrix explores how 19 different issues—from administration and police to community identity and boundaries—would be handled under each of three different scenarios: (1) status quo, in which MassDevelopment and the DEC continue to manage Devens; (2) new town, in which Devens becomes the 352nd independent municipality in Massachusetts; and (3) historical land, in which land within their historical boundaries is returned to Ayer, Harvard, and Shirley. Yet to be discussed are hybrid scenarios that combine elements of all three or offer regional solutions.

But perhaps the greatest accomplishment, outgoing DJFC Chair Normand told the Press in a Tuesday interview, is that the committee has held together despite MassDevelopment's departure. "I think that was an accomplishment," he said. "Holding it together is something noteworthy." By a unanimous vote that came later in the meeting, the committee elected Ayer Select Board Chair Jannice Livingston to succeed Normand as chair for a term of office yet to be decided. (See story on page 40.)

John Katter, the Devens rep, said in a Tuesday morning interview that the committee had a continuing role to play. "I think it's absolutely critical that the [Devens Jurisdiction Framework Committee] meets and the towns and Devens residents and the businesses and the DEC continue the work of discussing what jurisdiction could look like—because no one else is."

Harvard Press – September 19, 2025: Livingston replaces Normand as chair of Devens Framework

Committee: After six years as chair of the Devens Jurisdiction Framework Committee, Victor Normand is stepping down, following a unanimous vote at the committee's Sept. 10 meeting to rotate the chair among the three towns and elect Jannice Livingston, chair of the Ayer Select Board, to succeed him.

The change was initiated by John Katter, the Devens representative, who said some residents had felt it was time for a change. Normand told the Press that Katter had called him and Livingston before the meeting to pitch the idea and place it on the agenda. Normand said he told Livingston and Bryan Sawyer, Shirley's town administrator, that he was willing to continue, but if another town wanted the job he was willing to step aside. "I have no claim to that position," he said.

In a phone interview, Katter praised Normand's leadership. "He has proven to be a good steward. He's proven to be knowledgeable, and he has done an admirable job. ... Not many people would step up to do what he did."

Normand said that stepping away from the chair position was "a relief." "Putting the meeting together every month is hard work, but the real challenge is looking ahead and trying to move the committee along."

When you're chair, he said, "you really have to be balanced and inclusive and more or less objective." He said he thought Livingston would continue that tradition. "But now it's clear that I'm sitting there representing Harvard and Harvard's interests. It's a change in perspective. I'm looking forward to it."

On the agenda for the committee's October meeting: term limits.

Harvard Press – September 19, 2025: An inch wide but a mile deep: getting to know the Parker Charter

School: The Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens opened its doors for the 30th year on Wednesday, Aug. 27, boasting a new principal and a redesigned front entrance that includes an expanded walkway, outdoor classroom, garden, and landscaping designed to allow students to congregate in a safe and appealing environment.

The Parker School, as it is more commonly known, is a public charter school hosting students from Harvard, Devens, and 44 other towns in central Massachusetts. It is home to grades seven through 12 and has approximately 400 students in total. The school was founded in 1995 by the late and longtime Harvard resident TheodoreSizer, who believed education should start with the student, not the educator.

Sizer was renowned in the field of public education, writing a number of books on the subject. One of his works, "Horace's Compromise," was a series of three commentaries written from the perspective of a fictional high school English teacher frustrated with what he believed was an outdated method of instructing students. From that work, Sizer founded the Coalition of Essential Schools in 1984, which led to the Parker School's inception a little over a decade later.



Principal Rebecca "Bex" Wilusz.

A charter school is a public, tuition-free school that operates under a performance contract, known as a "charter," with state or district authorization. In exchange for greater flexibility over curriculum, staffing, and schedule, it's held to strict accountability for student outcomes and compliance with state laws. Enrollment is open and nonselective, determined entirely by a lottery system.

Bex Wilusz, principal of Parker, has "come home" to a school she considers foundational to her career, stepping into a restructured leadership model that frees Head of School Brian Harrigan to focus on initiatives like enrollment, facilities, and fundraising, while she concentrates on teaching and learning. "I taught here 20 years ago, and I love the school," said Wilusz. "I really appreciate being able to not just know students by their name, but actually know them as people, know their families, understand them as learners, and know how to work with them."

