



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

To: Planning Board

From: Community Development Department (CDD) Staff

Date: March 1, 2022

Re: **Alewife Overlay Districts Temporary Prohibition on Office and Lab Uses Zoning Petition**

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Overview

Petitioner: City Council

Petition Summary: That Article 20.90- Alewife Overlay Districts 1-6 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance be amended to insert a new section 20.94.3 to temporarily prohibit Office or Laboratory Uses as listed in Table 4.34 within the Alewife Overlay Districts 1-6 until December 31st, 2023, or until such time as new Alewife District zoning is ordained by the Cambridge City Council, whichever is sooner.

Planning Board Action: Recommendation to City Council

Memo Contents: Summary of proposed zoning, background information on the topic of the Petition, and considerations and comments from staff.

Summary of Petition Effects

The Petition would enact a time-limited prohibition on certain land uses for the purpose of contemplating new zoning for the Alewife Overlay Zoning Districts (AODs). Temporarily prohibited uses in the Alewife Overlay districts would include all Office and Laboratory Uses listed in Section 4.34 of the Table of Use Regulations in the Zoning Ordinance. Existing base zoning districts in this area include Office-1 (O-1), Office-2A (O-2A), Business A (BA), and Industry B-2 (IB-2). All uses in Section 4.34, which are listed below, are allowed as-of-right (except where noted) in these base districts and would be temporarily prohibited by the Petition:

- 4.34(a). Office of a physician, dentist or other medical practitioner not located in a clinic listed under Subsection 4.33(d)
- 4.34(b). Office of an accountant, attorney, or other non-medical professional person (includes properly licensed massage therapists)
- 4.34(c). Real Estate, insurance or other agency office
- 4.34(d). General office use
- 4.34(e). Bank, trust company or similar financial institution (special permit in IB-2)
- 4.34(f). Technical office for research and development, laboratory & research facility

Examples of uses that would still be allowed by right or by special permit if the petition were approved include residential uses, automobile parking lots or parking garages for private passenger cars, radio and television studios, utility stations, some institutional (religious, educational, health care, social service, or municipal) uses, retail or consumer service establishments, and some light or heavy industrial uses.

The stated intent of the temporary prohibition is to provide time for the implementation of new Alewife Overlay District zoning through a yet to be determined community process that will incorporate aspects of the Alewife District Plan and other recent planning reports.

In some ways, the Petition is similar to a development moratorium, which can be enacted to temporarily pause development while planning work is being undertaken. However, this Petition prohibits a specific category of use for a period of two years, while a moratorium more typically imposes a temporary ban on new construction activity by restricting the issuance of building permits. It is not entirely clear how the Petition might affect special permits, which authorize certain uses and can typically be exercised within two years of their issuance, or how it might impact the issuance of certificates of occupancy for development that has already received building permits. It is also not clear if existing office or laboratory uses would be treated as nonconforming uses for the stated time period. This Petition would create a lot of need for case-by-case analysis about whether existing uses can make changes as preexisting uses during the moratorium period, and whether uses that have building permits and special permits are protected under G.L. c.40A, §6. These issues would need to be discussed more thoroughly with the Law Department and Inspectional Services Department.

Background

Current Zoning

The current system of AOD zoning districts was enacted following the Concord-Alewife Plan, completed in 2005. The Concord-Alewife Rezoning made the base zoning in the area more restrictive, but through the overlay zoning, developers can seek a special permit from the Planning Board to build to an increased level of height and density if the development is found to be supportive of the area planning goals and in general conformance with design guidelines created for the area.

The preamble to the Petition reviews past zoning and planning studies in the Alewife district. The following is a summary of recent planning activity in the area.

Alewife District Plan

The [Alewife District Plan](#) was an outgrowth of the Envision Cambridge comprehensive planning process, completed in 2019. It serves as an update to the Concord-Alewife Plan. Community members advocated to revisit the planning and zoning for Alewife following a wave of residential development that occurred in the area during the 2010s.

The plan sets forth a vision of Alewife as a sustainable, resilient, mixed-use district that is integrated both physically and functionally to its surrounding neighbors and the City at large. To implement such a vision, the plan establishes recommendations around land use, open space, urban form, mobility, climate and environment, housing, economy and zoning. Many of the goals are similar to those in the Concord-Alewife Plan, such as encouraging mixed-use redevelopment and transforming from an auto-oriented to a pedestrian-oriented environment. However, the plan suggests different approaches to achieving some goals.

