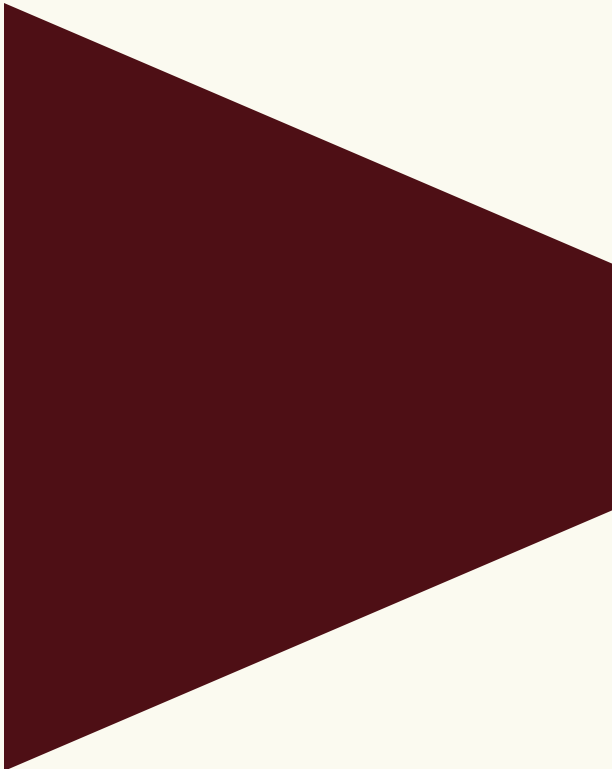
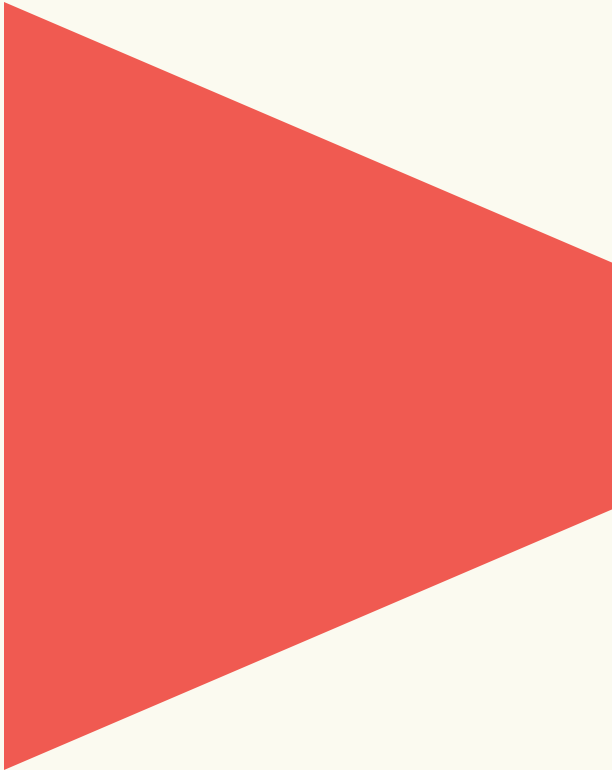
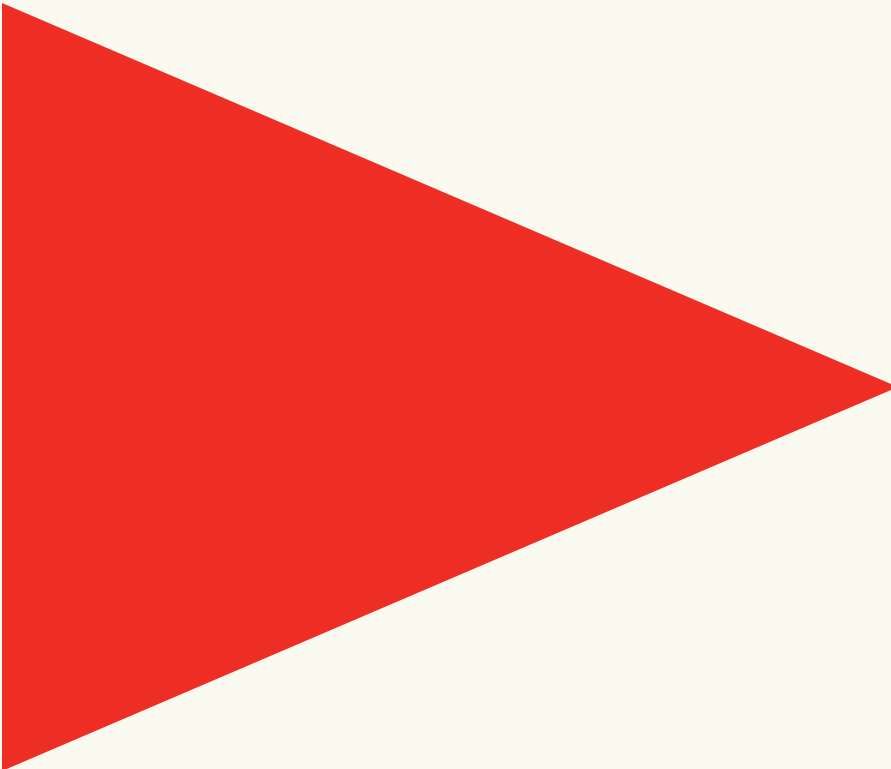


