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Smart growth is smart money

THE SMART GROWTH program is a sensible, cost-effective response to the shortage of housing in Massachusetts. Approved by the Legislature in 2004, the program has been responsible for the permitting of almost 1,700 units of housing in special zoning districts. But it is running out of money, and the Legislature needs to make a modest financial commitment to keep its word to cities and towns.

The Legislature and then-Governor Romney wanted to encourage communities to establish these districts, where housing would be built more densely than zoning usually allows. Towns were to be rewarded from a special fund, first when they set up the districts and again when they granted permits to build the housing. It hasn't cost much so far, but the Legislature never replenished the original \$3.7 million, and the fund contains only \$1.3 million.

Communities far and wide have sought to make use of the program. Brockton, Chelsea, Grafton, Kingston, Lawrence, Lynnfield, Natick, Plymouth, Amesbury, and North Andover have all created smart-growth districts. Boston, Gardner, Northampton, Belmont, and Pittsfield are considering doing the same. Dartmouth, Lunenburg, Norwood, North Reading, Lakeville, and Haverhill have gone a step further and issued housing permits.

The fund is about \$8 million short of what it will be required by law to pay to these com-

munities. If the Legislature keeps starving it of money, other towns will be discouraged from taking part, and the program will fail.

Economic growth in Massachusetts hinges on an increase in the supply of moderately priced housing. The smart-growth program uses the gentle prod of money to encourage cities and towns to loosen restrictive zoning in a few selected spots. It's a gradualist approach that deserves continuing support.

Governor Patrick agrees, and proposes to replenish the fund with a \$15 million transfer from an account that contains payments from the sale of housing once subsidized by the state. That would keep the fund solvent for 18 months, long enough for the Legislature to devise a lasting revenue stream.

Patrick included this proposal in his supplemental budget, which sits in committee. Representative Bradley Jones of North Reading and Senator Richard Tisei of Wakefield, the Republican leaders, have been pressing the legislative leadership to take action. "I drive by the site every day," said Jones said of the 406-unit development planned for his town.

Smart-growth districts like this will proliferate across the state if the Legislature keeps its promise. The program has a powerful supporter in Senate President Therese Murray, who said in a statement that she would find a way to pay for its commitments. Legislative action in the next couple of months will increase the supply of housing and clear the way for economic growth.