

East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Study Committee – Version 2.0

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Cambridge Historical Commission
May 26, 2021

Tonight's Agenda

Introduction of study committee members and staff

Why a conservation district study? The study to date

1. Review: Overall goal statement and secondary goals

(Public comment)

2. Review: Types of changes that should be subject to review

(Public comment)

3. Review: Implementation (binding/non-binding,
staff vs. commission review)

(Public comment)

4. Guidelines for reviewing changes in residential areas

Comments from members of the public

What's a neighborhood conservation district?

Neighborhood Conservation Districts are established to protect architecturally and historically distinctive areas of special concern.

The City Council has designated four NCDs since 1983: Mid Cambridge, Half Crown-Marsh, Avon Hill, and Harvard Square. A different commission administers each district.

NCD commissions are empowered to approve new construction, demolition, and certain alterations that are visible from a public way, according to guidelines and jurisdiction that are tailored to local conditions.

The establishment of an NCD recognizes the particular design and architectural qualities of neighborhoods and encourages their protection and maintenance for the benefit of the entire city.

The boundaries and jurisdiction of a potential East Cambridge NCD will emerge from the current study. The decision to enact an NCD in East Cambridge will rest in the Cambridge City Council.

How does a conservation district differ from an historic district?

Historic districts regulate every publicly visible feature of existing and proposed buildings, including color; the goal is to preserve buildings and exterior features throughout the district.

Neighborhood conservation districts (NCDs) are tailored to meet the particular needs of each neighborhood; the goal is to conserve significant buildings and features.

Regulations are designed to protect the most important buildings and architectural features, while allowing most alterations to proceed without review.

NCDs are governed by a commission of neighborhood residents and property owners appointed by the City Manager.

What is the National Register of Historic Places?

The National Register of Historic Places is a list of buildings, sites, structures, and districts that are important in American history, culture, architecture, or archaeology. This federal designation is administered by the Secretary of the Interior through the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

Listing on the National Register recognizes the importance of the site to the community, state, or nation. The National Register is used as a planning tool by federal, state, and local agencies regarding projects that are funded or permitted by the state or federal governments.

National Register listing in no way limits changes to the property unless the project involves federal or state funding, licenses, or permits.

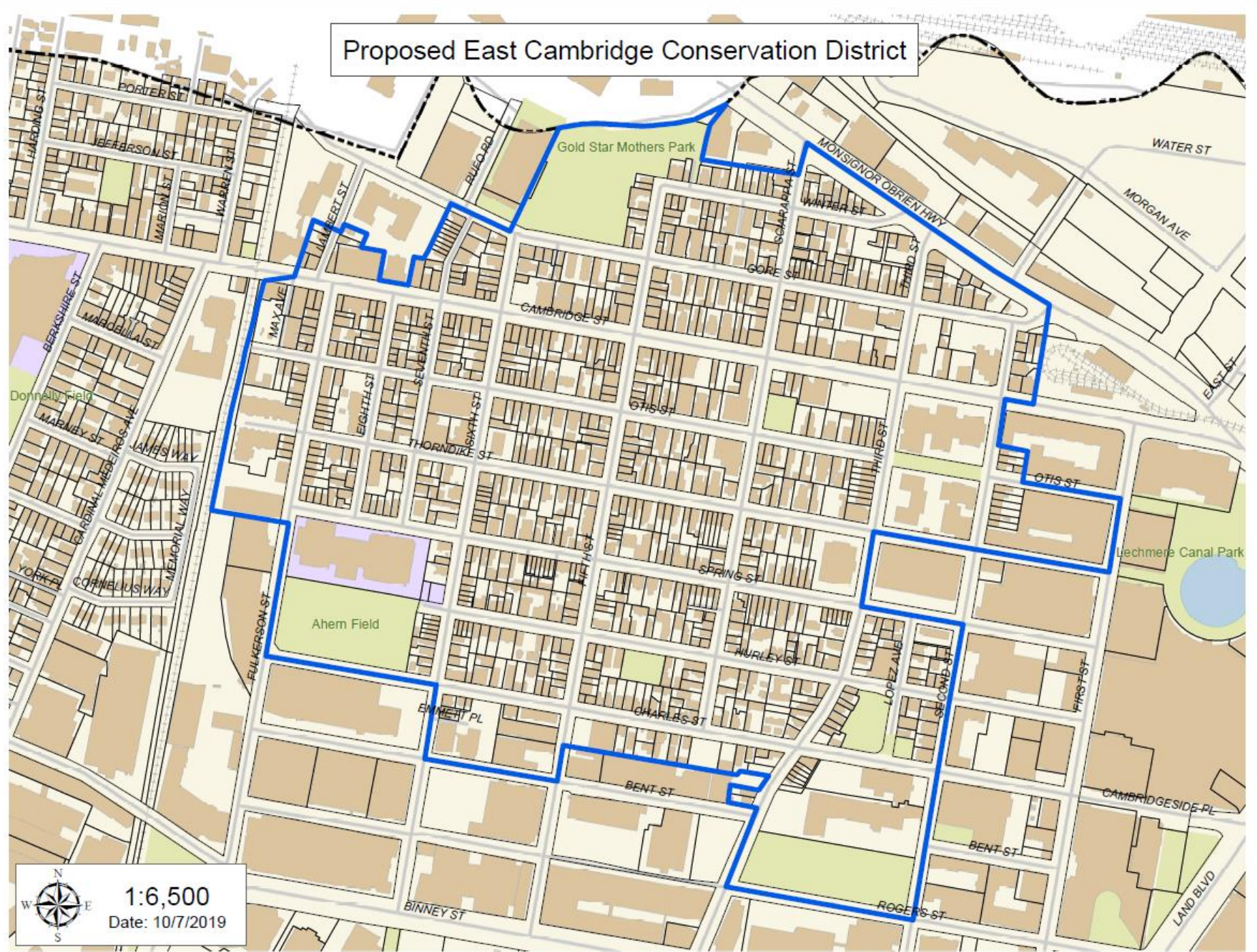
Cambridge has approximately 2,500 National Register-listed properties.