*Make government more
participatory and inclusive*



Recommendation: Make government more participatory and inclusive

Strategy 1

Expand pathways for engagement to improve accessibility of local governments.

Local, state, and federal government should be accessible to people in the community in order to ensure that it includes all residents. Residents should easily be able to find out what services are available to them, when public meetings are taking place and how to participate, and how they can best weigh in on local decision-making. Too often, local governments hear from the same few residents that have the time and knowledge to participate in meetings, call their elected officials, and write letters expressing their views. Expanding opportunities for virtual participation will be one critical avenue for promoting access to local governments. The COVID pandemic gave us an opportunity to see how innovative virtual participation can work in real time, but it also laid bare the need to invest in broadband and digital infrastructure. We should maintain the increased level of accessibility through virtual platforms so that more residents are able to participate and stay informed about local decision-making.

- ▶ **Action 1.1: Pass a suite of voting and electoral reforms to improve access to voting and increase voter turnout.** In the later part of the 20th century and the early part of the 21st, voter turnout in Massachusetts dipped from its highs in the 1940s and 50s, where we saw upwards of 80-90% voter turnout.¹ Encouragingly, the 2020 election saw a voter turnout rate of 76%, the highest in the Commonwealth since 1992.² However, an analysis of recent voter turnout data shows that there is a significant disparity in voter turnout across the Commonwealth, with the lowest turnout in Gateway Cities, where income and education levels fall below the state average. A MassInc Polling analysis confirmed this trend among early voters in the 2020 presidential election.³ That report showed that “in 10% of cities with the highest rates of early voting, 64% of residents have a Bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to just 31% among the bottom 10%.”⁴ When all of the results were in, a MassVOTE report confirmed this trend, the highest turnout communities had a median household income of \$127,000, while the lowest turnout communities had a median household income of just \$59,000.⁵

1 <https://www.sec.state.ma.us/e/elevoterturnoutstats/voterturnoutstats.htm>

2 <https://www.boston.com/news/politics/2020/11/19/massachusetts-2020-turnout/>

3 <https://www.wbur.org/news/2020/09/23/early-voting-data-inequity-massachusetts>

4 Ibid.

5 https://4da245b5-2040-4b7c-8d3a-890d1f13e948.filesusr.com/ugd/04949f_c886593fe4294d-a581a4c022f286de6f.pdf

The increased voter turnout trends in the 2020 election can largely be attributed to an emergency suite of voting reforms that were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to encourage voter participation, some local elections were delayed, and then in July 2020, the Legislature dramatically expanded mail-in voting, expanded ballot access online, and created early in-person voting for one week prior to the primary election and two weeks prior to the general election.⁶

