



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board
From: Community Development Department (CDD) Staff
Date: November 10, 2020
Re: **MXD Amendments Zoning Petition**

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Overview

Petitioner: Cambridge Redevelopment Authority (“CRA”)

Petition: To amend Article 14.000 – Mixed Use Development District: Kendall Center (“MXD”) to enable up to 800,000 square feet of new gross floor area (GFA) comprised of office/lab uses in conjunction with the construction of a substation by Eversource.

Context: The MXD district is part of a designated Urban Renewal Area overseen by the CRA and subject to the Kendall Square Urban Renewal Plan (“KSURP”). The KSURP and MXD were established circa 1977 and most recently amended in 2015 pursuant to the City’s Kendall Square (“K2”) plan.

Summary: This proposal is part of a tentative multi-party agreement facilitated by the City of Cambridge ([announced to the City Council on March 2, 2020](#)) to find an alternative to the site currently controlled by Eversource at 135 Fulkerson Street for a planned electrical transformer substation. This zoning amendment would facilitate the construction of the substation on the current site of the Kendall Square Blue Garage, owned by Boston Properties. If this alternative location is pursued, Alexandria Real Estate Equities has committed that it would acquire the 135 Fulkerson Street site at a cost of up to \$12,292,000 and convey that land to the City for public use.

Report: This memo will provide background into the area’s planning and development history, summarize key provisions of the Petition in the context of the City’s past and ongoing planning efforts, and suggest issues for the Planning Board to consider in its review of this Petition.

Planning and Zoning Background

Urban Renewal

Prior to the 1960s, this area of Cambridge was largely industrial in use. In the 1960s, fourteen (14) acres of land in Kendall Square bounded by Binney Street to the north, Grand Junction Railroad to the west, Main Street to the south, and Third Street to the east were consolidated into the Kendall Square Urban Renewal Plan (KSURP) area. Part of the area was designated for Federal government use, originally intended to be a NASA research center but later used by the Department of Transportation (now the Volpe Center). The remainder of the area was designated for private development and was rezoned as the Mixed Use Development (MXD) District in 1977. This initial rezoning authorized up to 2.7 million square feet of new development in the district, comprised of commercial, lab, and hotel uses that were developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s as research-based commercial uses began to grow in Kendall Square.

Growth Policy and Area Planning

In 1993, the City adopted a citywide growth policy that adjusted some of the urban renewal-era planning goals. The new policy placed a greater emphasis on mixed-use development integrating housing with commercial space, limiting auto traffic growth while encouraging walking, bicycling, and public transit, and a more contextual and urban approach to built form in contrast to suburban development patterns. This general policy led to several specific area planning studies and rezoning processes, including a citywide rezoning in the early 2000s that placed limitations on new commercial development, promoted housing, and set in place a more holistic review process for transportation impacts and urban design of large projects.

In 2001, the City released the [Eastern Cambridge Planning Study \(ECaPS\)](#), which focused on an urban mixed-use planning approach to Kendall Square and nearby areas, and identified a series of goals for development including the following:

- Supporting strong urban design and active street edges;
- Enhancing and expanding Kendall's open space network;
- Encouraging transit-oriented development that supports multimodal transportation options and infrastructure;
- Promoting development of new housing aimed at all income levels and sizes, with opportunities for homeownership.

One outcome of this planning effort was an amendment to the MXD District to permit an additional 200,000 square feet of residential development, which was ultimately completed in 2019 at 88 Ames Street.

K2 and Recent Area Rezoning

Later, following the Great Recession, Kendall Square began to experience increased demand for commercial and institutional research space, which led to a series of rezoning efforts which incrementally increased the capacity for additional office and lab development. In 2009, the City Council [adopted a rezoning of land](#) along Binney Street controlled by Alexandria Real Estate Equities, Inc. This

rezoning enabled about 1.5 million square feet of office/lab development while requiring the construction of mixed-income housing and the conveyance to the City of land and a historic building (the Foundry), which are being developed for public open space and other community uses. In 2010, the MXD was [amended](#) to permit an additional 300,000 square feet of new development that was built and occupied by the Broad Institute for Genomics Research.