The Alewife District Plan does not recommend reducing or prohibiting office and laboratory uses, but seeks to better integrate office and laboratory development alongside the broader goals the plan seeks to achieve. Area-wide recommendations for economic development of the area include fostering job growth through office/laboratory and industrial development, supporting a mix of uses typical of a thriving urban neighborhood, and identifying opportunities to protect legacy industrial businesses in the area alongside new office and lab spaces. Some objectives related to office and lab use include the following:

- Requiring ground-floor space of commercial development to be occupied with light industrial businesses, aiming to cross-subsidize the light industrial space with high rent generating commercial uses (e.g. office/R&D) on the upper floors.
- Identifying opportunities for start-ups and smaller labs to locate in Cambridge amidst fierce competition for space.
- Encouraging office and laboratory uses to be located towards the rear of the property, and include space for retail, light industrial, and consumer service uses along street frontages prioritized for more active uses.

- Siting and designing office and laboratory uses in a more resilient urban context – encouraging multi-modal transportation, heat and flood resilience, increased open space, and recreational opportunities.

The Alewife District Plan recommends a set of zoning changes in the AODs that include the following:

- Retaining the overall development density limits in current zoning, including development incentives for the creation of public facilities such as streets and open spaces.
- Increasing building heights for commercial uses to 85' in most areas, in order to accommodate desired ground-story retail and light industrial uses.
- Imposing lowered maximum limitations on off-street parking with no minimum requirements, and implementing enhanced parking and transportation demand management programs to meet specific goals for reducing single-occupancy vehicle (SOV) trips.
- Changing setback requirements to create a consistent urban streetwall and a more pedestrian and bicycle friendly streetscape, with the creation of wider public sidewalks and bicycle facilities (where they don't already exist), planting of street trees, and installation of raised walkways or "plinths" on building facades that are above projected flood elevations.
- Increasing open space requirements to 20% of lot area.
- Continuing to incentivize the creation of a pedestrian/bicycle crossing of the railroad line to connect the "Quadrangle" to the "Triangle," and require fund contributions of \$5 per square foot of new commercial development to support that and other infrastructure improvements.

Climate Resilience Zoning

The multi-year "Resilient Cambridge" planning effort, which produced a final report in 2021, has been a comprehensive effort to assess future risks to the community due to climate change and recommend actions to prepare for such risks. That planning work is citywide in scope, but paid special attention to the Alewife area. An offshoot of this effort was the Climate Resilience Zoning Task Force, a group of community stakeholders and experts that met to review Cambridge's resilience planning and recommend zoning changes that could be enacted in the near term. The Task Force's recommendations included the following:

- Flood resilience standards applicable to new development that are based on the City's future long-term flooding projections.
- Performance-based standards to incorporate urban heat reduction into building and site design, using a "Cool Factor" metric based on the cooling benefit of features such as trees, plantings, green roofs, shading, and high solar reflectivity materials.
- Amending current zoning standards to remove impediments to making building and site improvements that would promote flood and heat resilience.
- Requiring a report on resilience measures for development that requires Planning Board review.

Staff is currently working to develop these recommendations into draft zoning amendments for consideration by the City Council.

Quadrangle Northwest Zoning Petitions

Beginning in 2019 and continuing through 2020, the City Council and Planning Board considered a zoning proposal led by the property owner Cabot, Cabot & Forbes to amend the zoning in the AOD-1 subdistrict. If adopted, this proposal would have enabled a multi-site development along Mooney Street that was proposed to include a pedestrian/bicycle crossing of the railroad line from the end of Smith Place to Cambridgepark Drive. The proposed zoning would have enabled commercial building heights up to 85’ by special permit if the Alewife District Plan requirements were met, including ground-story light industrial uses, reduced parking ratios, and streetscape improvements consistent with the plan.

However, the proposal failed on a vote by the City Council in March, 2021, with Council members raising concerns about building heights and rooftop mechanicals, the amount of housing proposed, specifics of the proposed bridge crossing, and the clarity of the commitments being offered by the developer.

Council members at the time expressed a preference for the City to pursue zoning changes directly, instead of entertaining petitions by property owners. Such an approach allows the City Council to set new development standards in a more holistic way. However, it does not provide for a process to negotiate public benefit contributions from property owners as is the case with owner-led zoning petitions.