East Cambridge Study Area Boundaries

In 2019, a petition of registered voters requested that the Commission initiate a neighborhood conservation district designation study of the East Cambridge neighborhood, approximately bounded by Monsignor O'Brien Highway, Cambridge Street, Second Street, Bent Street, B & A Railroad, and Gold Star Mothers Park.

These boundaries were confirmed by a majority vote on February 17, 2021. The discussion of binding vs. non-binding jurisdiction in possible subareas will continue.

Proposed East Cambridge Conservation District




1:6,500
Date: 10/7/2019

1. Review: Overall goal statement and secondary goals for the district

Prototype Goal

The goal of the East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District is to conserve the character, variety and scale of the district's streetscapes and architecture, and to enhance the livability, vitality and socio-economic diversity of the District for its residents and the public at large.

The East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Commission will seek to

- enhance the unique environment and visual form of the District;*
- preserve its architecturally and historically significant structures and their settings and encourage design compatible therewith;*
- mitigate adverse impacts of new development on adjacent properties and areas; and*
- maintain the present diversity of development and open space patterns and building scales and ages.*

The District must remain a human-scale environment that maintains the history and traditions of its location.

Draft goal from past NCD studies, adapted to East Cambridge (CHC Staff)

Draft Goal Statements

Draft Goal Submittal #1

The goal of the East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District is to have a process for neighborhood residents to have a voice in how, when and why the neighborhood may seek to conserve the character, variety and scale of the exterior architecture of residential and commercial buildings in the District.

Through this process, the East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Commission would seek to both enhance and maintain the unique environment and visual form of the District's streetscapes by:

- (i) understanding the history of the District,*
- (ii) acknowledging change,*
- (iii) preserving architecturally and historically significant structures, and*
- (iv) supporting alternative designs compatible with the District.*

Submitted by a member of the Study Committee, February 2020

Draft Goal Statements

- Draft Goal Submittal #2
- *Maintain the same rights and opportunities for current and future residents and businesses to shape the architectural and aesthetic character of East Cambridge that previous generations enjoyed; does not privilege the past over the future.*
- *Rely on existing laws to conserve truly historic architecture, such as the city's recently strengthened tear down ordinance or land-marking tools already in place and in effective use in East Cambridge.*
- *Rely on education, information sharing, and public assistance through grants, all provided by our Historical Commission, rather than regulatory coercion and financial burdens to empower residents to knowledgeably and consensually protect the historic features of their properties.*
- *Create zero new regulatory or cost barriers to living or working in East Cambridge for renters, new home buyers, immigrants, entrepreneurs, long-term residents, local businesses, or anyone seeking to contribute to the fabric of our community.*
- *Create zero possibility that a conservation district will exacerbate our housing affordability crisis via new regulatory requirements that are expected to artificially raise property values.*
- *Create zero mandatory costs to property owners resulting from new materials requirements, use impairments, time spent in review processes, etc.*

Draft Goal Statements

Draft Goal Submittal #3

The goals of the East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District would be to conserve the character, variety and scale of the district's streetscapes and architecture, and to enhance the livability, vitality and socio-economic diversity of the district for its residents and the public at large.