In 2013, the City released the [Kendall Square \(K2\) study](#), which addressed future growth in Kendall Square based on the central theme of nurturing Kendall's Innovation Culture, and supported by three additional themes:

1. Create Great Places

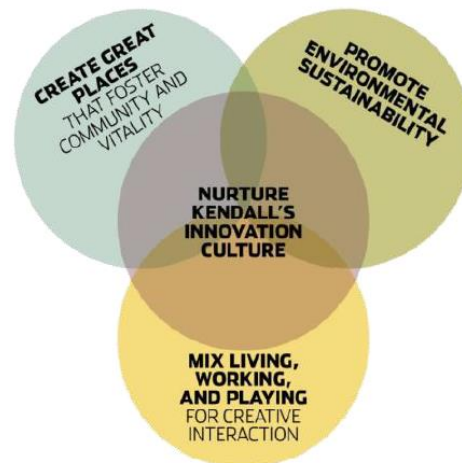
- Support open space and recreation needs of a growing neighborhood.
- Create lively, walkable streets.
- Expand opportunities for Kendall's diverse community to interact.
- Development and public place improvements must happen in tandem.

2. Promote Environmental Sustainability

- Expand convenient, affordable transportation and access choices.
- Enhance streets as public places.
- Create a healthier natural environment.
- Reduce resource consumption, waste and emissions.
- Leverage the environmental and economic benefits of compact development.

3. Mix Living, Working, Learning & Playing

- Leverage community and innovation benefits of a mixed-use environment.
- Focus intensity around transit.
- Minimize development pressures on traditional neighborhoods.
- Continue to support city and state economic development.



The K2 planning process led to the [Eastern Cambridge/Kendall Square Open Space \(ECKOS\)](#) study, in which teams of landscape designers and planners offered visions for connecting and activating public space within Kendall Square, to create a more integrated open space system and to better serve the surrounding neighborhoods. This planning effort established a series of recommendations focused on enhancing connectivity between existing and planned open spaces, improving the bicycle and pedestrian network throughout East Cambridge, and more holistically managing stormwater.

In 2014 and 2015, amendments to the MXD District were adopted that allowed up to 600,000 square feet of additional commercial development and 400,000 square feet of additional residential development in accordance with the recommendations of the K2 plan. In 2017, the City Council [adopted new zoning](#) for the 14.2 acre Volpe Center site, which was also pursuant to the K2 plan. Each of these rezoning efforts included requirements for housing, open space, active ground floor uses, innovation

space, and other public benefits. An Infill Development Concept Plan by Boston Properties for the MXD district was approved by the Planning Board in 2017 and amended in 2019, and development is underway. MIT is beginning the first stages of review for its development plan on the Volpe Center site.

Earlier this year, the City Council adopted the [Alexandria Grand Junction Overlay District](#), which allowed additional development at the former Metropolitan Pipe site at Binney and Fulkerson Street in exchange for the conveyance of land and contribution of funds for developing a portion of the Grand Junction Multi-Use Path, which is a key part of the City’s transportation and open space plan for Kendall Square and other parts of the city. An additional zoning change, a proposed [Canal District Kendall Overlay](#) that would enable a laboratory development with an arts and culture component on Third Street, is currently before the City Council.

MXD District Summary

Unlike most other base zoning districts, the MXD District has always been framed as enabling regulations for a mixed-use redevelopment plan rather than a general set of development controls for lots within a district. The following table provides a summary of the modifications to the MXD district since its inception in the late 1970s:

GFA Classification	GFA Amount	Cumulative GFA	Requirements/Stipulations	Status
1977 Original Plan GFA	2,773,000 SF	2,773,000 SF	Article 14.000 standards (770,000 sf Industrial uses; 830,000 sf Office uses; 150,000 sf Retail and consumer service uses; 300,000 sf Residential uses; 250,000 sf Hotel/Motel uses; 473,000 sf Entertainment, Recreation, Institutional)	Original plan
1993 Biogen GFA Reallocation	(475,000 SF) use reallocation only	2,773,000 SF	Allowed biotech and pharmaceutical use, 475,000 SF for Office/Biotech classification allowed north of Broadway (Parcel 2).	Twelve Cambridge Center, Fifteen Cambridge Center, and Twelve Cambridge Center Expansion
1997 Marriott GFA Reallocation	(190,000 SF) use reallocation only	2,773,000 SF	190,000 SF for Hotel/Motel classification, up from 250,000 SF.	Residence Inn
2001 Residential GFA	200,000 SF	2,973,000 SF	200,000 SF for multifamily residential use only; subject to Planning Board review (Section 19.20)	88 Ames Street, completed in 2018
2010 Ames Street GFA	300,000 SF	3,273,000 SF	Subject to 19.20 – Special Permit	75 Ames Street, completed in 2014
2015 Whitehead Institute GFA	60,000 SF	3,333,000 SF	Subject to 19.20 – Special Permit	No special permit application thus far
2015 Infill GFA	940,000 SF	4,273,000 SF	Min. 400,000 SF residential (20% affordable, 5% middle-income); innovation space; active ground floors; IDCP Plan review/approval by Planning Board	145 Broadway (commercial) completed 2019; 325 Main Street (commercial) in construction; 135 Broadway (residential) pending design review; additional residential phase pending
2020 Substation Commercial GFA (per current proposal)	800,000 SF	5,073,000 SF	Completion of substation; completion of Infill residential GFA (above) in one phase; Continued IDCP plan review/approval by Planning Board	Zoning Petition pending

Of the 4,273,000 square feet of total currently permitted gross floor area, 3,873,000 square feet has been built or is under construction. Only the 400,000 square feet of residential uses permitted as part of the 2015 amendments has not yet been initiated.