In order to maintain high voter turnout, long-term permanent voting reform measures are needed, including automatic voting by mail, expanded early voting, and same day voter registration. The efficacy of automatic voting by mail and early voting is clear, but same day registration has similarly been proven to work. Twenty states and the District of Columbia currently use same day registration and it has increased voter participation, especially among underrepresented voters and renters.⁷

One additional measure deserves further research would be to lower the voting age to 16 for local elections. While young voters ages 18-29 are typically low turnout voters, recent elections indicate that this trend is shifting.⁸ Two Maryland municipalities have lowered their voting age to 16 for local elections, and 15 states allow 17-year-olds to vote in primaries.⁹ In 2019, Somerville City Council passed a measure that would allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in local elections, but the proposal was not approved by state lawmakers.

► **Action 1.2: Update the Open Meeting Law to increase participation.** The Massachusetts Open Meeting Law applies to government entities at the state and local level. The law generally requires that the meetings of these entities be open to the public, that notice of such meetings be publicly posted, and that accurate records of the meeting be kept and made available to the public.¹⁰ The first Open Meeting Law was adopted in 1958 and was substantially revamped in 1975. Since that time, its format and general provisions have remained the same.¹¹ But when COVID-19 hit in March of 2020, it was necessary to quickly and immediately adopt changes to our Open Meeting Law provisions to allow remote deliberation and participation. What had once been deemed a process unlikely to see any significant changes without years of legislative study was suddenly upended overnight.

The Governor's March 2020 Executive Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law¹² was extended on June 16, 2021, and it creates remote meeting provisions until April 1, 2022. The new law allows public bodies to continue providing live, "adequate, alternative means" of public access to a public meeting, which can include access through telephone, internet, or other technology that allows the public to follow the proceedings in real time. The law also authorizes all members of a public body to continue participating in meetings remotely, suspending the requirement that a quorum of the body and the chair be physically present at the meeting location.

6 Session Laws. Acts of 2020 c. 115, An Act relative to voting options in response to COVID-19, July 6, 2020. <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2020/Chapter115>

7 <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/same-day-registration.aspx>

8 <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/demographics>

9 <https://vote16usa.org/project/maryland/>

10 M.G.L. c 30A §§ 18 through 25

11 <https://www.holdenma.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlif4526/f/file/openmtgguide.pdf>

12 <https://www.mass.gov/doc/open-meeting-law-order-march-12-2020/download>

Allowing remote participation changed the landscape of public participation in government, opening access to meetings for those with disabilities, those who faced transportation challenges, or for those who could not attend previously due to work or family obligations. Remote participation and access to public meetings must be made permanent to reflect current civic engagement expectations and realities. The Legislature should make long-term changes to our Open Meeting Law in order to allow for continued engagement at the local level, baking more flexibility into our Open Meeting Law so that our public meetings remain open to the public in a variety of ways and encourage participation. Changes to our Open Meeting Law should take into consideration the rapidly evolving nature of meeting technologies and should allow for the appropriate flexibilities as new options become more widely available and secure.

► **Action 1.3: The Commonwealth should invest in publicly accessible broadband and increase digital literacy.** One of the challenges of pivoting so quickly to remote work and participation during the pandemic is that not all communities had the resources to meet huge new digital needs. Almost overnight, the internet became essential infrastructure to ensure that people could work and learn remotely and stay connected. As municipal offices, schools, and social service centers closed, the internet was also critical to communicate essential information about the pandemic and ensure residents were able to access needed services. Unfortunately, the digital divide is a very real problem in the Commonwealth, and it impacts some of the lowest-income communities in our region.

Residents should not suffer from disproportionate access to the internet. Instead, the state should provide resources for cities and towns to plan for and invest in broadband. One option to explore is municipal broadband. Investing in municipal broadband could give residents faster internet speeds, lower prices, and better customer service than from traditional internet service providers (ISPs), many of whom created redlining practices in the Commonwealth. In some cases, ISPs face very little competition, which allows them to raise rates without improving quality of service. Municipal broadband would offer an alternative publicly-owned model and help provide internet access to those who cannot otherwise afford it and don't currently have equal access. Several communities south of Boston, including Milton, Quincy, and Weymouth, are in the preliminary stages of planning for municipal broadband. In some parts of the region, it may make sense to explore a similar regional framework so municipalities can share the limited resources available for broadband investment. Longer-term, a public access open broadband approach supported by the state could be considered.