An initial discussion of area planning and zoning was held with the City Council Neighborhood and Long-Term Planning Committee in August, 2021. Since that time, CDD staff has prepared for a follow-up discussion to review the specific zoning recommendations of the Alewife District Plan and determine which changes the Council wishes to advance.

Planning Board Development Review

The Planning Board has reviewed several development proposals in the Alewife area during and since the completion of the Alewife District Plan. CDD staff and the Planning Board have worked with developers to implement the plan’s recommendations to the greatest extent possible while working within the limitations of current zoning. Below is a summary of developments and how they have contributed to the Alewife District Plan objectives:

Development Site	Description	Alewife District Plan Contributions
50 Cambridgepark Drive (PB-338, granted 2018)	8-story, 294-unit residential building	Reduced parking ratio and enhanced TDM; ground-story retail; construction of separated cycle track; funding contribution to infrastructure improvements; redesign of shared driveway into an improved streetscape; flood resilience Site Action Plan including neighborhood resilience initiative
87-101 Cambridgepark Drive (PB-354, granted 2020)	5-story, 141,834 SF office/lab building	Enhanced TDM and future parking reductions; ground-story retail; construction of elevated cycle track and pedestrian/bicycle connection to public multiuse path; funding contribution to

		infrastructure improvements; design to projected flood elevations and implementation of Site Action Plan
75-109 Smith Place (PB-359, granted 2020)	3-story, 144,175 SF office/lab building	Enhanced TDM and future parking reductions; orientation of building to Alewife District Plan setbacks and construction of streetscape with sidewalk and separated cycle track; funding contribution to infrastructure improvements, including \$15/SF toward railroad crossing; design to projected flood elevations and implementation of Site Action Plan
180 Fawcett Street (PB-	4-story, 58,000 SF office/lab building	Enhanced TDM and parking ratio of 0.8 spaces; construction of separated cycle track and sidewalk; funding contribution to infrastructure improvements; design to projected flood elevations and implementation of Site Action Plan

Many of the objectives in the Alewife District Plan can be achieved under current zoning. In particular, the current AOD zoning allows developers to provide public improvements on private land in exchange for a development bonus. Because the City owns little of the land within the area, being able to incentivize developers to incorporate and convey land for public use is essential to achieving many of the plan’s goals.

However, some objectives of the Alewife District Plan have proven to be more difficult to achieve within current zoning limitations. The following are three of the most substantial issues:

- The Alewife District Plan recommends raising the maximum height for non-residential uses to 85 feet to accommodate high-bay industrial and retail space at the ground floor, which would be exempt from FAR limitations. With the current height limit of 70 feet or 55 feet in many areas, it is more difficult to accommodate such uses without displacing the other uses that were expected to subsidize them.
- The construction of elevated walkways connecting the sidewalk to uses at the ground floors of buildings is constrained by the current zoning requirement that front yards must be green area open space and must be at grade; however, the building can be designed creatively to incorporate some elevated areas and allow for this type of feature to be added in the future.
- It is difficult to achieve the recommended maximum off-street parking ratios because they are in many cases less than the minimum requirements under current zoning, and can only be reduced further if the Applicant seeks a special permit for such a reduction.