Summary of Zoning Petition

Overall Zoning Approach

The main intent of the Petition is to enable the construction of an electrical substation (referred to as the “Substation Project”) in the district and allow an additional 800,000 square feet of buildable commercial GFA (referred to as “Substation Commercial GFA”) in order to balance the cost and risk to the developer of undertaking such a project in a way that enables the public utility (Eversource) to locate its facility in the MXD District instead of on the site it currently owns on Fulkerson Street.

Aside from this major change, most of the zoning would remain substantially consistent with the 2015 rezoning that followed the K2 study, including a requirement that a development plan must be reviewed and approved by the Planning Board. The one exception is that an electrical substation, as a public utility, would be exempt from Planning Board review and approval – nevertheless, it will be important during the review process for the Board to understand some of the characteristics of the substation development that might affect uses on other sites. There are several other secondary zoning changes included in the proposal, which are discussed below.

Phasing of Residential Component

In order to ensure the development of the 400,000 square feet of undelivered residential GFA approved as part of the 2015 amendments, the Petition includes a provision that a building permit for the entire residential component be issued as a single phase “prior to or concurrently with” the issuance of a building permit for any project utilizing Substation Commercial GFA.

The plan currently approved for the MXD District would require part of the residential component to begin development prior to the occupancy of the building under construction at 325 Main Street, while the remainder of the residential component could be built later. Moving the start date of the residential component is necessary because it would need to be coordinated with the demolition of the garage and development of the substation on the adjacent site. However, the Petitioner has indicated that this change would provide a stronger guarantee that the entire housing component is completed more quickly than under current zoning, because the entire 400,000 square feet of residential uses would be completed in a single building and in a single phase rather than in multiple buildings and in multiple phases.

Building Height

Current Zoning	Proposed Zoning
1) Generally, 250’ height limit	1) Generally, 250’ height limit
2) 200’ height limit if building is further than 450’ north of Broadway	2) Requirement removed (250’ height limit would apply)
3) Two buildings up to 350’; residential only above 250’ and floorplate ≤ 12,000 square feet	3) One building up to 400’; residential only above 250’ and floorplate ≤ 12,500 square feet

This change would provide the additional height for the residential component to be constructed as a single building, as well as providing some flexibility in the height of commercial buildings along Binney Street by allowing up to 250’ (which was the height limit prior to the 2015 rezoning) instead of 200’. All building designs would still require study, review and approval by the Planning Board.

Active Ground Floors

The current zoning requires that the ground story of buildings with frontage on Main Street, Broadway, or Ames Street contain an active use (e.g., retail or public gathering space) along at least 75% of that frontage. The Petition proposes to reduce the frontage requirement to 40% for buildings with a façade length of 100’ or less.

The intent of this provision is to allow for buildings with a narrower frontage – presumably, in this case, the residential building – to have more flexibility to accommodate lobby and other ancillary spaces at the ground floor. Again, with design-based provisions, the Planning Board review and approval process will be crucial to evaluate whether design outcomes are responsive to the City’s objectives.

Innovation Space / Education Use

The current MXD zoning requires that any development with more than 100,000 square feet of office/lab uses dedicates at least 10% of the newly constructed office/lab GFA as Innovation Space, with additional requirements limiting the size of tenant spaces, length of leases, and size of office suites. Half of any such Innovation Space would be excluded from GFA limitations – meaning that it could partially be offset by additional commercial GFA. The Petition proposes to exempt the Substation Commercial GFA from this requirement and remove the GFA “bonus” for additional Innovation Space beyond what already exists in the district. Alternatively, the Petition creates a new GFA exemption for up to 20,000 square feet of Educational Lab, Classroom or Training Facility uses, which would provide services to the general public, but there is no requirement to include such a space in a development plan.