One way to support expanded access to broadband in the Commonwealth could be to increase funding for the technical assistance programs available through the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI). Created in 2008, MBI is a division of the MassTech Collaborative aiming to bridge the digital divide and expand access to affordable high-speed internet.

Dedicated funding for the creation of broadband access programs should prioritize investments in municipalities that currently experience limited digital accessibility, and it should be coupled with efforts to build local digital literacy among local governments and residents. See Action 2.1 in “**Improve local government capacity and service delivery**” for more details on expanding internet access to local governments.

Best/emerging practice: In partnership with the Massachusetts Broadband Institute, Central and Western Massachusetts communities have pursued measures to expand broadband access to residents. In 2014, MBI created the MassBroadband 123, a 1,200-mile open access fiber cable network in Central and Western Massachusetts primarily serving public institutions in the region. This critical “middle mile” infrastructure also connects local networks to other network services providers and major telecommunications carriers. MassBroadband 123 has enabled the successful launch of several “last mile” broadband programs. In 2015, LeverettNet was the first of these last mile programs to launch, with 650 of the Town’s 800 households signing up for service.¹³ The Town created the Leverett Broadband Committee and the Leverett Municipal Light Plan to oversee approach, financing, and construction of the network.

Strategy 2

Enhance resident influence and representation in local decision-making.

In most forms of local government, decision making is at the hands of a small number of individuals who serve on the executive and legislative branches. In many cases, local decision makers have been in power for a long time, and board and commission members are not representative of the residents who are the most likely to be impacted by their decisions. Opportunities to serve on boards, commissions, and other decision making bodies are not always well publicized and might ultimately be limited to residents who know how to navigate the system. In addition to the actions in Strategy 1, investing in local civic infrastructure and elevating the role of community-based organizations can enable more residents to participate in local planning and decision making processes. Additionally, municipalities have the opportunity to make these engagement processes more meaningful by giving community-driven planning efforts, particularly master plans, more influence on local policy and zoning decisions. A more participatory and inclusive government would give its residents greater say on how their government functions, what it spends its money on, and what programs and policies are needed to best serve its residents.

- ▶ **Action 2.1: Cities and towns should expand community engagement for local projects and work with local resident organizations.** Good community engagement leads to positive outcomes for residents and government alike, resulting in more equitable, sustainable public decisions that improve the lives of residents, and especially those residents that are most affected by a decision or project.¹⁴

¹³ <https://broadband.masstech.org/last-mile-programs/im-pact-stories/leverettnet>.

¹⁴ <https://medium.com/change-lab-solutions/equitable-community-engagement-34d2542f68fd>

Too often, the residents who participate in the community engagement process represent a narrow slice of the whole community, trending towards older, whiter, and longtime residents that are most often homeowners.¹⁵ This skews the perspective on local projects, leaving out the critical voice of the majority of residents, and potentially resulting in decisions that don't reflect the true perspective of the community.

One way to expand the capacity of community engagement is to partner with community-based organizations and other institutional partners. All municipalities have these civic organizations, which can include anything from a parent-teacher organization, to a service organization like Rotary or Kiwanis, to a Community Development Corporation or other local non-profit. These organizations can complement those groups that might already have high participation rates in community meetings, including those longtime residents, local Chambers of Commerce, or Realtors groups.

These community based organizations can partner with local entities and engage in a variety of activities to increase public participation, including co-host public input sessions in a familiar setting, help to adapt information to a language and format that makes sense to the desired audience, recruit attendees and help to provide critical support such as transportation and child care, and help to report back to the community about how the input was used in the final decision.¹⁶

Where appropriate, communities should offer compensation to community-based organizations that help with these efforts.

