

# The Boston Globe

## Fix the Boston Redevelopment Authority, don't break it

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The Boston Redevelopment Authority was a punching bag during the recent mayoral elections, and Boston's next mayor, Martin Walsh, has promised to overhaul it. That's only reasonable, for the BRA has its flaws. It's been accused of secrecy and favoritism. It's also been seen as the [mayor's profiteering pawn](#), which makes development either too easy or too hard, depending [on who's doing the complaining](#).

But not every reform will further what should be the authority's ultimate objective: delivering the new space that Boston needs to grow and promote affordability. Ceding some mayoral power over the BRA to the City Council and neighborhood advocates may be good politics, but only the mayor has the broad perspective required to balance citywide needs against neighborhood sentiment. (A disclosure: The current BRA has repeatedly accepted summer fellows from the Rappaport Institute, which I direct, and has also facilitated my attempts to gather research data.)

What's crucial is avoiding changes that [could easily make things worse](#). Here's my list of what the new mayor should and shouldn't do:

**Above all, don't make it harder to build.** The BRA's support for new building enabled the city's population to grow by 4.8 percent between 2000 and 2010, outpacing the Commonwealth for the first decade since the 1870s. Yet construction hasn't kept up with demand, so prices are still too high. If Boston is going to provide space for middle-income people and new businesses, then we need to green-light more projects, not fewer.

**Don't imitate other cities blindly.** A common call is to split the BRA's zoning powers from its development functions, as other cities have. That could easily create an independent regulatory body that tries to look active by enacting more barriers to building.

**Don't give neighborhoods a veto.** Local abutters almost always dislike the inconveniences of new construction, while the benefits of growth flow to the city as a whole. One primary benefit of new building — lower property costs — will even seem bad to neighboring property owners. The interests of the neighborhood deserve a voice, but not a veto. Just as state pro-housing policies like Chapters 40B, 40R, and 40S push individual towns to think beyond their parochial interests, mayoral control can help the BRA put the city first.

**Don't create an agency that has too many objectives.** Walsh [has proposed bundling the BRA into a super-agency](#) “which will oversee all of the economic development functions of the city,” but too much breadth dilutes focus.

**Don't make a fetish of agency independence.** Independence is only desirable if mayoral influence has more downsides — say, favoritism for particular contractors — than upsides — for instance, leadership by a citywide official who is directly accountable to voters. With development firmly under the control of the powerful Richard M. Daley, Chicago built big-time. The city remained far more affordable than communities that rested power in unelected panels or bureaucracies.

**Do increase independent oversight.** An independent watchdog committee that regularly and publicly evaluates the agency, without actually making decisions, would promote accountability without barring new building.

**Do set up clear rules.** New builders face a murky path. What's needed is a clear system of fees and timetables. Ideally, builders would face an impact fee that is split between the neighborhood and the city as a whole — but that also decreases the longer it takes to get a project approved. This would essentially enable developers to pay for a speedy decision, and would make the costs of delay more obvious to everyone.

Walsh has already set out some sensible objectives — like revitalizing the downtown core while still paying attention to the neighborhoods, addressing stalled development projects, and establishing a mayor's economic development council.

Yet the city leadership's most powerful tool for shaping economic development is how it steers and oversees construction. As Walsh seeks to reform the BRA, he should be careful to make sure these reforms make Boston more dynamic and equitable — not less.

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