

THE

# CITY WIDE REZONING BULLETIN

Cambridge Community Development working jointly with the City-Wide Growth Management Advisory Committee

June 1998

## Are You Concerned About the Loss of Backyard Open Space?

In 1997 a group of citizens petitioned the City Council to make many substantial changes to the zoning regulations of Cambridge to guide the future development of the city. The City Council adopted several of these proposed changes.

The Planning Board recommended further study of the issues that were not resolved by the Council's vote and the Community Development Department proposed a two to three-year process to study and act on them.

The City Council requested and the City Manager appointed a Citywide Growth Management Advisory Committee (see page



*The connecting backyards of our residential areas provide significant shared benefits of green space and light. Please let us know what concerns you have about protecting this valuable resource.*

four for membership) composed of community residents and business people to advise the Department on the process and information needed for the rezoning study. This "City Wide Rezoning Bulletin" on backyard development and residential open space is being published at the recommendation of the Committee.

The major issues to be addressed in the Citywide Growth Management Process are:

- (1) Inclusionary zoning to create affordable housing. *This provision which requires residential developers to include 15% affordable units in their projects was adopted by City Council in March.*
- (2) Limits on infill development and loss of open space in residential areas. *This issue, which is illustrated in this Bulletin, is currently being examined and will be considered by the Planning Board during the summer.*
- (3) Transition "buffers" where high-density zones meet residential areas. *The committee will take up this issue next and will involve the public in discussions about transition buffers and appropriate zoning over the next year.*
- (4) Reduction in development allowed in commercial districts to control growth of traffic. *The committee will begin to discuss this issue in late 1999.*

## Residential District Open Space and Backyard Development

Current Cambridge zoning in residential districts permits three possible changes to residential backyards that can alter the character of neighborhoods:

1. Over-paving of back yards, usually for parking.
2. The expansion of dwellings into previously green yards
3. The addition of dwellings units, attached or separate from existing buildings.

The Growth Management Advisory Committee has taken this issue as its first item, focusing on the lower-density residential zones - Residence A, B, C and C-1.

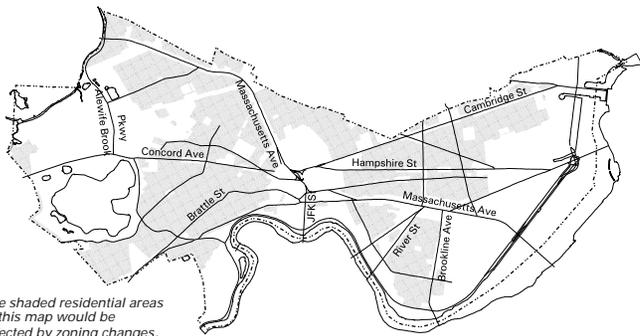
Although the "backyard development" of a hundred years ago is often regarded as today's charming cottage, many Cambridge residents are concerned that residential expansion infilling their blocks, as zoning often permits, diminishes the pattern of green back yards that contributes to the livability of the City.

The paving of backyards with asphalt to create additional parking results from the scarcity of on-street parking in many neighborhoods, from requirements in the zoning code (one parking space per unit for new dwelling units) and from the expectation of many residents, especially those purchasing new units, to have on-site parking for each unit. The added paving of large areas in time means fewer trees and other plantings, increases storm water runoff, increases nearby temperatures in the summer, and is unappealing to many, often nearby neighbors who have enjoyed the combined effect of adjacent backyards.

Possible tools to address these concerns range from retaining current regulation and improving enforcement, and offering education and incentives to retain green and permeable backyards, to instituting changes in the zoning code that would significantly reduce further backyard development, or to rules directly limiting additional paving.



*The addition of a housing unit in a backyard changes the sense of openness and privacy for all neighbors of the site.*



The shaded residential areas in this map would be affected by zoning changes.

# In Order to Maintain Existing Residential Open Space.. Should We:

A Typical Cambridge Lot

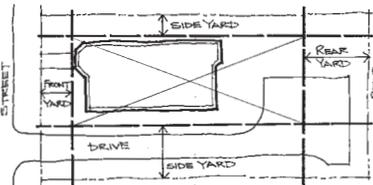
Prevent Over Paving

Limit New Units in Yards

Limit Building Additions



## Understanding Existing Zoning For Residential Open Space

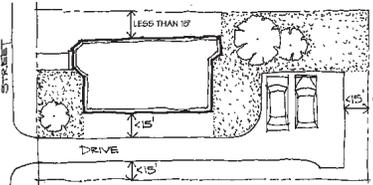


### A. Yard Setbacks

All residential buildings must be set back a certain distance from the front, side and rear property lines of a lot to provide sunlight and air to the street and to neighbors. In some zoning districts the setback is a fixed number, while in other districts the setback dimension is determined by a formula that reflects the height and width of the house.

The area of the lot beyond all of these yard setback requirements is the only area on the lot within which a residential building may be built.

