



Catalyst Housing is an example of the possibility of utilizing faith-based land to create more housing. (Spenser Hasak) [Purchase this photo](#)

Housing could land in ‘God’s Backyard’

March 11, 2026 by [Briana Alvarez](#)

LYNN — A bill moving through the Massachusetts Legislature could unlock thousands of new housing units statewide by allowing religious institutions to build housing on land they already own.

The proposal, known as “Yes in God’s Backyard” (YIGBY) legislation, aims to remove zoning barriers that often prevent churches, synagogues, mosques, and other faith-based organizations from developing multi-family housing on their properties.

Supporters say the bill could help address Massachusetts’ housing shortage while also creating new revenue for cities and towns.

“In faith communities, it’s just innately in their ethos to help their community,” Katie Everett, executive director of the Lynch Foundation, said.

Recent research commissioned by the Lynch Foundation found that if faith-based organizations across Massachusetts developed just a quarter of their vacant land for housing, it could support more than 250,000 housing units.

The legislation would allow multi-family housing by right on land owned by faith-based organizations, require 20-25% of units in larger developments to be affordable, and provide clearer zoning pathways for projects that often stall at the local level.

State Sen. Brendan Crighton, who represents Lynn, said the policy is intended to remove barriers that have historically slowed housing production.

“Basically for the last 50 plus years, there have been intentional policies put in place that prohibit or make it very difficult to build housing in particular multifamily,” Crighton said. “So as a commonwealth...we’re looking to build 222,000 units by 2035.”

In Lynn alone, researchers estimate that 27.1 acres of vacant land owned by religious institutions could potentially support between 210 and 350 new housing units if zoning barriers were removed.

While Lynn has taken steps to encourage housing development, Crighton said the legislation could help ensure similar projects are possible in communities across the state.

“Our zoning policies — thanks to the City Council, the mayor, and the Planning Department — aren’t overly restrictive,” he said.

He pointed to a recent local housing initiative connected to a religious organization.

“A project like the East Coast International Church... I think it was 24 units of supportive housing... for at risk or housing insecure youth or homeless youth,” Crighton said. “That was

completed last year... that project, it was built on a religious property, that in many cities and towns would not have been allowed.”

Projects like the Catalyst Housing located at the church in collaboration with The Haven Project highlight the problem the bill is trying to solve.

“(They) may create housing projects out there that will never see the light of day because of overly restrictive zoning,” Crighton said.

In fact, Lynn is not completely new to these kinds of housing projects. What used to be St. Jean Baptiste Parish, closed in the mid 1990s, is now a 38-unit mixed-income development.

A collaboration between the Lynn Housing Authority and a nonprofit housing developer called the Planning Office for Urban Affairs allowed the closed church to be taken down and ultimately developed.

“We constructed...14 new townhomes for first-time buyers and (a) 24-unit affordable housing development.” President of the Planning Office for Urban Affairs Bill Grogan said.

He added, “It has been successfully operated and managed over the last 20 plus years.”

Grogan expressed that these are examples of how looking at yet another construction site doesn't send the wrong message. It's an instance of how housing can be built to actually meet the needs of the communities.

“At this moment in time... they're in a housing shortage,” he said. “Everyday we read about the high cost of housing but... in the use of property that's owned by faith-based organizations to build, affordable housing can meet whether that's affordable housing for seniors or... family housing. It can turn into a win-win situation.”

The estimates behind the legislation come from a statewide analysis using parcel ownership records and zoning data.

Everett said researchers mapped land owned by religious organizations and analyzed how much housing could be built if zoning restrictions were eased.

“We have a database that... will tell you every single parcel of land (and) who owns it,” Everett said. “And then you can analyze based on the zoning rights for that city or town or municipality how many units if any faith communities were given the opportunity for zoning relief where they could build affordable units.”

Researchers found thousands of potentially developable properties statewide.

“We have analyzed the opportunity to build between 300 and 500,000 units of new housing if only 50% of the available land from faith-based communities was developed,” Everett said. “Because there are over 4,860 developable parcels, 21,000 acres of land.”

Many of the properties already have infrastructure that could support development.

“The average parcel size is about 4 acres,” Everett said. “It also has access to the majority of these parcels; 65% have access to water and sewer already, (and) 62% have access to public transit.”

Massachusetts lawmakers widely agree that the state’s housing shortage is a key driver of rising rents and home prices.

Crighton said increasing supply is central to addressing affordability.

“When you build housing, you will see costs stabilize,” he said. “But really, almost universally, (it’s) agreed upon that the reason costs are high is that supply is low, and demand is very high.”

The YIGBY legislation would join other recent housing policies intended to increase housing production. Crighton described it as “another tool in the toolbox to build housing.”

The bill is currently moving through the Massachusetts Senate as part of a broader housing package.

Crighton said lawmakers are aiming to pass the legislation before the end of the current legislative session.

“Our session ends on July 31,” he said. “So that’s the goal line for us.”

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