

Feds Extend Legal Status For Haitian Immigrants

By Sam Drysdale

State House News Service

Federal immigration officials on Friday extended a legal status for Haitian immigrants – who make up the majority of the population of new arrivals into Massachusetts – for an additional 18 months.

Temporary Protected Status is an immigration classification granted by the Department of Homeland Security to foreign-born individuals who are unable to return home safely due to conditions like ongoing armed conflict or environmental disaster.

“Several regions in Haiti continue to face violence or insecurity, and many have limited access to safety, health care, food, and water. Haiti is particularly prone to flooding and mudslides, and often experiences significant damage due to storms, flooding, and earthquakes. These overlapping humanitarian challenges have resulted in ongoing urgent humanitarian needs,” says a release from Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas.

Haiti’s TPS designation was set to expire on Aug. 4, before Mayorkas moved last week to extend it until Feb. 3, 2026.

Under Temporary Protected Status, immigrants are eligible for work authorization and cannot be deported from the United States on the basis of their immigration status.

Around 95 percent of immigrants coming into Massachusetts in the last year are from Haiti, according to Massachusetts Law Reform Institute senior policy advocate Pat Baker.

Massachusetts has experienced an influx of new arrivals over the past year and a half, many of whom have sought shelter in the state's emergency family housing system. There are approximately 8,500 Haitians in Massachusetts's shelter system, according to the MLRI.

The shelters have filled rapidly since 2022, and Gov. Maura Healey put a capacity limit in place at 7,500 families last fall, after which a waiting list has steadily grown.

Healey has recently ratcheted up messaging to try to dissuade immigrants from coming to Massachusetts, deploying her emergency assistance director, Gen. Scott Rice, to the southern border to spread the message that the Bay State's shelters are full, and through distributing fliers warning that "Massachusetts is very cold in the winter and very hot in the summer," and that people could experience "difficulty finding legal help for immigration needs."

Asked Monday about the expansion of TPS legal status for Haitian immigrants, Lt. Gov. Kim Driscoll said, "We continue to obviously press on the federal government for help and assistance. And we have a large Haitian population here, so having that Temporary Protected Status for so many family members, extended family members, will be something that I think our Haitian American community is fully supportive of."

TPS-classified immigrants are in the country legally through the status granted to them by the Department of Homeland Security. Under Massachusetts' "right to shelter" law, emergency shelter has traditionally been granted to any family in the state legally, regardless of their citizenship status.

"We are going to continue to spread the word that Massachusetts is out of shelter space and that, if families are traveling to Massachusetts, they need to be prepared with a plan for housing that does not include Logan Airport or our Emergency Assistance shelters," Rice said last week.

Asked for comment Monday on the extension of the immigration status in light of Healey's messaging that Massachusetts shelters are closed, the governor's spokesperson referred to Driscoll's comments.

When former President Donald Trump moved in 2017 to temporarily end Haitians' TPS, Healey – then attorney general – offered strong remarks against removing the protections.

“In the face of yet another cruel, reckless, illegal, unconstitutional and un-American act by our president you stand strong in the faith and in the belief that it is in and through our immigrant communities that this country is great and will be only greater,” she said at the time. “We just saw the Trump administration double-down on that reckless record that he has developed by announcing that it is going to phase out temporary protected status for Haitians and Nicaraguans. I want you to know you have the full commitment of my office and me in this fight ahead.”

The redesignation of Haiti for TPS allows an estimated additional 309,000 Haitian nationals to file an application for the legal status if they are otherwise eligible and have continued residence in the United States on or before June 3. Haitians who were not residing in the United States on or before June 3 are not eligible for the protection, and “will face removal to Haiti if they do not establish a legal basis to stay,” according to Mayorkas's office.

Current TPS holders will have 60 days to re-register, starting on July 1 and ending August 29, and individuals eligible to submit first time TPS applications can do so through February 2026, according to MLRI.

There are approximately 4,700 Haitians with TPS currently residing in Massachusetts, according to Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley's office. Pressley leads the House Haiti Caucus, and has led calls – joined by Sens. Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey

– for President Joe Biden’s administration to extend the TPS designation for Haitian nationals over the past year.