Zoning Considerations

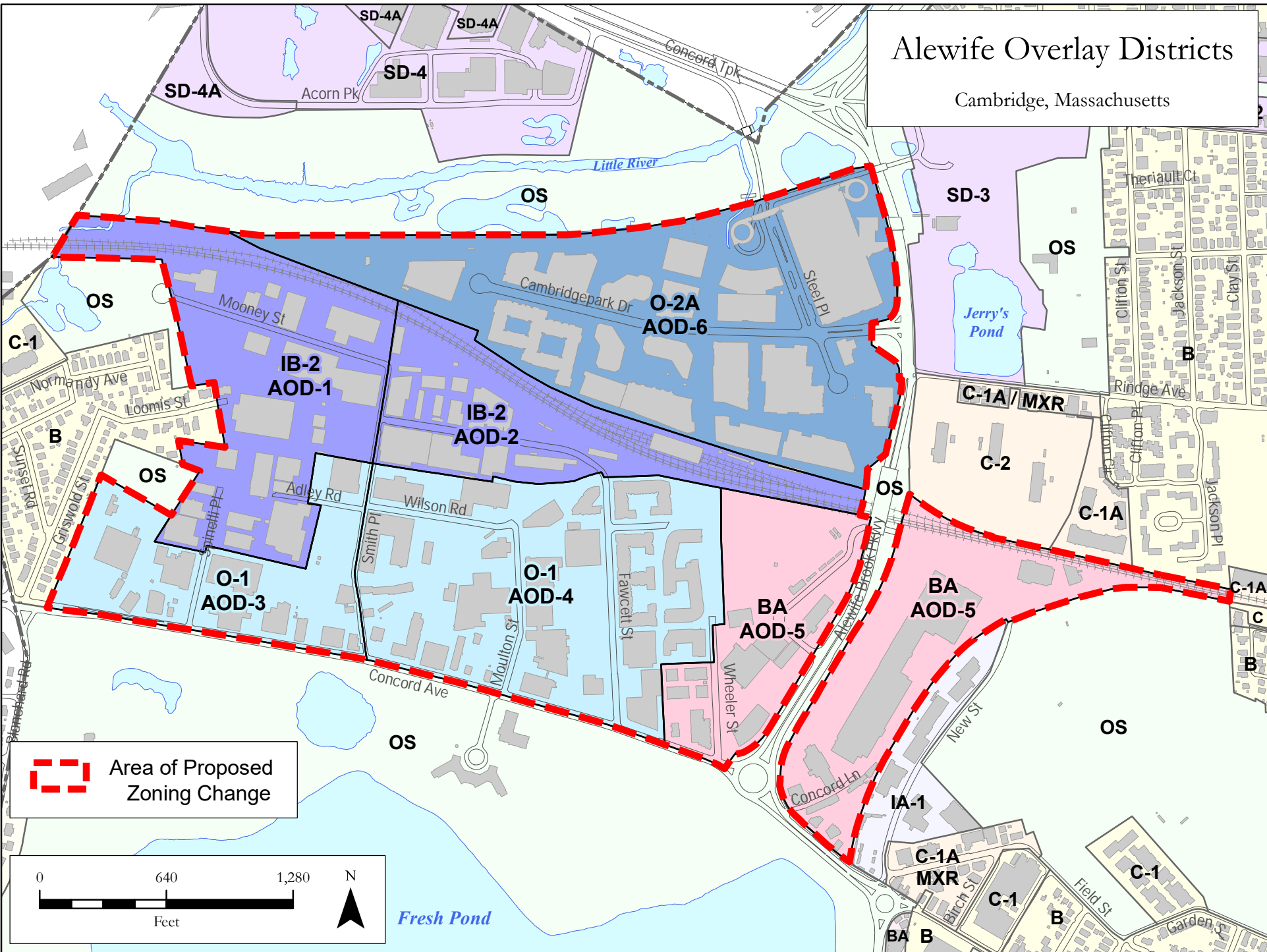
As noted further above, there are several questions raised by the concept of prohibiting a particular set of uses for a limited amount of time, and how precisely that would impact the issuance of special permits, building permits, or certificates of occupancy. Those issues would need to be discussed further with the Inspectional Services Department and Law Department.


More broadly, the concept of a “development moratorium” carries with it potential benefits and drawbacks. The benefit to a moratorium is the presumption that a change in zoning will produce development outcomes that are better than the development outcomes that would occur under present zoning, and that improvement is substantial enough to offset the drawbacks described below. In that sense, it is helpful to consider what specific improvements are expected as a result of a change in zoning. It should be noted that development outcomes are not determined solely by zoning, but also by market conditions and other economic factors. It is also not unusual for the City to consider zoning changes while development activity is in the permitting process, with the acknowledgement that adopted zoning changes would affect any development that had not been issued a building permit or special permit by the time that public hearings of that zoning change were first advertised.

The potential drawbacks to a moratorium include that it results in a pause in development activity within an area for a period of time, which also means that the public benefits and infrastructure improvements enabled by this activity would be delayed. Other forms of economic development activity might occur that are not prohibited by this Petition, but given that the current real estate market heavily favors office/laboratory uses, a major shift in development activity is unlikely to occur in the near future, and any development that does occur would be less likely to support benefits such as major public infrastructure improvements. One overarching issue is that it is unknown how the economics of real estate development might change between the start and end to the moratorium period, and whether the types of benefits that would be enabled by a change in zoning would continue to be economically supportable by future development.

Alewife Overlay Districts

Cambridge, Massachusetts



 Area of Proposed Zoning Change

