



# Dynamic and Representative Government

Government is vital to the success of our region. From setting the rules for development and providing affordable housing to fixing our roads, government shapes so many facets of our region. We have a long history of local control, with 351 municipal governments determining everything from land use to local budgets. This form of government has many advantages: resident-volunteers often serve as the legislative branch with Town Meetings, people have reasonably good access to their elected representatives, and accountability can be achieved through the ballot box.

But this “close-to-the-people” structure has some serious limitations. Local governments are not equipped to easily solve regional challenges from climate to housing and economic development that function on greater geographic scales. Local priorities can actually run counter to regional priorities, such as a desire for no new residential construction. Tight municipal budgets can make it difficult to make the investments and hire the staff needed to carry out the goals of a community.

## Vision

- ▶ **We imagine** a future where all governments are forward-looking, collaborative, able to adapt to changing circumstances, and inclusive. Creative partnerships are formed across governments and with non-governmental institutions to address our region’s challenges. Local, regional, and state governments make the investments needed and are able to manage our vital assets such as transportation, water and wastewater, and our parks. And governments provide a meaningful opportunity for their residents to participate and share in decision-making.
- ▶ **In 2050**, local governments work together, often across municipal lines. Elected leadership and staff reflect the region’s diversity. Everyone can participate in government and take part in decision-making. Municipalities and regional entities are structured, sized, and have the capacity to address significant land use, mobility, and sustainability challenges effectively. They have the financial resources to address both our regional and local needs and the flexibility to raise the funds they need to accomplish that goal. Governments and health, educational, social service, and commercial enterprises act as partners, systematically supporting the region’s residents. The Commonwealth provides the guidance, incentives, and support needed to achieve the goals of the region and its local communities. All levels of government work together to make Metro Boston one of the healthiest, best educated, most equitable and resilient regions in the world.

## How We Got Here

Some of our local governments were established over 400 years ago, setting the fundamental organization and governance models that continue to the current day. Town meetings serve as the legislative body in most towns, conducting the business of government through volunteer-residents. There is great variability in the size of our local governments, ranging from cities with 1,000's of employees to our small towns that have few professional staff and rely on volunteers to provide many of the functions of local decision-making. As a home rule state, Massachusetts municipalities have the powers that in other states fall to counties or regional authorities, such as planning, zoning, public health, and revenue generation. As a result, we have 351 cities and towns that asked to provide a host of services and functions, except where the state retains jurisdiction. Local governments are primarily answerable to the residents and employers that call that community home, relegating regional concerns to a secondary priority.

At the same time that our municipalities enjoy wide latitude in governing what happens within their borders, the State sets the rules within which they must operate and severely constrain their ability to raise additional revenues unless approved through state legislative action. The state provides local aid supports to help fund general operations, schools, and roads. These payments occur on an annual basis and steer greater amounts to fiscally challenged, less wealthy cities. Because local aid is entirely dependent on state revenues, it can be an unpredictable source of funding that in hard economic times gets cut back. Many of our revenue generating mechanisms are regressive in nature, asking lower-income residents and workers to pay a higher percentage in local and state taxes.

Greater Boston is home to some of the world's best universities and medical institutions, yet they are governed by boards that have little representation by municipal leadership. Municipalities have limited ability to compel these types of institutions to do more in terms of financial or programmatic contributions to improve the host communities, other than to accept voluntary PILOT payments and community service offerings.

Representation and participation in government has never been equal by race, gender, or economic status. From our earliest days, BIPOC and women were intentionally excluded from civic life and voting, denied the rights and privileges enjoyed by White men. While legal barriers to participation have been overthrown, our elected and appointed leadership in state, regional, and local governments continue to not reflect the diversity of our region. To be sure, diversity amongst our elected officials has grown over time. Yet barriers such as money in politics, the advantages of incumbency, distrust of government, and continuing racism, sexism, and economic insecurity continue to prove high bars to greater diversity in leadership positions.

## Challenges

Public decision making is spread across various level of government. In a region with limited county governments, we rely heavily on the state government and on regional agencies such as the MBTA and MWRA for critical resources, programs, and resources. As these entities are further removed from the local level, representation and accountability to local needs are not represented. During the

pandemic, local leaders collaborated closer than ever before to plan for pandemic response and reopening. Despite this unprecedented collaboration, many decisions were made at the state level that had to balance statewide needs, instead of a more tailored approach to regional circumstances.

In addition to greater representation and collaboration across levels of governmental jurisdictions, creative problem solving, and partnerships are needed amongst municipalities and with private and non-profit sector partners. Having the staff, capacity, and ability to convene and work across sectors is a major challenge, often competing with usual job duties and local time-sensitive issues. In order to improve the outcomes sought by governments, access to reliable data is another challenge. Data collection, standards, and ownership vary widely depending on the source, making it difficult to fully understand problems or track progress towards solutions.

Municipalities are funded through a variety of sources, but the largest and growing source for most is the property tax ([link to Municipal Finance Assessment](#)). Some communities rely on property taxes for nearly 95% of their revenues. Others have large commercial and industrial tax bases, while others rely on annual appropriations of state aid in large measures. Despite the pandemic, most municipal budgets are looking solid in the short term due to federal stimulus and less dire economic impacts than early estimates contemplated. Despite the generally rosy short-term forecasts, longer-term threats and unmet investment needs are likely ahead. Negative impacts from climate change, an uncertain commercial property market, and unpredictable levels of federal support, all point to a need for a greater ability to raise sufficient revenue using more equitable and predictable mechanisms to meet our long-term needs.

Proposition 2.5 restricts the growth in annual property tax levy and most of our municipalities depend increasingly on property taxes to fund their operations. This dependence on property taxes fuels some of the glaring disparities in school district quality and resistance to multifamily and affordable housing development. At the same time of constrained options for increasing revenues, fixed costs such as medical, retirement, and infrastructure maintenance eat up an increasing share of local spending. Local governments are severely restrained in their ability to raise new revenues, despite growing need. The state legislature and governor must authorize any new tax revenue generation techniques, limiting the ability of local governments from finding their own solutions.

Another challenge is increasing the representation and participation of all our residents into the processes of governance. Serving in government can be a thankless job. Whether serving as an elected, appointed, or volunteer official, long and late meetings, low- or – no pay, and increasing vitriol in civic life and over social media, can make serving a difficult proposition. Our research has found that municipal employees are older and Whiter than regional averages. As the Baby Boomers begin retiring over the next decade, attracting new employees and volunteers, especially BIPOC candidates will be critical to building the capacity and effectiveness of the next generation of governments.

## **Recommendations**

Our recommendations for strengthening our local and regional governments include greater collaboration and representation across governments and with institutional and private sector partners. We would like to see more flexibility and joint decision-making to raise funds from regional sources to address regional challenges. And by making government more accessible and a more rewarding experience, new generations of workers and volunteers of all backgrounds will be more likely to work for and participate in their municipal and regional governments.