“The humanitarian crisis in Haiti demands a humanitarian response that will help save lives, and extending and redesignating Haiti for TPS is a necessary step that will do just that,” says a statement from Pressley. “I’m grateful to Secretary Mayorkas and the Biden-Harris Administration for heeding our calls and being responsive to our broad coalition of policymakers, immigrant justice advocates, and impacted Haitian families in the Massachusetts 7th and across the country. While we continue our push for federal action to halt to deportations, end arms trafficking to Haiti, deliver urgent humanitarian relief, and more, I am grateful our Haitian siblings can breathe a little easier tonight.”

In a letter to the Biden administration in May, MLRI pleaded with officials to reinstate TPS designation, saying it would keep Haitians safe from deportation to “one of the most dangerous countries in the world at a time when it sees record levels of deadly violence.

“As you know, conditions have deteriorated so much that Haiti has grown significantly more dangerous than it was when they fled,” the letter says. “Given that Haiti has no formal government, returned families would be vulnerable to gangs who run 80% of Port au Prince and are known for using systemic rape, brutal murder, and kidnapping to control the terrorized and starving Haitians who were unable to flee the country. Just flying into Haiti would be nearly impossible as gangs have closed airports, along with schools, hospitals, and municipal facilities... These are the very sorts of conditions that TPS, a humanitarian safety valve, is supposed to address.”

New Bedford Honors Iconic Musical Group Tavares With Tavares Brothers' Way

Tavares played sold-out shows all over the world, performed for millions on television, and won the highest award in the music industry.

But, from concerts at Buttonwood Park and the Zeiterion, to supporting local causes and shining a light on Cape Verdean culture, the Tavares Brothers – Arthur “Pooch” Tavares, Ralph Tavares, Antone “Chubby” Tavares, Feliciano “Butch” Tavares, Victor Tavares, and Perry “Tiny” Tavares – never forgot their hometown of New Bedford.

The City honored the iconic musical group Saturday morning when Mayor Jon Mitchell joined elected officials and members of the Tavares family to unveil Tavares Brothers' Way, the new name of a street in a historic Cape Verdean neighborhood.

“The Tavares Brothers gained worldwide fame through their timeless hit songs, but we in New Bedford know them for their many contributions to the city, especially its Cape Verdean community,” Mayor Mitchell said. “We’re proud to honor their enduring achievements with the renaming of a street in the country’s first Cape Verdean neighborhood.”

“The Tavares Brothers and the entire Tavares family have made New Bedford very proud,” City Council President Naomi Carney said. “They climbed to the very top of the mountain in the music business, winning a Grammy and touring the world with the Jackson 5 and others, yet their heart always remained in

New Bedford with their Cape Verdean community.”

Tavares Brothers’ Way runs from John F. Kennedy Boulevard (Route 18) to S. 2nd Street just south of Downtown, renaming a portion of the former Griffin Street. Mayor Mitchell joined Chubby, Victor, Tiny, and a huge crowd of family, friends, fans and supporters Saturday to unveil the new sign that officially dedicates the street in their honor.

Tavares won a Grammy award in 1978 for their performance of “More Than a Woman” from the soundtrack to Saturday Night Fever. They placed eight singles on the Billboard Top 40, and 12 on the R&B Top 10 chart while touring with some of the biggest names in the music business, including the Jackson 5, KC and The Sunshine Band, the Bee Gees, and Marvin Gaye. They received the Lifetime Achievement Award from The National R&B Music Society in 2013 and were inducted into the Cape Verdean Music Hall of Fame in 2006. They performed two shows at the Zeiterion last year to benefit the Cape Verdean Recognition Committee.

Their music also stands the test of time as their songs “Heaven Must be Missing an Angel” and “More than a Woman” have been played more than 112 million times on Spotify.

Biden Debate Performance Rattles Massachusetts Democrats

By Sam Drysdale
State House News Service

Sen. Jason Lewis of Winchester called for President Joe Biden to step down as the Democrats' nominee for president in the race against former President Donald Trump this fall, following a nationally televised debate between the candidates Thursday night.

"President Biden has contributed a lifetime of distinguished public service to our nation. In 2020, he rose to the challenge of defeating Donald Trump and restoring dignity and honor to the presidency," Lewis posted on X Friday morning. "Under his leadership, our country has made tremendous progress. But now it is time for him to step aside."