Best/emerging practice: Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting is a process whereby community members decide how to spend part of a public budget. It started in Brazil in 1989 and has had dramatically positive results for the people who live there. Several communities in Massachusetts are experimenting with participatory budgeting, with Cambridge already in its 8th year of participatory budgeting.¹⁷

The Cambridge participatory budgeting process focuses on how to spend \$1 million in one-time capital projects. Community members brainstorm projects in June and July, and then volunteer budget delegates turn the ideas into formal proposals, which are vetted by city staff and approved by the city manager. In December, the final proposals go to the ballot for a vote by any Cambridge resident 12 and over. The final projects are included in the next fiscal year budget. Past projects include musical instruments for the high school, bilingual books for kids, extending outdoor public wi-fi, pedestrian-controlled crosswalk lights, and laundry access in public schools.

15 http://sites.bu.edu/kleinstei/files/2017/09/EinsteinPalmer-Glick_ZoningPartic.pdf

16 https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/partnering_with_comm_based_orgs_final.pdf

17 <https://pb.cambridgema.gov/>

- **Action 2.2: Board and commission vacancies should be made more public and residents in these roles should receive a stipend, where appropriate.** In every corner of the Commonwealth, cities and towns appoint residents to serve on boards, commissions, task forces, and committees to advise paid staff and elected officials on a wide range of issues. Most of the time, these positions are volunteer positions and residents serve without compensation. There are many barriers to volunteering to engage in public service. Meetings are often in the evening, making participation difficult for those who work in the evening, have family and childcare commitments, or face transportation challenges. Additionally, the work of volunteer committees is often, by design, thankless and behind-the-scenes. And too often, residents who are appointed to committees come from a relatively small pool of individuals, rather than reflecting the diversity of a particular community.

Cities and towns can address these issues by creating a public process to elevate public service opportunities within their community. Some communities in our region widely publicize public service opportunities, but not all communities do. Cities and towns should publicize board and commission vacancies in multiple places – online, in the local paper, and in newsletters that come from local elected officials. Sending information about opportunities for civic engagement home with school-age children could also help to reach a wider audience. Information about available positions should clearly state the committee’s responsibilities, decision-making authority, and timeline, so that all interested individuals come into the process with as much information as possible.¹⁸

Finally, some boards and commissions serve for a very long time without any compensation. Where appropriate, individuals who serve in these roles should have the opportunity to collect a stipend to support them. As described above, a stipend program should similarly be designed to encourage participation of those who otherwise would not have an opportunity to participate due to family and childcare commitments, transportation challenges, or other barriers. Cities, towns, and counties across the country are experimenting with paying these previously all-volunteer positions, and Massachusetts should explore this opportunity at the state level and set aside funds so municipalities can provide stipends to those residents who volunteer or are appointed to public boards and commissions.

- **Action 2.3: Municipalities should ensure zoning bylaws and ordinances do not conflict with their master plan.** Most municipalities in the region have adopted community-wide master plans. These plans (sometimes referred to as comprehensive plans) cover many topics, including land use and housing. Developing a master plan requires significant investment, can take two or more years to complete, and involves extensive community input. The resulting goals and strategies often include a number of recommendations to create a more inclusive and equitable community, such as adoption

¹⁸ <https://www.cbi.org/article/volunteer-committees-set-them-up-for-success/>

of inclusionary zoning, open space residential design bylaws, mixed-use zoning, and more. Once a master plan is adopted by the Planning Board, however, there is no requirement that a community implement its own plan, often creating a disconnect between its master plan and regulations.

Massachusetts cities and towns should ensure that zoning bylaws and ordinances do not conflict with their respective master plans. Doing so will ensure that a community's zoning aligns with the goals and strategies developed and adopted in the master plan. Numerous other states, including New York, California, Rhode Island, and Maine, require local zoning to conform with adopted master plans. In New York, for example, once master plan is adopted, all land use regulations must be in accordance with it. This usually means that plan adoption is followed by the adoption of a series of zoning laws designed to "implement" the comprehensive plan.

