

When Towns Become Cities in Massachusetts

City Status in Massachusetts Is a Choice, Not a Number

Unlike most U.S. states, Massachusetts does not automatically grant city status based on population. Communities must vote to adopt a city charter, making municipal change a deeply political and cultural decision.

Town vs. City Governance

Towns	Cities
Open town meeting	Mayor / City council / Manager
Direct citizen voting	Representative democracy
Smaller administrative structure	Complex administrative systems
Strong local participation	Designed for larger populations

“The town meeting is to liberty what primary schools are to science; it brings it within the people’s reach.” — Alexis de Tocqueville

Key City Transitions

1848 – Worcester: Industrial and transportation hub
1881 – Brockton: Shoe manufacturing boom
1888 – Quincy: Railroads and Boston expansion
2018 – Framingham: Modern population pressures

“Institutions must advance and keep pace with the times, or they soon become useless.” — John F. Kennedy

Exceptions and Ongoing Debates

Brookline remains one of the largest towns in Massachusetts, choosing direct democracy over city governance. Shrewsbury continues to study whether a city charter would better serve its growing population.

“Local government is the foundation of a free society.” — John Adams

Sources

de Tocqueville, A. *Democracy in America* (1835).
Massachusetts Municipal Association – Municipal Charters.
City of Framingham, Brockton, Quincy, and Worcester historical records.