Lewis called for an open Democratic Party convention this summer to select a presidential nominee to run in November. "Our party has many younger leaders who are experienced, talented, and ready to step up and defeat Donald Trump and MAGA Republicans," he wrote.

In the hours since the debate ended, Democrats of all levels have dodged questions about the president's performance. Several national outlets have reported that some in the party are considering alternatives to Biden.

Gov. Maura Healey – a staunch Biden supporter who has been campaigning for the president – told reporters Friday afternoon that the president's debate performance was "tough to watch."

"Joe Biden had a bad debate performance – it was tough to watch," Healey said at the State House on Friday, according to a video posted to X by Politico reporter Kelly Garrity.

"I also saw Donald Trump stand up there and lie. I saw he bragged about overturning Roe, once again, and taking away care for women. I also heard him talk about his refusal to talk about the results of the last election, and refusal to commit to accepting results of the next election and refusal to denounce the insurrection. So, you know, it's more of the

same from Donald Trump, and the stakes couldn't be higher," Healey said.

When a reporter asked if the Democratic party needs to rethink Biden's nomination, Healey did not respond as she was walking away.

"I know I'm not a young man, to state the obvious," Biden said in a speech Friday afternoon. "Folks, I don't walk as easy as I used to. I don't speak as smoothly as I used to. I don't debate as well as I used to. But I know what I do know: I know how to tell the truth, I know right from wrong, and I know how to do this job."

Rep. Mike Connolly also took to social media to air concerns about Biden's debate showing and his prospects in a general election rematch against Trump.

"There is no way to defend President Biden's atrocious performance last night. We have to figure out a way to stop Trump from winning the election," he wrote on X.

Massachusetts Public Health Awards \$8.3 Million for 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline Network

The Department of Public Health (DPH) today announced that \$8.3 million in state and federal grant funding will be awarded to five community organizations to support the continuation of services for the 988 Suicide and Crisis

Lifeline Network. The funds will provide infrastructure, operational capacity, and staffing to these organizations so they can offer emotional support, and de-escalation to those who call the 988 Lifeline, seeking someone who will listen, understand, and be present.

“The 988 Lifeline is critical to ensuring that Massachusetts residents can access the care that they need how and when they need it, whether that’s via call or text,” said Governor Maura Healey. “We know how important it is to have these resources in place, and I am thrilled that continued funding means that these organizations will still be able to make 988 available to anyone who needs it.”

“Everyone in Massachusetts, no matter how they identify or what language they speak, should be able to access the resources that 988 provides,” said Lt. Gov Kim Driscoll. “We can prevent an unnecessary loss of life by continuing to provide this life-saving resource, which can mean everything for an individual who just needs help or some form of connection in a time of crisis or need.”

The five crisis call centers are being funded by DPH’s Suicide Prevention Program as part of the Massachusetts 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline Network. The 988 Lifeline Network is available 24/7, 365 days a year, via phone, chat, and text to provide free and confidential support to those experiencing emotional distress or thoughts of suicide. It features dedicated support for veterans, Spanish speakers, LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults, videophone and TTY services for the Deaf and hard of hearing, and translation services spanning more than 200 languages.

“We will do whatever we can to prevent the pain and tragedy of suicide,” said Secretary of Health and Human Services Kate Walsh. “It is imperative that we identify people who are suffering and provide comprehensive resources and support to those who find themselves at a loss and unable to cope. One

important and simple thing we can do is preserve the funding for this important lifeline that can help deescalate a crisis, connect someone to life-saving services, and offer hope.”

“When someone is struggling with feelings of despair, a caring and compassionate presence on the other end of the 988 Lifeline can be lifesaving,” said Public Health Commissioner Robbie Goldstein, MD, PhD. “Suicide prevention is a critical public health responsibility, and the 988 Lifeline is a resource that offers emotional support at some of the most vulnerable moments in a person’s life. Seeking help for mental health is a sign of strength, and we want all residents of the Commonwealth to know that they are not alone, even in the darkest of times.”