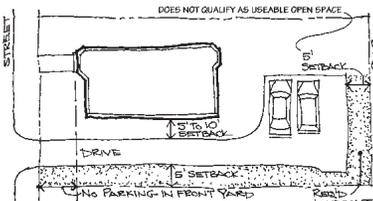
On the illustration this buildable area is demarcated with an "x". The remaining areas of the lot are unbuildable and constitute the required front, side, and rear yards. Accessory garages have different yard requirements.



### B. Useable Open Space

The percent of a lot required to be useable open space varies from one zoning district to another. The zoning ordinance defines "useable" as that portion of a lot not occupied by the building itself, driveways or parking areas. Additionally, useable open space must be at least 15 feet x 15 feet in size. A space which is less than fifteen feet wide (>15') does not qualify as "useable open space". The current zoning definition of "useable" open space does not address the quality of the open space - that is, whether it is planted, green, or paved.

Not all unpaved areas on a lot may be counted as "useable" open space. On the illustration, the stippled areas of the lot with at least 15' dimensions may be counted as useable open space.

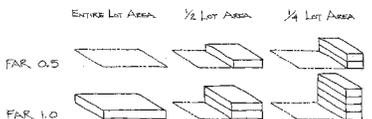


### C. Areas of Allowed & Required Parking

In all zoning districts, one parking space is required for each housing unit. However, a household may want more than one car, in which case another parking space may be built on the lot. For example, if three housing units are on a site, three on-site parking spaces are required by zoning but the three households may own four, five or six cars.

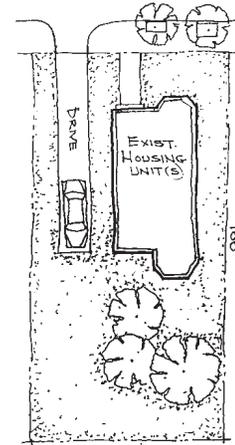
Parking spaces may be located in side yards and backyards, but not in front yards. Paved parking areas and driveways must be set back 5 feet from property lines. These setback areas must also be landscaped. Paved parking areas and driveways must also be set back between five and ten feet from any wall of a house that contains windows.

Parking spaces must be arranged, in most instances, so that one parked car does not block another from entering or exiting. Therefore, "tandem" parking spaces are not allowed unless more than one parking space is assigned to the same household. Note that the required 5' setback does not qualify as "useable open space".



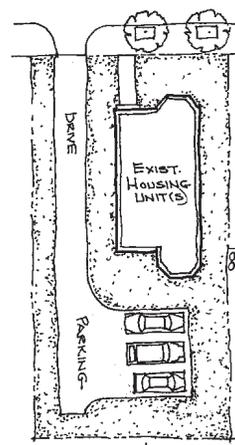
### D. Floor Area Ratio (FAR)

Floor Area Ratio (FAR) limits how intensely a lot may be built upon. FAR is the gross floor area of a building divided by the area of a lot. For example, a building of 2,500 square feet on a 5,000 square foot lot would have an FAR of .5 (2,500 / 5,000 = .5).



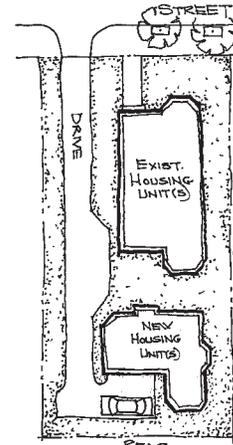
### A Typical Cambridge Lot

For purposes of illustration, we have assumed a typical Cambridge lot of 5,000 square feet. The lot shows the common sideyard driveway, one which often serves more than the single car pictured. As they form typical blocks in Cambridge, the backyards provide numerous benefits of light, air and greenery to those households all along the block.



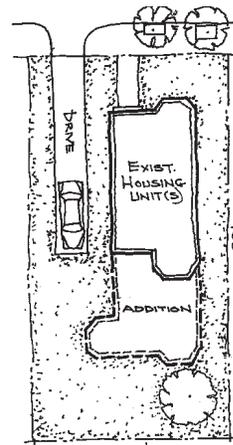
### A. Parking & Paving in Backyards

Increasingly Cambridge residents are seeing formerly green and planted backyards converted into paved areas to accommodate increased parking spaces for two-car households and homes expanded to contain more units which then require additional parking.



### B. Increased Development in Backyards

As demand for housing in Cambridge has continued to rise, a number of backyards have been developed for additional housing units and townhouses. Neighbors living close to these new backyard developments have experienced a loss of views, privacy and greenery.



### C. Other House Additions

From time to time homeowners may seek to expand their residences to add bedrooms, kitchens or living areas, without creating an additional dwelling unit. Though some may consider these additions intrusions into backyards, others consider these additions to be reasonable if they are kept to a appropriate size.

## Should We:

### Require Unpaved Surfaces for a % of the Lot

Portions of the lot could be required to have surfaces that allow water to filter into the ground. Such permeable areas would make it easier to maintain growing plants and reduce the amount of water that would run into the city's stormwater system. Enforcing such requirements over time might be difficult.

### Develop Administrative Procedures that Make Existing Requirements More Easily Enforced

At times existing requirements for parking or landscape buffer are not observed when property owners make changes on their lot. Changes in City procedures might make it easier to catch these violations of the requirements. For instance, paving contractors might be licensed so there is an incentive for them to be sure their paving jobs are consistent with the zoning requirements.