The East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Commission should also allow for architectural diversity and individualized alterations while respecting the current character of the neighborhood including commercial as well as residential properties.

The district should also maintain the present diversity of development and open space patterns and building scales and allow for more density where applicable while preserving the existing housing stock of the neighborhood.

Submitted by a member of the Study Committee, April 20, 2021

Draft Goal Statements

Consensus choice on April 21

Draft Goal Submittal #3

The goals of the East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District would be to conserve the character, variety and scale of the district's streetscapes and architecture, and to enhance the livability, vitality and socio-economic diversity of the district for its residents and the public at large.

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Submitted by a member of the Study Committee, April 20, 2021

Draft Goal Submittal #3, As Edited

The ~~goals-goal~~ of the East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District would be to conserve the character, variety and scale of the district's streetscapes and architecture, and to ~~enhance-support~~ the livability, vitality and socio-economic diversity of the district for its residents and the public at large while acknowledging changing housing demand and conditions in the neighborhood.

The East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Commission should seek to conserve significant structures and features where they exist while allowing ~~also allow~~ for architectural diversity and individualized alterations ~~while that~~ respecting the current character of the neighborhood ~~including commercial as well as residential properties.~~ The ~~district-Commission~~ should also seek to maintain the present diversity of development and open space patterns and building scales and allow for more density where applicable-appropriate while preserving the existing housing stock of the neighborhood.¹

Draft Goal Submittal #3, As Edited

Fair Copy

The goal of the East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District would be to conserve the character, variety and scale of the district's streetscapes and architecture and to support the livability, vitality and socio-economic diversity of the district for its residents and the public at large while acknowledging changing housing demand and conditions in the neighborhood.

The East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Commission should seek to conserve significant structures and features where they exist while allowing for architectural diversity and individualized alterations that respect the current character of the neighborhood.

The Commission should seek to maintain the present diversity of development and open space patterns and building scales and allow for more density where appropriate while preserving the existing housing stock of the neighborhood.

Draft Secondary Goal Statements 1-5

Secondary Goals:

- 1) *Conserve the diverse architectural character of the district, including its modest 19th-century workers' housing and significant civic and institutional buildings, while allowing the neighborhood to adapt to changing circumstances.*
- 2) *Allow for architectural diversity and individualized alterations while respecting the traditional housing stock of the neighborhood.*
- 3) *Retain significant **architectural** features that characterize much of the neighborhood, including but not limited to roof pitch, historic architectural elements, and traditional window and door configurations.*
- 4) *Allow and encourage additional housing units and density while retaining significant historic structures, when possible.*
- 5) *Encourage contemporary design that respects surrounding context yet differentiates itself as belonging to the period in which it is being designed.*

Draft secondary goals from past NCD studies, adapted to East Cambridge (CHC Staff)

Draft Secondary Goal Statements 6-10

Secondary Goals:

- 6) *Sustain the vitality of the commercial environment of Cambridge Street by preserving architecturally significant or original building fabric. When this is not possible or appropriate, support creative, contemporary design for storefront alterations and additions.*
- 7) *Encourage higher density residential projects on Cambridge Street, especially in mixed-use buildings, and support existing **and future** residential uses there.*
- 8) *Encourage trees and greenery while limiting new impervious paving to enhance the landscape amenities and mitigate **negative climate impacts on the neighborhood**.*
- 9) *Encourage low fences to ~~define the street edge while protecting~~ **protect** views of houses and through yards, while permitting flexibility to minimize the adverse visual effect of trash containers and mechanical equipment.*
- ~~10) Consider traffic and parking impacts of proposed developments as they may adversely affect traditional street patterns and pedestrian activity.~~

Draft secondary goals from past NCD studies, adapted to East Cambridge (CHC Staff)