Suicidality, suicide attempts, and suicide deaths among Massachusetts residents are a significant and preventable public health issue. Data from the 2021 Massachusetts Violent Death Reporting System reported that there were 596 suicides in Massachusetts, a rate of 8.5 per 100,000, with 22 percent of suicides resulting from firearms. The Commonwealth seeks to reduce the incidence of suicidal ideation, behavior, and deaths in Massachusetts through compassionate crisis services. The 988 Lifeline is a core component of this strategy.

Funding for the five community organizations will begin July 1, 2024, and will continue for two years.

The Suicide Prevention Services crisis call center funding recipients are:

- Family Services of the Merrimack Valley
- Samaritans of Cape Cod and the Islands
- Samaritans, Inc, Boston
- Samaritans of Fall River and New Bedford, Inc. dba Samaritans Southcoast

· United Way of Tri-County, Framingham

This summer, DPH will launch a statewide public awareness campaign to promote the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and inform people throughout Massachusetts that they can access it by calling or texting 988. The campaign will run in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Haitian Creole and will include TV, radio, social and digital media, and out-of-home.

OPINION: “New Bedford mayor doesn’t want homeless encampments, but forcing sober homes to close!”

The following is an opinion sent to New Bedford Guide. It does not reflect the opinion of New Bedford Guide, nor is it an OP-ED. In fairness and objectivity, we share opinions from our readers whether we agree or disagree with their opinion.

Do you have a counter opinion to this opinion? Have an opinion about something else? Email us at info@newbedfordguide.com.

This opinion is a response to the City of New Bedford requiring lodging house licenses and upgrades to the sober homes throughout the city.

“I can tell you one thing: putting all these rules and regulations on sober homes is forcing recovering addicts back on the streets.

Where are we going to go!?! I can be a testimony on how my sober home 'Dawns New Day,' saved my life, held me accountable, and helped me find my faith and my way. Many other women at the homes can vouch for this. Thanks to the sober house I'm now a fully functioning member of society. Working full time, going to church, and saving up to be able to move into my own apartment. I have learned how to be of service to the community.

You may be attacking the sober homes but the ones who will suffer the most are going to be the people like me who are just trying to find my way back. You think you have a problem now, wait till we are forced back into the streets. All the public asked for is that addicts get help! How can we if we dont have safe places to go after detox? You can go to detox but detox doesn't help you get acclimated to the real world. You need time to be able to find a network and learn how to live clean.

And if you get help and you then leave detox to go back to the street that never ends well. I live in the grad house at 'Dawn's.' It's very spacious, we are a family. These are my sisters! We cook together, eat together, clean together, and support each other.

To some women this is the only family they have. I have fought hard to be here and earned my way. This is a home not a facility!

The mayor is doing more HARM than good. YOU DONT WANT ENCAMPENTS but are forcing sober homes to close! So what that is saying is you want more addicts and less recovery in our city. That's the message. The train is coming and its about to get worse, way worse... let's take the sprinklers out of the mayor's salary, since he 'cares' so much about us burning alive."-Jeanna DiSanti.

Massachusetts Emergency Assistance Director to migrants: “Our Shelters Are Full”

By Colin A. Young
State House News Service

Gov. Maura Healey sent her emergency assistance czar and others to the southern U.S. border this week to spread the message that Massachusetts shelters are full and can't continue to take in migrant families who cross the border.

State Emergency Assistance Director Scott Rice is leading a handful of Bay State officials on a trip to connect with U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Joint Task Force-North, non-governmental organizations and migrant families at some of the most common points of entry for families that later arrive in Massachusetts: San Antonio, McAllen, Hidalgo and Brownsville, all in Texas.

“This trip is an important opportunity to meet with families arriving in the U.S. and the organizations that work with them at the border to make sure they have accurate information about the lack of shelter space in Massachusetts,” Rice, a retired lieutenant general of the U.S. Air Force, said. “It is essential that we get the word out that our shelters are full so that families can plan accordingly to make sure they have a safe place to go.”

Healey's office said the state's delegation to the border would visit the San Antonio airport, Centro de Bienvenida/San

Antonio Migrant Resource Center and Shelter, Ursula Processing Facility in McAllen, Hidalgo Port of Entry, and Brownsville Migrant Welcome Center. In addition to Rice, the group includes the emergency assistance incident command deputy director, pre-shelter policy lead for incident command, executive director of the MA Office of Refugees and Immigrants, and strategy manager at the Division of Housing Stabilization.

