

Warrant Article 13

Create a new Article 3.12A of the Town’s General By-Laws to establish an Office of Housing Stability

Recommendation:

The Human Services Subcommittee recommends **favorable action on the Subcommittee's motion to refer** WA 13 to a Select Board Committee for further study and to report back to the Fall 2023 Town Meeting by a vote of 2-0-2. A vote recommending favorable action on the petitioners' article failed by a vote of 1-3-0.

Executive Summary:	This Article asks Town Meeting to create a new Office of Housing Stability in the Health Department or within some other town department at the discretion of the Town Administrator.
Voting Yes will...	<p>On the Petitioner’s Motion:</p> <p>It would create the Office as described in the Article but not provide any funding to hire anyone to carry out its mission.</p> <p>On the Motion to Refer recommended by the Human Services subcommittee:</p> <p>Allow a committee to study what the Town is already doing, what more needs to be done, find money (including grant money) to fund the initiative, bring together Town Departments and find ways to coordinate a Townwide effort, research State programs that could help and report back to the Fall 2023 Town Meeting.</p>
Voting No will...	Result in the Town continuing to do some aspects of what the petitioners are asking for piecemeal (for example, there are some programs currently running through the Senior Center and in other departments).
Financial impact [if any]	Potentially a large financial impact. If the new office is created, a minimum of 1-2 FTEs would probably be required.
Legal implications [if any]	Unlikely.

Hearing Recording:

https://brooklinema.zoomgov.com/rec/share/nxdgTf-Pi7rp62at5oHVPOhmLBBdv85AzEL_az7bUDgjALj0FZKN6nEI_QfUboFk.Oghb4VGJ7HC0hv2w

Public Hearing:

The Human Services Subcommittee held a virtual public hearing on Warrant Article 13 via Zoom on March 27, 2023. Attending were Susan Granoff (Chair), subcommittee members Katherine Florio, David-Marc Goldstein, Markus Penzel; petitioners Chi Chi Wu, John Card; Sigalle Reiss, Director of Public Health & Human Services; Sean Lynn Jones-CTOS, TMM-1; Regina Frawley TMM-16; John Kleschinsky, Assistant Director of Public Health Policy; Bonnie Bastien TMM-4.

Introduction:

Article 13 creates a new By-Law which would establish an Office of Housing Stability within the Department of Public Health, or possibly in another department at the discretion of the Town Administrator.

The lead petitioner stated that the mission would be to assist residents at risk of displacement, prevent homelessness, develop initiatives to combat displacement, serve as a resource at a clearing house, and identify best practices for combating displacement. The essential services of this office could include: providing advice and information referrals, accessing financial assistance, advocacy with landlords to resolve housing disputes, housing searches, and individual outreach.

It would also potentially serve smaller landlords with problem tenants. The petitioners estimate the numbers of employees in this office could range from one to several FTEs.

Discussion:

At the subcommittee hearing, the petitioners discussed the serious rental crisis that exists in Massachusetts. Rental increases throughout the region have risen dramatically, and the Boston region competes with San Francisco for the second most expensive city in the country for renters (New York City is number one).

The petitioners stated that the problem is less a matter of eviction than voluntary displacement, where people have to move out of Brookline to a less expensive community due to increased housing costs.

Three towns have recently created a Housing Office (Boston created theirs in 2016). Malden just created one, Revere created theirs in 2020, and Somerville, where 70% of their population are renters, started theirs in 2018. Somerville has funded 9 staff, with some of the funding coming from grants.

In 2021, 16% of renters nationwide were not caught up with rent payments (from the Center for Budget Priorities-CBPP.org), and about 45% are cost burdened to some extent, with 21.8 % moderately cost burdened (30-50% of income on rent), and 22.7% severely cost burdened (more than 50% of income used for rent). In Brookline's case, while 52% of our population are renters, that number includes many luxury rental units along with units rented by students. The chart below, provided by the petitioners, shows the number of renters and homeowners who are cost burdened in terms of housing as averaged during the years 2015-19.