Public Comment

2. Types of changes that should be subject to review

Decisions Necessary on Three Levels
in Both Residential and Commercial Districts:

Geographic Areas:

Treat all areas the same or differentiate by National Register status

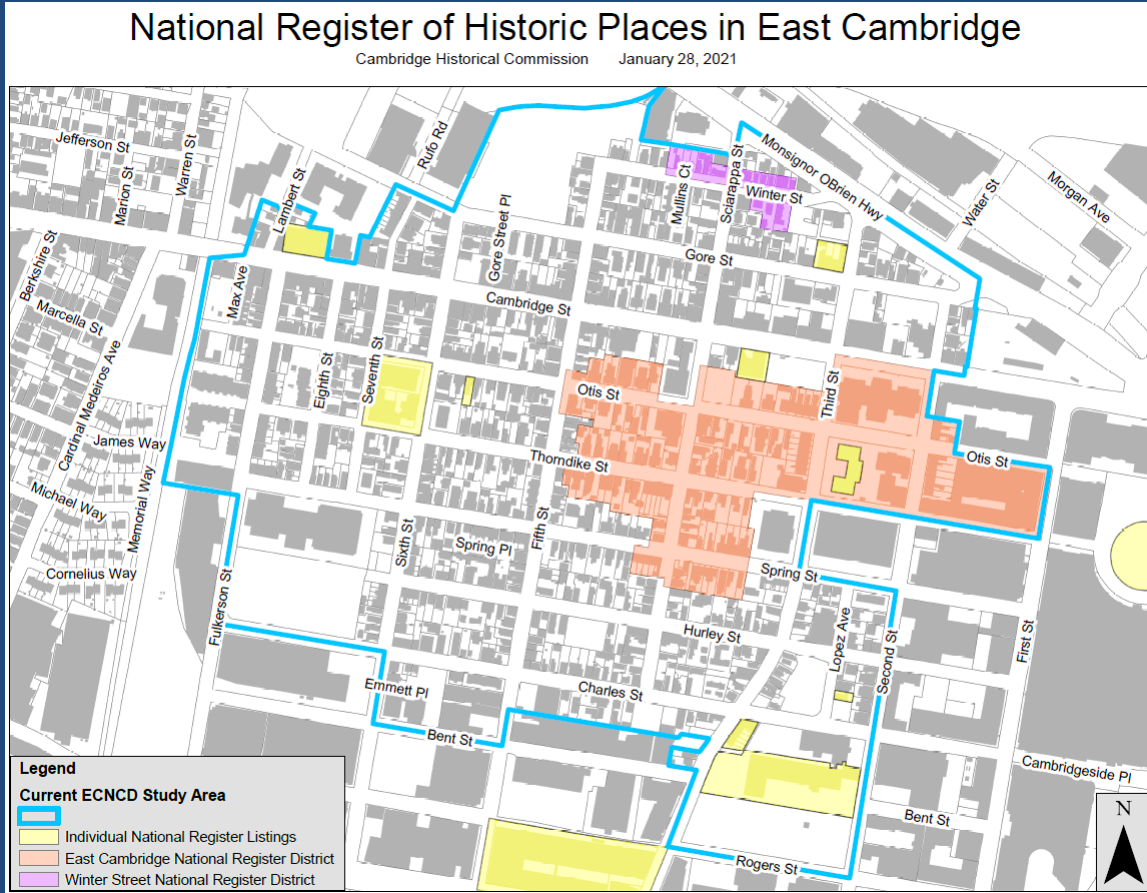
Jurisdiction:

Features or activities that deserve protection to achieve neighborhood goals

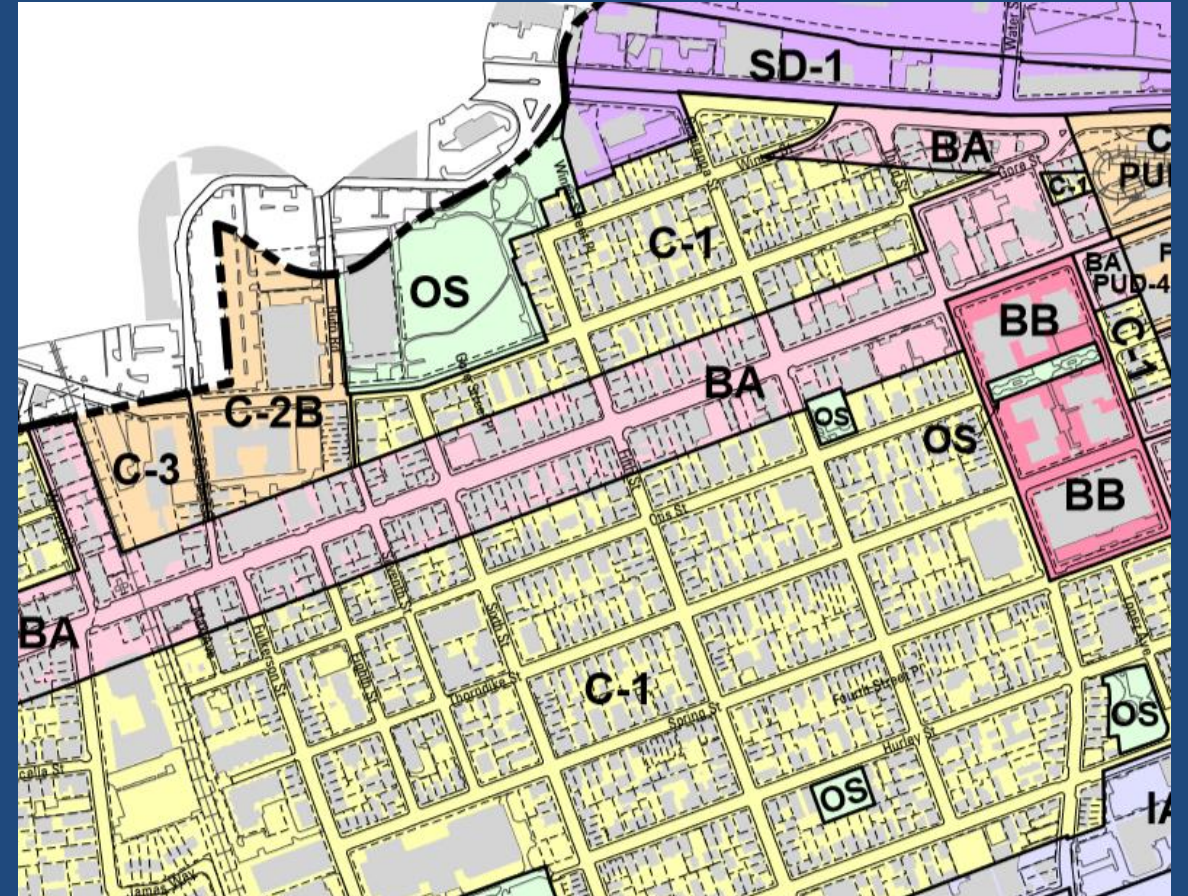
Implementation:

Binding review for some properties and/or architectural features
and non-binding review elsewhere

Geographic Areas: Important Boundaries That Might Affect Jurisdiction



National Register of Historic Places



Business A Zoning District (Cambridge Street)

Jurisdiction: Exterior Features and Activities Potentially Subject to NCD Review

Action	National Register		Non-National Register		Exempt from Review
	Binding	Non-binding	Binding	Staff Review	
Demolition	x		x		
New construction	x		x		
Exterior alterations					
Raising roof	x		x		
Replace siding	x			x	
Masonry repointing/waterproofing	x			x	
Location of doors and/or windows	x			x	
Replace windows	x			x	
Replace doors	x			x	
Decorative features	x			x	
Roof material	x			x	
Solar panels flat to roof					x
Skylights flat to roof					x
Remove chimneys	x			x	
Chimney caps					x
Vents: dryer and range					x
Vents: high efficiency furnaces	x			x	
Window air conditioners					x
Storm door and windows					x

Jurisdiction: Exterior Features and Activities Potentially Subject to NCD Review

Action	National Register		Non-National Register		Exempt from Review
	Binding	Non-binding	Binding	Staff Review	
Terraces, walks, driveways		x			x
HVAC condensers	x			x	
Fences over 6' high	x			x	
Fences less than 4' and 6'					x
Exterior lighting					x
Accessory structures	x			x	
Exterior paint color					x
Interior alterations					x
Conforming signs					x
Storefront alterations*					x
Ordinary repairs and maintenance					x
Reconstruction in kind after fire or loss					x