Diving deep

The mission of the Parker School incorporates 10 common principles as a framework for progressive, student-centered education. (See below.). "We're intentionally small and essential, which is in our name," Harrigan said in a joint interview with Wilusz and the Press. "It means we're going to go deep, get to know kids really well. We're not going to go wide in the way a comprehensive school would, meaning we don't have some of the elective offerings. Part of that's a size issue, but it's also a choice. Whatever we do, we're going to do it deeply and well."



Head of School Brian Harrigan. (Photos by Jen Manell)

"I am really excited to continue to work with the staff on understanding culturally responsive teaching and how to make sure that our school is welcoming to all students," said Wilusz. "Whether it's our neurodiverse students, our LGBTQIA+ students, or our students who come from different cultural and racial backgrounds,

I think it's so important, especially in this climate, for us to ensure that every student feels a sense of belonging and connection to school."

Parental perspective

Pam Gordon, Harvard resident and chair of the Parker School Board of Trustees, has three children who have attended the charter school. "I wanted a school that treated children as whole people, where they would be known well by adults and supported in both rigor and relationships. Parker does that beautifully," she said. Her eldest, Hannah, graduated from Parker in 2022 and went on to study at Colby College in Maine, where she will graduate next year. Gordon's middle son, Ethan (Parker class of 2024), is currently attending Wesleyan University in Connecticut. Her youngest son, Jacob, is a senior at Bromfield.

Jacob attended Parker for seventh and eighth grade. "The deal with our kids has always been 'Try it for a year. If you want to come back to the Harvard Public Schools, they have to take you,'" said Gordon. "Jacob's first year was during COVID-19, so he was remote for almost the whole year.

At the end of that, we said, 'You actually have to try it one more year when you're in person.' But he had a really good group of friends [at Bromfield] and wanted to come back, and that was fine."

Another Parker parent, Sima Baran of Harvard, said she and her husband, Paul, chose Parker for their two children based on its "students in the driver's seat of their education" approach, the emphasis on depth over breadth, and the project-based learning that includes extensive feedback and revision. Baran's son, Alec Robertson, is a freshman at Parker, and her daughter, Aylin, is in her first year at the school, in seventh grade. Baran said the transition was difficult at times, but they have no regrets about moving to the charter.

"There was some FOMO [fear of missing out] for Alec," said Baran of her son's first year at Parker. "I think that was hard. And maintaining friendships outside of school at that age was a challenge. He's still in touch with some of his close friends from Bromfield. We have no regrets. I always tell Brian [Harrigan] that I'm actually upset Parker didn't start in the sixth grade. I would've happily gone from [Hildreth Elementary] to Parker."

There are many other charter schools in addition to the Parker School that Harvard students have the option to attend. Filling out online applications will gain students access to the lottery. The only preference given in a lottery is for geographical location and sibling priority. Charter schools with geographical priority for Harvard residents include the Sizer School: A North Central Charter Essential School in Fitchburg (grades 7-12); the Innovation Academy Charter School in Tyngsborough (grades 5-12); and the Advanced Math & Science Academy in Marlborough (grades 6-12), though its priority does not include Harvard specifically.

According to U.S. News & World Report, five of the top 10 ranked high schools in the state are charter schools. Still, only 7% of Parker's students come from Harvard. "Parker's greatest challenge isn't what happens inside the classroom," said Gordon. "It's communicating to the outside world just how remarkable the education is."

The Parker School's 10 Common Principles

1. Learning to use one's mind well

The school's central aim is to help students become thoughtful, critical, and independent learners.

2. Less is more, depth over coverage

Focus on essential skills and knowledge, studied deeply, rather than superficially covering vast content.

3. Goals apply to all students

High expectations for every student; no tracking or sorting by ability.

4. Personalization

Teaching and learning should be tailored so that each student is well known and supported.

5. Student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach

Emphasize active, engaged learning rather than passive absorption of information.