### Develop Incentives for More Appealing Designs for Parking Areas and Landscaping on House Lots

Neighborhoods and city agencies might work to provide information and services to homeowners that would encourage them to voluntarily adopt more attractive and friendly designs when the open space in back yards is altered.

## Should We:

### Increase Lot Area / Dwelling Unit Requirements

New construction in the back yard may occur if there is the opportunity to build another dwelling unit. If the zoning was changed to reduce the number of dwelling units allowed (by increasing the amount of lot needed for each dwelling unit on the lot), the incentive to build a new home in the back yard might be reduced or eliminated.

### Increase Rear Yard Setbacks Required

A potential zoning change is to increase the rear yard setback requirement. This tool could limit the potential to add additional dwelling units without reducing the ability of homeowners to add reasonably sized home additions.

### Increase % of Required Open Space

One possible zoning "mechanism" to reduce the potential to construct additional dwelling units in backyards is to increase the required percentage of open space beyond that now required in each Residential Zoning District.

Though this tool initially appears to have potential to address over paving and overdevelopment, a large increase in required percentage of open space would apparently be required to affect the desired outcomes.

### Reduce the Permitted FAR on the Lot

If the area of floor space allowed in relation to lot area is reduced in the zoning ordinance, there will be less building that can be constructed on a lot.

## Should We:

### Increase Rear Yard Setbacks Required

A potential zoning change is to increase the rear yard setback requirement. This tool could limit the potential to add additional dwelling units without reducing the ability of homeowners to add reasonably sized home additions. This tool does not address the problem of increased incidence of new or expanded paved parking areas.

### Reduce the Permitted FAR on the Lot

If the area of floor space allowed in relation to lot area is reduced in the zoning ordinance, there will be less building that can be constructed on a lot. It is possible that on some lots no additional building would be possible, either as additions to the existing house or as a new building in the back if the requirement is strict enough.



**Please Let Us Know What You Think**

COMMITTEE MEETINGS  
All meetings of the CGMAC are open to the public. Meetings are held at 57 Inman Street from 5-7 p.m. on the first Wednesday and third Thursday of each month.

E-MAIL  
Send comments via e-mail to [sdash@ci.cambridge.ma.us](mailto:sdash@ci.cambridge.ma.us)

WEB PAGE  
The CGMAC web page is accessible through the CDD web site on the City of Cambridge home page at [www.ci.cambridge.ma.us](http://www.ci.cambridge.ma.us)

FAX  
Please send us your thoughts/pictures at fax number 349-4669

PHONE  
Contact Stuart Dash at 349-4640

CABLE T.V.  
See us on Channel 3

**Public Meeting**  
Tuesday, June 9th  
7pm  
Cambridge Senior Center  
806 Mass Avenue

# Frequently Asked Questions

- Q.** Will I have to change my yard or house if the rules change?  
**A.** No, any zoning change will affect only the changes that are proposed after the effective date of zoning.
- Q.** Will I be able to add a room to my house?  
**A.** The goal of any proposed zoning change would be to leave reasonable expansion possibilities in place on most lots, so in most cases the answer will be "yes". However, each site will have different situations with respect to the rules, so in some cases adding even one room may already not be allowed, and revisions might increase the number of such cases.
- Q.** Does this mean there will be no new infill construction in a residential neighborhood?  
**A.** No. Some lots may still be able to meet the requirements for size and setbacks that allow additional units.
- Q.** What if I want to pave my backyard?  
**A.** If a strict rule requiring a % of unpaved surface is adopted it may limit your ability to pave your backyard.

## TimeLine

The time line for this portion of the process is as follows:

JANUARY-APRIL 1998

Committee Research

MAY-AUGUST 1998

Public Outreach

JULY-SEPTEMBER 1998

Planning Board Hearings,  
Deliberations

SEPTEMBER 1998

City Council Vote

**PLEASE COME!**

**Public Meeting**  
on  
**Backyard Open Space**

**Tuesday, June 9th at 7pm**  
**Cambridge Senior Center**  
**806 Mass Avenue**

## Next Steps

### PUBLIC MEETINGS

Come and tell us what concerns are most important to you - use of backyard for additional housing units, parking or building additions?

### PLANNING BOARD/CITY COUNCIL

Beginning in July, the Planning Board will hold hearings on any proposed open space zoning changes. A Planning Board recommendation will go to City Council for hearing and vote in September.

### LATER ISSUES

Over the next nine months the City Wide Growth Management Advisory Committee will take up the issue of how to create better transitions where low density/low height zones meet high density/high height zones. Following these recommendations the Committee will work on zoning for commercial areas which will minimize traffic impacts.



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## It's your turn!

The Community Development Department and City-Wide Growth Management Advisory Committee would like to know your thoughts on the issues discussed in this publication. Please send us your comments on issues and your concerns regarding the future growth of our city. Write your response here (feel free to attach additional pages if you need to) and mail it to: Stuart Dash, Community Development Department, 57 Inman Street, Cambridge, MA 02139 Telephone 349-4640, Fax 349-4669, E-Mail: sdash@ci.cambridge.ma.us