For more than a year, the shelter system that Massachusetts is statutorily required to provide for homeless families has been deluged with an influx of migrant families that enter the U.S. at the southern border and make their way to Massachusetts, often because they are told of the state's right-to-shelter policy as well as services and benefits available to them. Healey declared a state of emergency last August and in the fall implemented a cap of 7,500 families in the state's system.

Healey and the Legislature agreed to a new law this spring to impose a limit on how long families can stay in state shelter, capping it at nine months. State guidance released this month said families who have been in state shelter for longer than nine months could begin receiving notices by early July that they have 90 days to leave and find other housing accommodations. The law allows the state to remove no more than 150 families per month, in addition to those that leave on their own accord.

In its announcement of the trip to Texas, Healey's office said that the number of families exiting the shelter system "has steadily increased each month, with more than 331 families leaving in May – the highest number in years."

Last month, MassGOP Chair Amy Carnevale sent a letter to Healey imploring the governor to push President Joe Biden to address "the most disastrous border crisis in United States history." Carnevale asked Healey to "leverage your

relationship with President Biden as a surrogate for his reelection campaign” to close the border until unauthorized crossings stop, reinstitute the “remain in Mexico” policy, request U.S. Coast Guard patrols of waters off Massachusetts, and more.

“Governor, you are correct when you stated that this stems from a “federal crisis of inaction.” Unfortunately, we are disappointed to see you follow suit with that level of inaction by continuing, like the Biden Administration, to succumb to political pandering and perpetuating this crisis,” the Republican Party chairwoman wrote. She added, “It’s imperative for our nation and the Commonwealth to address and resolve this immigration crisis, bringing the border under control. If President Biden ever plans to get serious about border security, then he needs more leaders in the Democratic Party like you to demand he do so.”

Accountants sound the alarm over high-income residents leaving Massachusetts

Michael P. Norton
State House News Service

Accountants continue to sound the alarm over high-income residents leaving Massachusetts, in part to avoid the new income surtax that even the CPAs acknowledge has led to a “surge” in state tax revenues.

In its new 2024 public policy and competitiveness report, the Massachusetts Society of Certified Public Accountants said

two-thirds of accounting professionals surveyed reported that at least one high-income client relocated out of Massachusetts in the last year.

Ninety percent of accounting professionals indicated high-income clients are considering leaving Massachusetts, the report said, and 64 percent of respondents indicated the 4 percent surtax on household income above \$1 million per year is a factor in relocation decisions.

The survey involved 128 CPAs who collectively represent 3,600 clients with annual taxable income of more than \$1 million.

“The top three states to which Massachusetts residents are moving or considering moving are New Hampshire, Florida and Texas,” the report said. “Fifty-three percent of accounting professionals say that their clients are considering moving across the border to New Hampshire, suggesting that the tax burden imposed by Massachusetts plays an important part in the decision to relocate – and refuting the claims that individuals are just relocating due to a desire for sunnier weather and more coastline.”

Massachusetts collected \$1.84 billion from the voter-approved surtax on the state’s highest earners through the first nine months of fiscal 2024, the Department of Revenue reported in May. Collections from the surtax appear on track to easily surpass \$2 billion per year, and Beacon Hill Democrats continue to advance big plans to invest the new revenue in public education and transportation.

Last month, the Raise Up Coalition, which successfully pushed for the tax change as a constitutional amendment, used news of the \$1.84 billion in collections to point to investments that it said are “making a real difference in the lives of people across Massachusetts.” Examples ranged from increased public college scholarships and free school meals to upgrades at the MBTA and road repair funding for cities and towns.

While collections are roughly aligning with revenue projections that date back to 2015, the Raise Up Coalition used last month's news to assert that those who claimed that multi-millionaires would flee Massachusetts rather than pay the new tax "are being proven wrong every day."

Evan Horowitz, executive director of the Center for State Policy Analysis at Tufts University, said some people are leaving Massachusetts due to the new tax, but said the revenue collections show that it's not a "tidal wave."

The tax is too new to gauge its impact on households that earn just more than \$1 million per year versus households with incomes well above that threshold. Horowitz said tax avoidance among high-income households is a "much bigger challenge" than the threat of households leaving Massachusetts for lower-tax states.