6. Demonstration of mastery

Students show their learning through exhibitions, portfolios, or projects—not just standardized tests.

7. A tone of decency and trust

Schools should cultivate respect, fairness, and responsibility in relationships between students and adults.

8. Commitment to the entire school

Staff work collaboratively, share responsibility for all students, and are dedicated to the school's mission.

9. Resources dedicated to teaching and learning

Budgets, schedules, and decisions prioritize student learning over other concerns.

10. Democracy and equity

Schools should model democratic practices and provide equal access to high-quality education for all students.

Nashoba Valley Voice September 19, 2025 - Parker School dedicates new walkway, honors retired principal:



Parker School
dedicates walkway,

Worcester Telegram September 24, 2025 – UMass Memorial's new emergency facility in Nashoba Valley moves one step closer to reality



ET GROTON — Federal, state and local officials gathered in Groton Monday, Sept. 22, to celebrate the first steps toward bringing health care back to the residents of the Nashoba Valley, by unveiling renderings of UMass Memorial Health's planned satellite emergency room. Shovels are expected to break ground at 490 Main St. in Groton within two months, said Dr. Eric Dickson, president and CEO of UMass Memorial Health, and the facility is expected to open in January 2027. The facility, which will offer all the services of a traditional, hospital-based emergency department, is intended to be the "toehold" the organization needs to start extending services to the Nashoba Valley community. "Ideally, we will establish the emergency department to deal with today's problems," Dickson said. The area the facility will serve was determined to be an emergency health care desert with the shuttering of Nashoba Valley Medical Center in August 2024, after Steward Health Care declared bankruptcy and made the decision to close Kinga Borondy Worcester Telegram & Gazette eight medical centers. State officials found buyers for six of the Steward Health Care hospitals, leaving Carney Hospital in Boston and Nashoba Valley Medical Center in Ayer to close. Once the satellite emergency room has opened, Dickson said, UMass Memorial would like to bring its digital medical services into the area. The organization already has a hospital at home service where patients are treated by medical professionals in their own homes. "We know outcomes are better," Dickson said. These digital services include extending at-home treatment options to the EMS, where trained medical professionals answering calls for emergency services can assess a situation, stabilize a patient and treat them in the comfort of their home. The system also already offers remote patient monitoring. "This will allow patients to stay at home, but with backup," Dickson said, explaining that the satellite center will allow the organization to extend these services to residents in the Nashoba Valley while also ensuring a backup system for emergencies when they are

needed. For Dickson, the future of the satellite center would also embrace multidisciplinary services to treat patients with diabetes, neurological issues and cardiac issues; he dubbed these the diseases of aging. The center could offer routine monitoring and care. Certain procedures would still require a trip to Worcester or Boston. "But the more frequent treatment protocols, we could do it here," Dickson said. Local fire and emergency medical services personnel embraced the proposed satellite center. Many worked closely with the state and UMass Memorial Health personnel to create a solution after the closure of the area's only hospital and emergency medical center. "This project provides the community with hope," said Groton Fire Chief Arthur Cheeks. The chief, along with other first responders, attended the noon ceremony and unveiling of a rendering of the structure. The site is close to being a central location for the communities that will rely on the new emergency room for medical care. Cheeks said it was one of several sites proposed by local fire chiefs as it has infrastructural support and is close to state highways. Cheeks said area first responders have been hit hard this past year, strained by increased travel distances, overcrowded emergency rooms and increased wait times to transfer care from the EMS crew to hospital staff. More: Fire chiefs: EMS response in N. Central Mass. 'on verge of collapse' after hospital closing "We don't have the staff to run a second ambulance," Cheeks said. As first responders eagerly anticipate the new satellite center, the state has allocated \$10 million in emergency funds in Gov. Maura T. Healey's supplemental budget, signed in the summer months, for local emergency responders. Of that, \$5 million was earmarked specifically for the Nashoba Valley departments affected by the shuttering of Nashoba Valley Medical Center. State Sen. John Cronin said the Legislature is working with the Department of Public Health to determine where those funds will be allocated, adding that not all area departments and communities have been equally affected by the shuttering of Steward hospitals.