Cost-Burdened Renters in Brookline

Table 2.4. Incidence of Housing Cost Burden

Income by Cost Burden	Renters				Homeowners		
	Total	Total	Cost Burdened	Severely Burdened	Total	Cost Burdened	Severely Burdened
Income <= 30%	3,960	3,190	63.5%	55.2%	770	81.8%	71.4%
Income >30% to <=50%	2,180	1,360	83.1%	68.4%	820	77.4%	28.0%
Income >50% to <=80%	2,505	1,615	80.2%	18.6%	890	53.9%	28.7%
Income >80% to <=100%	1,560	800	46.3%	1.3%	760	46.1%	11.8%
Household Income >100%	14,225	5,515	9.3%	0.2%	8,710	12.8%	2.2%
Total	24,435	12,485	42.7%	24.1%	11,950	26.9%	11.0%

Source: HUD, Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy Data (from ACS 2015-2019).

While the subcommittee was in favor of the concept, there were a number of issues raised by subcommittee members, including a lack of knowledge in regards to what is already being done by the Town, what holes there are in meeting those needs, how many full-time positions would be needed, where the funding for them would come from, in which department the Office should be placed, and does the Town Administrator (named in the By-Law) or the Select Board have the authority to decide where this Office would be placed.

It's clear that no Town Department currently has the resources to take this on, especially if it means bringing on one or more full time staff. Even if the override passes, it would not provide any FY24 funding for an Office of Housing Stability. It was unclear as to how many full time employees (and the additional benefits costs) would have to be added to the Town payroll to deal with the ambitious workload.

A member of the public pointed out that the Town has a Housing Trust Fund, and perhaps money from that could be used to help fund the activities needed. There may also be grant money available, but the subcommittee felt that the Town needs to identify both costs and potential funding before putting this By-Law into effect. The Health Department is currently examining their department's structure, they have no resources available to commit to this By-Law, we have other unfunded mandates in our Town and adding a new one and figuring out how to and find sources of funding later made no fiscal sense.

The subcommittee agrees that we need to do more to help residents who are at risk of eviction and displacement from their Brookline residences to remain in Brookline, and agree with the petitioner's aspirations. However, the subcommittee believes it's bad policy in general to vote in a By-Law that has not been fully fleshed out, and where there could be unintended consequences.

The subcommittee believes it is better to first figure out how much is already being done, where are the gaps, the best way to bring all the Town's resources together to the extent possible, and coordinate a comprehensive approach.

A Select Board committee would bring together departments such as Veterans, Council on Aging, BHA, HAB, the Brookline Community Foundation, the Brookline Mental Health Center, as well as others, to discuss what they're currently doing, discuss regional initiatives, research grant funding, available State resources (and website), etc. And a Select Board committee would also provide staff support for this study committee.

The petitioners indicated that they plan to bring this to the floor of Town Meeting first and fund it later, because people need help now. However, it must be pointed out that because there are no funds currently available to staff this ambitious plan, and whether Town Meeting passes it now, or waits until November Town Meeting to allow a few months for people to meet, coordinate, gather information, work out the details and then create something, there won't be help given out through this article until these details are worked out and funding is found.

Recommendation:

The subcommittee vote to recommend **FAVORABLE ACTION** on the Warrant Article failed by a vote of 1-3-0.

Yes-Penzel

No-Granoff, Goldstein, Florio

The subcommittee recommends **FAVORABLE ACTION** on the following Motion to Refer by a vote of 2-0-2.

Yes- Granoff, Goldstein

No- - -

Abstain- Penzel, Florio

Moved: that the subject matter of Article 13 be referred to a Select Board Committee which will coordinate with different town departments and find out what they're already doing, what more needs to be done, explore ways to get it all into one centralized location, if possible, along with finding a funding mechanism, and to report back to the Fall 2023 Town Meeting.