The surtax switched Massachusetts away from a flat income tax rate of 5 percent. Income over \$1 million is now taxed at an effective 9 percent, putting the rate in line with "more burdensome states" such as New York, New Jersey and Vermont, according to the report, which notes the surtax was indexed for inflation so the threshold for the 2024 tax year will be \$1,053,750.

In its report, the accountants group acknowledges "a short-term surge in revenues from the surtax," while contending that "the long-term uncertainty is concerning given the share of total state revenues derived from this group of residents."

While major tax policy changes do not appear to be a focus of top Democrats over the last six weeks of formal sessions, the CPA group is calling on the Legislature to pass three measures it says would make Massachusetts more competitive.

First, the society says Massachusetts should join 21 other states by decoupling from the federal limit on business interest expense to support companies that have already

invested in Massachusetts and to “ensure that businesses based in Massachusetts deduct more interest from borrowing, which results in more infrastructure investments in our backyard.”

A 2023 tax reform law increased the estate tax exemption to \$2 million and the CPA group recommends raising it further to \$5 million, and adjusting it for inflation. Neighboring states offer more generous exemptions, including New York (\$6.1 million), Vermont (\$5 million) and Connecticut, which is aligned with the federal threshold at \$12.92 million. New Jersey repealed its estate tax in 2018.

“Despite progress, we believe there remains room for improvement,” the report said. “With the tax reform package signed into law, Massachusetts has transitioned from possessing the lowest estate tax exemption to now ranking as the third lowest in the nation.”

CPAs also continue to call on Beacon Hill to eliminate or reform the “sting tax,” an entity-level tax imposed on larger S-corporations. The group says the tax was enacted in the 1980s to safeguard tax benefits for small businesses and level the playing field between large S-corporations and C-corporations, but now “negatively sets Massachusetts apart from other states in terms of its taxation.”

“The thresholds for net income triggering the additional excise tax (\$6 million and \$9 million) have been neither updated nor adjusted since its original enactment,” the group said. “Consequently, an increasing number of small businesses have been adversely affected.”

With the new income surtax, many small businesses and S-corporations find themselves in a position where shareholders are subject to a tax burden exceeding the 8 percent corporate tax rate, “which is in direct conflict with the original intent of the law,” the report said.

Massachusetts Delegation Pushing For 500% Increase In Shelter Aid

Colin A. Young
State House News Service

The entire Massachusetts delegation in Washington late last week got on board with a request for five times more money than what the federal government has already allocated to the Bay State to provide new arrivals in the state with shelter and humanitarian services.

In a letter to Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Deanne Criswell, the delegation wrote that Massachusetts is struggling, as the only state in the country with a legal requirement to shelter homeless families, to provide and pay for services for 7,377 families living in state shelters and an additional 800 families on a waiting list.

“With shelter facilities at capacity, families have been forced to sleep outdoors and in cars, in a state with below-freezing temperatures for months of the year. Some have turned to airport lobbies and hospital emergency rooms for makeshift shelter. The Commonwealth is now running out of shelter funding and faces a shortfall in its shelter budget for the upcoming fiscal year,” the delegation wrote.

Massachusetts applied for \$34.5 million in FEMA Shelter and Services Program (SSP) funding, and has been allocated almost \$7 million, the lawmakers said. The delegation said this year’s allotment is “more than triple the \$1.9 million the

Commonwealth received in 2023,” but “hardly makes a dent in the over \$900 million that the Commonwealth expects to spend on shelter in the upcoming fiscal year.”

The delegation members said they “recognize that the total pool of SSP funding is inadequate,” pointing out that Congress this year appropriated \$650 million for the program, down from \$800 million a year before and less than half of the \$1.4 billion President Joe Biden requested. The delegation said FEMA has already allocated \$275 million of the \$650 million to states, and will now award about \$341 million through a competitive process (keeping the remainder in reserve).

Beacon Hill leaders have seldom discussed the shelter crisis, which has been fueled by an influx of migrant families to Massachusetts over the last year, without calling on the federal government to reform immigration laws, provide additional funding and work permit flexibility for states housing migrants, or both.

