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GREY COLLINS/ MARBLEHEAD CURRENT David Modica at the Marblehead, Mass., town meeting.

The Latest Hero of the 'Yimby' Movement Is a Man in a Hoodie

One wealthy Massachusetts town's housing plan won't add much housing, and a local called them out; 'Are we trying to do nothing?'

BY WILL PARKER

DAVID MODICA, headphones around his neck, hoodie sleeves scrunched up, took the mic at a Marblehead, Mass., meeting this week and asked the question facing every American town pushing back against new housing.

"Are we kinda bein' pricks?" His frankness about local housing opposition turned him into something of a hero for the "yes in my backyard," pro-development movement. And his disheveled look, Massachusetts brogue and salty language was instant meme fuel.

His doctored image has appeared in social-media posts depicting him in a Norman Rockwell painting and as the New England Patriots' head coach.

One X user posted a Massachusetts flag bearing his signature quote as the new state motto. Another post lauding Modica's comments generated more than three million views.

"This guy is peak New England in all of the best ways," wrote one X user. "If 'Good Will Hunting' taught us anything, it's that there's no coming back from losing an argument to someone with this accent," wrote another.

For more than a year, Modica's upscale Boston suburb has stalled on complying with a Massachusetts law requiring towns with transit access to allow more housing. The Boston area is among the nation's priciest, has a chronic housing shortage and is packed with small cities and towns that control their own zoning rules.

Recently, Marblehead settled on a plan that its voters could get behind: change the zoning codes at the Tedesco Country Club and golf course, where apartments could hypothetically be built, but likely won't be. The coastal town of about 20,000 people is filled mostly with single-family homes.

The plan's do-nothing nature was never so clearly articulated as when Modica approached the mic at a packed town meeting Monday.

"Tedesco, that's like a golf course, yeah?" Modica asked, addressing a planning board member who was moderating questions.

"Last time I drove by," the board member said.

“So they’re not gonna build any houses there, cause it’s a golf course,” Modica continued.

“So like, this is a way to comply with 3A without doing any of the 3A stuff?” Modica asked knowingly, referring to the state law. Some in the crowd of more than 1,000 people in a highschool gym chuckled and applauded.

The board member agreed: “We tried the other way and it was rejected.”

Modica declined an interview in a brief email, saying, “I think people have probably heard enough from me by now.” Residents at the meeting ultimately approved the controversial new plan by a wide margin.

For the so-called Yimby movement, or activists who support policies to make building easier, Modica became an instant star.

“He hit the nail on the head with this message and delivery,” said Jesse Kanson-Benanav, executive director of Abundant Housing Massachusetts, a Yimby group in the state. Pro-development activists have long criticized the way homeowners and elected officials try to block new housing, especially apartments, through zoning vagaries and legal complaints.

Yimby politics have become more prominent in high-cost coastal states such as California and Massachusetts. That has started to translate into policy changes, with both of those states passing laws to allow more housing in recent years.

But many local governments still resist. In California, where the state passed a law five years ago requiring local zoning changes, the Bay Area enclave of Woodside initially claimed that its entire town was a mountain lion habitat to evade the law. Huntington Beach sued all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which declined to hear its appeal earlier this year.

In Massachusetts, the state attorney general in January sued nine communities that she said had failed to comply with 3A, including Marblehead. Town officials didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday.

Situated on a peninsula northeast of Boston, Marblehead has median household income of more than \$180,000 a year and average home values of more than \$1 million. Those values have risen by more than 60% since 2018, according to Zillow. The state wants Marblehead to open up its zoning laws so the town could allow 897 new housing units, with a minimum of 15 units per acre. But under the just-approved plan, 780 of those units would have to come from the golf course. Voters had previously rejected a plan that would have changed the zoning of more of Marblehead’s residential neighborhoods, where developments might have been more likely to happen. Opponents to that plan planted yard signs warning of “overdevelopment” and “over 700 more cars.” At the Monday meeting, the planning-board member said the new Marblehead plan had preliminary approval from a state agency.

The Marblehead Independent, a local news outlet that interviewed Modica after the meeting, said he owns a small online business and at one time sought a political career. Modica said some Nimbys opposing development talk like they are “revolutionary soldiers fighting the good fight against the tyranny of townhouses.”

“Are we trying to do nothing?” Modica asked at Monday’s meeting. “ ’Cause it seems like we’re doing nothing.”

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