Innovation Space was a key component of the original K2 plan, and has resulted in several existing buildings and spaces around Kendall Square being converted to flexible or co-working office and laboratory space (examples include Cambridge Innovation Center and LabCentral). At this stage, it is unknown whether the public benefit from additional Innovation Space justifies the additional GFA that would result if this zoning provision were retained. Educational uses may provide a benefit, as workforce development and training were identified as needs in the K2 plan. However, the K2 plan recommended

funding contributions for programs rather than requirements or incentives for dedicated space. Also, MIT has committed to creating a job training center through its development of the Volpe site.

Parking & Bicycle Parking

Parking requirements in current zoning include prescribed maximum parking ratios for all uses, and no minimum parking requirements for any use except residential, which can be shared with parking for other uses. The Petition would reduce the minimum off-street vehicle parking ratio for residential uses from 0.4 space per dwelling unit to 0.25 space per dwelling unit. Current zoning also allows off-site parking facilities to satisfy the requirement for parking in the district, as long as the parking facility is within 1,000 feet of the MXD district boundary. The Petition increases the existing maximum distance for off-site parking facilities to 2,000 feet.

These changes would increase the flexibility to provide off-site parking to serve the needs of any development, which is generally consistent with the K2 plan and other planning policies toward automobile parking. The changes would primarily affect parking for residential uses rather than commercial uses. Zoning currently allows relief from parking requirements by special permit, usually based on evidence of lower parking demands or alternative parking options. Because the proposed parking ratios and locations have not been studied by staff, it will be important in the review process for the Planning Board to receive enough information to assess the proposed amount and location of off-site parking and whether it will be suitable to the needs of residents.

The Petition also introduces a new Section 14.52.6, which proposes a means of reducing the overall required minimum bicycle parking by utilizing alternative strategies as follows:

Alternative Strategy	Substitution Rate
Public Bike Share within 500’ of Site	1 bike dock = 2 required bike parking spaces
Centralized Public Bike Storage	1 storage space = ½ required bike parking spaces
Countercyclical (Shared) Bike Parking	1 qualifying space = 2 required spaces
Complimentary Valet Bike Parking	Subject to Planning Board approval

In current zoning, Section 6.108 provides a mechanism for the Planning Board to approve alternative bicycle parking plans by special permit. Part of the stated purpose is to allow for more coordinated “campus style” bicycle parking strategies for mixed-use developments, which may allow for more efficient use of spaces. The provision has also been used in the past for projects where site-specific constraints have made it difficult to meet all standards.

This proposal is similar in concept to the current zoning in Section 6.108 and includes strategies that are effective in managing demand for bicycle parking spaces, but the “substitution rates” that are proposed have not been thoroughly studied by staff. If the proposed language is adopted, staff expects that more analysis will need to be provided at the special permit review stage in the context of a more detailed development proposal, so that the Planning Board can reasonably determine whether the bicycle parking plan will meet the needs of the project.

Letter of Commitment

A Letter of Commitment was executed as part of the 2015 MXD amendments, which committed to provide at least 20% of the 400,000 square feet of residential uses as homeownership units (the “Letter of Commitment”). The Petition proposes to rescind the Letter of Commitment.

If the Letter of Commitment is rescinded, then it would not affect the total amount of housing that is otherwise required or the requirement for a 20% affordable and 5% middle-income component. Zoning does not establish requirements for tenure, so the housing could be either rental, homeownership or a combination, or could change over time. Without additional requirements, a residential development of this scale would most likely be rental.

Considerations for Review

This petition is unique, compared to previous zoning petitions that have allowed additional capacity for development in exchange for meeting certain public planning objectives. It aims to enable a public objective that was identified and proactively pursued by the City – the alternative siting of the Eversource substation – and reflects a tentative agreement reached by the City in partnership with multiple private entities, including Alexandria, the CRA and Boston Properties, that is necessary to accomplish that objective. Urban development in the Kendall Square area is driven by strong economic demand for office/lab uses, which can support the development and implementation of other types of community/public uses and improvements.

Other proposed amendments in this Petition are somewhat secondary to the main effort. Some of the proposed changes – standards for height, ground floors, parking, and bicycle parking – are aimed to provide more flexibility but will still require Planning Board review and approval of the specifics of a development proposal. Other changes – provision of innovation space, incentives for education uses – should be weighed as matters of policy relative to the main objective of siting the electrical transformer substation, which will be difficult to accomplish without the passage of this zoning.

Overall, considerable effort went into the 2015 MXD rezoning that followed from the K2 study, and the main structure of that rezoning remains largely intact.

Specific comments on the language of the zoning text are not included in this review, but as with any zoning petition, the Planning Board’s recommendation could direct City staff to conduct a careful text review for clarity and consistency with the City’s zoning practices.