South Coast Rail Start Delayed Until Spring 2025

By Chris Lisinski
State House News Service

The long-awaited MBTA commuter rail expansion to the South Coast will not open to passengers until next spring, nearly 18 months after the original opening date attached to the project.

After sharing the latest outlook with community members Thursday night, T officials announced Friday that they now

expect service to begin in spring 2025, a delay they said would allow “more resources and attention to make South Coast Rail reliable on the first day of service and beyond.”

The New Bedford Light reported that MBTA General Manager Phil told attendees at a Thursday meeting that he realized in the spring the timeline for South Coast Rail had been “slipping.” Eng earlier this year named Karen Antion as the new project manager, and MBTA officials said that move was “needed to ensure the success and safety of the project.”

It’s the latest delay for a project that has been postponed several times. In December 2022, while celebrating a project milestone, then-MBTA General Manager Steve Poftak said passengers could expect to begin riding the new rails by the end of 2023. By the fall of 2023, officials changed the timeline to summer 2024, and this spring, the T’s leadership suggested that goal might no longer be possible.

Debate about expanding commuter rail service to the South Coast stretches back decades.

Once complete, the \$1.1 billion project’s first phase will offer commuter rail service linking Boston to New Bedford, Fall River and other nearby communities. State officials say Taunton, Fall River and New Bedford are the only major cities within 50 miles of Boston that lack commuter rail access to the state’s capital.

T officials said four of the extension’s stations – Fall River, Freetown, Middleborough and Church Street – are complete, and two more in New Bedford and East Taunton will be finished this summer.

Test trains will begin running Monday at speeds of up to 79 miles per hour, and Eng urged locals to be careful near tracks. Between August and January, the T will also test anti-collision technology on the system.

The agency also announced a fare structure for the extension. All South Coast Rail stations will be in Zone 8, so passengers will owe \$12.25 for a one-way ticket or \$388 for a monthly pass.

Officials said the distance between Boston and the new stations suggests they should be placed in either Zone 8 or Zone 9.

Massachusetts House Outlines \$6.2 Billion Housing Plan

Sam Drysdale

State House News Service

House Democrats will seek a vote this week on a bill that combines \$6.2 billion in state borrowing and tax credits with policy reforms designed to unlock new housing production, including development of units on single-family lots.

With sky-high sale prices and rents suffocating residents, the House will try to shift the tide by pumping more money into existing housing programs and rolling out a few new strategies, but not the local-option transfer tax Gov. Maura Healey proposed.

The House Ways and Means Committee bulked up the five-year, \$4.1 billion bill Healey filed in October (H 4138), calling for \$2 billion to fix the state's aging public housing stock and \$1 billion to expand the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority's service area into more suburbs with the goal of spurring housing production.

Top Democrats sought to portray the proposal as a landmark – Housing Committee Co-chair Rep. James Arciero called it “the largest housing investment in state history” – and as merely one step toward untangling a thicket that for years has generated dire warnings.

Some estimates have suggested Massachusetts needs to generate 200,000 more units of housing to keep up with population growth and prevent workers from departing for other states.

“You don’t have the capacity to build all those units all at once anyway, so it’s ridiculous to think that you’re going to solve this with one bond issue. I think it’s the beginning of a process,” Mariano said Monday.

“We hear all the time about people not staying, college grads looking for more affordable housing, and I think that’s something we have to be aware of and we have to begin the process right away,” he added. “We can’t wait.”

The House plans to take up the redrafted bill (H 4707) on Wednesday.

Housing challenges were at the forefront of public concern at the outset of the 2023-2024 session, but lawmakers are only now about to embark on deliberations about concrete policy reforms, more than seven months after Healey filed her own proposal.

Healey has suggested her bill could lead to more than 40,000 new housing units, and House Democrats said Monday they’re unable to put an estimate on the number of new units Massachusetts could expect from the major funding commitment.

Much of the bond authorization in the bill would recapitalize existing programs, typically at higher levels.

Close to half of the House bill’s bottom line covers just two provisions. It would direct \$1 billion toward the MWRA

expansion efforts, and make \$2 billion – \$500 million more than Healey proposed – available for repairs, rehabilitation and modernization to the roughly 43,000 public housing units in Massachusetts.

Many of those homes are in a state of disrepair, and WBUR and ProPublica reported last year that about 2,300 units were vacant.