*Subject to Harvard Square guidelines regarding preservation of storefront surround

3. Implementation: Binding vs. Non-Binding Review

Mid Cambridge Model:

Binding review by the Commission:

- New construction
- Additions more than 750sf or enlarging floor area more than 33%
- Demolition of more than 33% of a structure
- Any alterations to National Register or publicly-owned buildings

Non-binding review by the Commission:

- New construction and additions between 150 and 750sf
- Alterations involving removal of historic decorative elements, changes in size or location of doors or windows
- Changes in the configuration of a roof

Exemptions from review:

- Additions less than 150sf; demolition of garages; fences; paving; solar panels; skylights; alterations not involving historic features or openings
- Ordinary maintenance, repairs, interiors, exterior features not publicly visible

Upon completion of non-binding review applicants are free to do as they wish.

Implementation: Binding vs. Non-Binding Review

Avon Hill Model:

Binding review by the Commission:

- Exterior alterations to National Register Properties
- New construction
- Additions more than 300sf or enlarging lot coverage to more than 35%
- Demolition of any structure larger than 150sf
- Vinyl or aluminum siding or windows
- Alterations to bay windows, porches and roofs, including dormers

Non-binding review by the staff:

- Alterations for buildings not on the National Register, such as window reconfiguration, gutters, skylights, solar panels, and qualifying additions

Exempt from review:

- Alterations not affecting historic features or roof shape
- Driveways and terraces outside the NR District
- Walls and fences less than 4' high in front, less than 6' high elsewhere
- Temporary structures, play equipment, statuary
- Ordinary maintenance, repairs, interiors, exterior features not publicly visible

Upon completion of non-binding review applicants are free to do as they wish.

Implementation: Binding vs. Non-Binding Review

Staff recommendation for jurisdiction in East Cambridge NCD

National Register Properties (Individually listed or within a district)

- Binding Review by the NCD Commission
 - New Construction
 - Demolition
 - All alterations visible from a public way (unless exempt)

Non-National Register Properties (not individually listed or not within a district)

- Binding Review by the NCD Commission
 - New Construction
 - Demolition
 - Additions 300+ sq. ft
 - Changes to roof form or height
 - Removal of siding down to sheathing
 - Dormers unless conforming to City of Cambridge Dormer Guidelines
 - Changes to door and window sizes and locations
- Non-Binding Review by CHC Staff
 - New construction and additions up to 300 sq. ft
 - All other alterations not listed above

Upon completion of non-binding review applicants are free to do as they wish.

Staff Review

The NCD Commission will adopt procedures delegating review and approval to the staff of some reversible alterations which nevertheless have the potential to adversely affect historic fabric. A Certificate of Nonapplicability will be issued by the staff if Neighborhood Conservation District guidelines are followed. These categories will include:

- Ordinary repairs or maintenance using synthetics or similar materials and construction details to those existing.
- Reconstruction replicating the exterior design of a building, structure, or exterior architectural feature damaged or destroyed by fire, storm, or other disaster, provided such reconstruction is begun within one year thereafter and carried out in accordance with the guidelines.
- Roof repairs and HVAC equipment not visible from a public way.
- Window replacement in conformity with guidelines to be adopted by the Commission after public hearing.
- Interior work and alterations not visible from a public way.

Exemptions

The following activities should be exempt from any review by the NCD Commission or staff:

- Work that is not visible from a public way.
- Paint color and painting of features, with the exception of previously un-painted masonry facades and features.
- Storm doors, storm windows, screens, window air conditioners.
- Flat skylights or solar collectors parallel to and in close contact with the plane of the roof.
- Chimney caps provided they are installed in a manner that will allow their removal without altering the structure or appearance of the chimney.
- Satellite dishes, antenna, or similar features.
- Exterior lighting conforming to city codes.
- Terraces, walks, driveways, sidewalks and similar features substantially at grade level, provided, however, that they are not to be used for parking between the street and either the principal front wall plane of a building or the principal front and side wall planes of a building that occupies a corner property.
- Walls and fences four feet high or less as measured from the grade of the sidewalk or the surface of the ground immediately below the wall or fence, whichever grade is lower.