To implement this policy action, several considerations should be taken. First, the Commonwealth should provide technical assistance resources to ensure master plans are updated periodically. Second, the Commonwealth should require each master plan to contain a baseline level of detail, so that the zoning and land use recommendations are clearly outlined. Finally, there are some exclusionary zoning measures that could have a sizeable negative impact on the region. Action 2.2 in "**Improve regional coordination and partnerships for infrastructure and services**" describes how a regional land use board could intervene in these limited circumstances.

Strategy 3

Grow local efforts to promote diversity, equity inclusion within the municipal workforce and across government boards and committees.

MAPC has done extensive research into the [diversity of our municipal workforce](#). Our research showed that city and town employees are, as a whole, both older and Whiter than the region's general labor force, as well as its population.¹⁹ This disparity can influence residents' knowledge of and interest in participating in local planning and decision-making processes. Staff who carry out the day-to-day functions of local government have influence on how receptive a government is to the needs of its people. A workforce that more closely resembles the demographic makeup of the community can support more effective and culturally competent community engagement initiatives and allow more residents to feel their perspectives will be heard by their local government. A diverse municipal workforce that reflects local demographics is not only important for representation in decision-making, but also expands professional pathways for individuals who otherwise may not feel inclined to explore a career in municipal government. As such, the actions below must work in concert with the recommendations for a more creative, adaptive, and diverse municipal workforce included in Strategy 1 in "**Improve local government capacity and service delivery**".

¹⁹ <https://metrocommon.mapc.org/reports/14>

- ▶ **Action 3.1: Cities and towns should collect and report data about their municipal workforce and committee demographics.** MAPC’s research on municipal workforce diversity relied on self-reported demographic and occupation information compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau to assess age, gender, and race/ethnicity demographics of municipal employees living in the MAPC region, which was supplemented with publicly available municipal workforce demographic statistics from individual cities and towns.

In order to get a clearer picture of how we are meeting our goals, every municipality should be collecting and publishing information about their workforce demographics using clear data standards. As recommended in Action 2.4 in “**Improve local government capacity and service delivery**”, the state should create an Office of Data Standards that promulgates these data standards for cities and towns. These data standards would enable comparisons across communities over time, and help cities and towns get a better sense of where they might be falling short.

These data standards can also be applied to municipalities’ boards, committees, and commissions, which would help to show where cities and towns need to do more work to recruit local volunteers that reflect the demographics of the community.

- ▶ **Action 3.2: Support municipalities’ diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts through an expansion of the Office of Access and Opportunity, to provides technical assistance and support for municipal DEI work.**

Throughout history, government has played a role in creating and maintain racial inequity. While we have seen some progress in the past several decades, racial inequities continue to persist and have been sustained by systems that repeat patterns of exclusion. Many cities and towns in our region are doing important work to address DEI in their municipal workforce and in local policies and programs. This can help to implement policy changes at multiple levels and across multiple sectors and have a long-term impact on the lives of residents.

There are several state offices that are charged with overseeing DEI efforts, including, for example, within the Office of Diversity and Equal Opportunity at the Division of Developmental Services, and within the Office of Race, Equity, and Inclusion within the Department of Mental Health. The [Office of Access and Opportunity](#) works to increase diversity and inclusion within state government and partners with other leaders in state government to establish best practices. This office should be expanded to also provide technical assistance to cities and towns to help them create DEI plans and/or hire a DEI officer at the local or regional level.

An expansion of the role and purview of the Office of Access and Opportunity would help to better streamline DEI training that cities and towns provide to their employees. Local and state government staff should undergo implicit bias training alongside the traditional ethics training that state and local employees already take.

Another possible role for an expanded Office of Access and Opportunity would be to provide additional support for interpretation services at the local level. Local DEI staff do not have the capacity to provide interpretation services and are often left scrambling to provide translation at public meetings or in public documents. There is currently legislation pending on Beacon Hill that would mandate, standardize, and enforce language requirements for state-funded programs, by requiring agencies to translate websites and documents and provide oral interpretation services into non-English languages.²⁰ Should this legislation pass, it would be an important step towards ensuring equitable access to services for non-English-speaking residents, and it could be implemented within the Office of Access and Opportunity.

²⁰ <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/192/H3199>