“We were unaware of the number until we got hit in the head with it, and it’s a real need,” Mariano said Monday. “Cities and towns have put off putting people in units because they can’t get them up into a livable standard.”

One-quarter of the public housing funding in the House bill would be reserved for preserving housing for residents who earn less than 30 percent of the area median income.

Another \$800 million in the bill would flow to the Affordable Housing Trust Fund, which works to create or preserve homes for families who earn about the median area income or less.

One idea House Democrats added to the mix would make \$150 million available to help cities and towns convert commercial properties into multifamily residences or mixed-use options. Project sponsors could also qualify for tax credits worth up to 10 percent of development costs.

House Ways and Means Committee Chair Aaron Michlewitz said that proposal would “tackl[e] two different issues at the same time” by helping to create a path forward for vacant commercial properties, which have become more common since the COVID-19 pandemic rewired work patterns.

The bill also embraces Healey’s proposal to allow for accessory dwelling units, or ADUs, by right in single-family zones across the state. Supporters say those homes offer a viable option for larger families who want to keep adult children or aging parents close by, and the Healey

administration previously estimated the reforms could lead to production of up to 10,000 ADUs in five years.

House Democrats did not, however, go along with one of the most controversial ideas in Healey's bill: allowing cities and towns to impose new taxes on pricey real estate transactions and steer the revenue toward housing.

Several communities, including Boston and those on Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, for years have sought state permission to roll out transfer fees, arguing that the policy change could drum up much-needed money for affordable housing. Boston Mayor Michelle Wu told lawmakers last year that if a 2 percent tax on the portion of any real estate sale over \$2 million were in place in Boston, it would have generated up to \$100 million from only 700 transactions out of more than 10,000 that took place.

Healey gave Wu and other supporters a jolt of optimism by backing a statewide local option in her housing bond bill. The measure drew opposition from real estate industry groups such as the Greater Boston Real Estate Board, who argued that it would increase prices.

Mariano hinted earlier this spring that he was at least open to the idea, telling business leaders that "we must explore all options that have the potential to make a real difference." But he said Monday that he found the measure "was not as universally appealing as I thought it might be" among representatives.

"It's so inequitable. You'd raise a ton of money in Nantucket and you'd raise next to nothing in Lawrence," Mariano said. "It's hard to have an effective housing policy that is going to spur development when there's that much of a difference."

A reporter asked what the harm would be in approving the measure as a local option, which would greenlight it only in communities that actively want to impose the higher fees.

“The harm is that you get a scattered policy that doesn’t help anyone. It only helps the folks with the money,” Mariano replied.

“Piecemealing it one by one by city and town is just not effective real housing policy, and it doesn’t solve the housing crisis that we’re in across the commonwealth,” Michlewitz added.

The Healey administration estimated that, if half of municipalities adopted the local option with a 1 percent tax and put revenue toward subsidizing housing at about \$350,000 per unit, it could add 3,210 affordable homes over five years.

Asked Monday if she felt the bill would be watered down without the transfer tax, Healey replied that she had not yet seen the House bill but was glad that it had been released.

Representatives rejected an earlier version of the idea in 2020. At the time, Cambridge Rep. Mike Connolly sought to add a local option real estate transfer fee to an economic development bill, but the House shot down the idea 29-130.

Virtually all of the major changes to Healey’s bill – one of the most impactful proposals of the two-year term – occurred in the final stage of review, the step controlled by Mariano’s top deputies.

The Housing Committee spent more than four months reviewing Healey’s proposal before advancing it without altering a single word, and the Bonding Committee also left the original bill intact. The House Ways and Means Committee, which unlike the other two comprises only representatives and no senators, then substantially raised the bill’s bottom line and spiked the transfer tax language.

Bond bills authorize capital spending but annual state borrowing amounts across a wide range of priority areas are limited by how much debt service the state can afford in its

annual budget.

Michlewitz said he wants to take advantage of the April 2023 rating upgrade Standard & Poor's Global Ratings awarded to Massachusetts.

"We're trying to take advantage of our most recent bond rating increase. Now's the time to go higher on that, to take advantage of it, as high as we can," he said.

[Alison Kuznitz and Sam Drysdale contributed reporting.]