



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

# PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

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Date: September 14, 2023

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Subject: Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO) Amendments Zoning Petition

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Recommendation: The Planning Board makes the following report with no positive or negative recommendation.

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To the Honorable, the City Council,

On August 8 and August 29, 2023, the Planning Board (the “Board”) held a public hearing to discuss the AHO Amendments Zoning Petition (the “Petition”). City Councillors Marc McGovern, Quinton Zondervan and Burhan Azeem presented the Petition at the hearing. Staff from the City’s Community Development Department (CDD) also attended the hearing and answered questions from the Board. Following a presentation by the Petitioners, and extensive public comment, Board members posed a number of questions to the Petitioners and City staff, and discussed the merits of the Petition. **Following deliberation, the Board voted to forward a report to the City Council summarizing the Board’s comments, without making a positive or negative recommendation.**

The following is a summary of the main comments made by Board members:

- Board members agreed that building more affordable housing is a top policy priority for the City. Envision Cambridge set a discrete goal for the number of new affordable housing units to be produced by 2030, and the units produced through inclusionary zoning and other means will not be sufficient to achieve that goal. Further, some Board members noted that the affordable housing crisis deserves urgent action, and waiting for area-specific planning to conclude could delay the City’s ability to solve the crisis in sufficient time.
- Board members offered a variety of solutions for addressing potential impacts from the proposed heights under the Petition. Solutions could include new design requirements to mitigate shadow and wind impacts; adding an additional community meeting for certain types of AHO projects; and/or updating the AHO Design Guidelines to address the new building scale that would be enabled by the Petition.
- Some Board members expressed concern about the process, and noted that the original AHO included a provision for annual reporting as well as a five-year “look back” to determine the success of the original zoning. They felt that it would be better to wait for

the five-year review to determine if and what changes are needed. Conversely, some Board members noted that the AHO was originally established with a competitive edge over market-rate developments, and that competitive edge has eroded with further zoning changes that are applicable to all new developments, such as the elimination of parking minimums citywide.

- Board members believe that the advisory design review process under the AHO is effective, and that initial concerns about AHO projects have been addressed as design development occurs. Board members noted that the original AHO eliminated the Planning Board's discretionary vote on certain projects, but was balanced by a reasonable expectation on what could be built in certain parts of the city and what the impacts of height and setbacks would be. Some were concerned that without careful study, that same predictability is not as easy to surmise under the current Petition.
- While some Board members were comfortable with the heights proposed established in the Petition, other Board members were concerned that the heights may not be appropriate in all of the areas proposed for rezoning and felt that additional study and modeling should be done before arriving at specific dimensional requirements. Some Board members also expressed concern about the proposed elimination of the side yard setbacks, noting the negative impact this could have on adjacent properties.
- Board members had differing opinions on the proposed heights as illustrated in the following range of comments and as such were not able to reach consensus on either a positive or negative recommendation. Comments included:
  - Taller heights and density around transit nodes and corridors is an environmentally friendly and sustainable development pattern.
  - Taller heights may introduce additional impacts and compatibility challenges with the smaller scale adjacent development in some areas of the City.
  - It is difficult to determine what heights are needed and feasible for affordable housing developers without supporting study and analysis.
  - While the height increases appear significant, it may be unlikely that a large number of development proposals advance at the maximum allowed heights due to other limitations and constraints; such as funding, construction technology and the cost of high-rise construction.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,



Mary Flynn, Chair.