Public Comment

4. Guidelines for reviewing changes in residential areas

General Criteria

Applications shall be considered in terms of goals statement and secondary goals of the District, and in addition with regard to the following factors:

- the architectural and historical significance of the structures on the site
- the physical characteristics of the site, including but not limited to existing vegetation and topography; and
- the potential adverse effects of the proposed construction, demolition, or alteration on the surrounding properties, and on the immediate streetscape.

Specific Criteria

New Construction and Additions

In reviewing new construction or additions to existing buildings, the Commission "shall consider the appropriateness of the size and shape of the structure both in relation to the land area upon which the structure is situated and to structures in the vicinity." Review of new buildings will be guided by considerations such as the appropriateness of the structure's height, scale, mass, proportions, orientation, and lot coverage; the vertical and horizontal emphasis, rhythm of openings, transparency, texture, and materials of the publicly-visible facades; sunlight and shadow effects; relationship to public open space; and landscaping.

Neighborhood conservation district commissions "may in appropriate cases impose dimensional and setback requirements in addition to those required by the applicable provision of the zoning ordinance." Implementing such a measure could result in a reduction of the Floor Area Ratio (FAR) allowed by zoning. The appropriate circumstances for imposing dimensional and set-back reductions could include a wide disparity of scale and density between the proposed project and its surroundings, or a situation in which the proposed project would destroy or diminish the historical resources of the site.

a. New Construction:

New construction in the East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District should seek to relate to the particular streetscape on which is located, in building height, mass, scale, and siting. New construction should not replicate buildings of past eras and should be distinguished as the time of its design and construction. While new construction should appear more contemporary, it should also aim to take cues from historic characteristics of structures nearby including roof pitch and style, siding, and solid-to-void ratio.

b. Additions:

Additions should aim to be subordinate in height, massing, and design to the structure where they are attached. Depending on the circumstances, an addition can be designed match the existing structure through a continuation of form, features, and materials; or an addition can be differentiated from, but complement, the existing building through the choice of materials, fenestration, or other design features

Demolition

The East Cambridge NCD Commission will issue a Certificate of Appropriateness to an applicant seeking to demolish a structure if the project, including both the demolished and the replacement buildings, is determined to be "appropriate for or compatible with the preservation or protection of the . . . district." Approval of demolition will be dependent on a finding by the NCD Commission that a) the demolition of the structure will not adversely impact the district, subdistrict, or abutting properties in the sense described in secondary goal #1, and b) the replacement project meets the purposes of the neighborhood conservation district with respect to secondary goals #2, 4, 5, and 7, where these are applicable.

Buildings that are individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places or that are contributing structures in National Register districts are strong candidates for preservation. However, all applications will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, and the NCD Commission will not necessarily protect all such structures from demolition.

Demolition (continued)

In evaluating an application to demolish a structure, the Commission should consider the following factors:

- the architectural and historical significance of the structure of which any portion is to be demolished
- the physical condition of the structure and its subsoil conditions and practical restoration or repair alternatives to demolition that might be available using modern techniques and materials
- the location of the structure in relation to adjacent uses and surrounding context
- the design of any proposed replacement structure
- the extent to which the proposed project advances the broad interests of the community, such as for provision of affordable housing or services to the public
- the financial costs of renovation compared with new construction; and
- if made, a claim of substantial or other hardship

Alterations

While potentially all alterations to exterior architectural features visible from a public way are subject to review by a neighborhood conservation district commission, the Study Committee recommends that the jurisdiction of the East Cambridge NCD Commission be limited as proposed in the attached Table of Jurisdiction for Alterations.

The goals of the district favor retention and repair, rather than replacement, of original or significant exterior fabric. Review of proposed alterations to an existing structure, and of all other features not exempted from review, should be made with regard to the following additional factors:

- the extent to which the integrity of the original design has been retained or previously diminished
- the consistency of the proposed alteration with the character, scale, massing, and detailing of surrounding properties; and
- the proximity of adjacent surrounding structures.

See <https://tinyurl.com/ECNCDstudy> for guidance on alterations to roofs, windows, materials, landscape and material features, and accessibility.

Committee discussion and public comments

Preview of next meeting agenda, June 16 at 6:00:

- Jurisdiction (continued)
- Goals and guidelines for residential areas (continued)
- Goals and guidelines for Cambridge Street
- Review of Preliminary Report and committee recommendations

Send comments to staff at ehill@cambridgema.gov

View the Study Committee website at <https://tinyurl.com/ECNCDstudy>