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CITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board  
From: CDD Staff  
Date: **June 13, 2012**  
Re: **North Massachusetts Avenue Rezoning Petition**

On March 28, 2012 the North Massachusetts Avenue Rezoning Petition was submitted to the Cambridge City Council on behalf of the Planning Board. This petition includes zoning changes recommended through a planning study conducted by CDD for the North Massachusetts Avenue area. The principal elements of the proposed rezoning are to maintain ground floor retail, protect historic structures, and facilitate outdoor seating.

Since the time that the petition was submitted, city staff has drafted the attached alternate zoning language to address issues that have been raised by community members and others at prior public hearings. The alternate language makes the following substantive changes:

- In response to concerns from neighbors who reside in the area between Harvard Square and Porter Square, the language has been restructured so that all changes affect only the portion of the Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District north of Porter Square.
- Some proposed language has been clarified following questions and comments made at the public hearings. For instance, it is made more explicit that the proposed ground-floor use requirements will not result in the allowance of additional uses that are not permitted under base zoning regulations.
- New language has been introduced to address some issues raised at the Ordinance Committee hearing, including limitations on the frontage of bank uses, a requirement that reductions in the height of ground-floor uses cannot provide for increases in the height of above-grade uses, and a specific listing of properties with significance for historic preservation.
- The parking exemption for 5,000 square feet of non-residential use is removed in the alternate language based on comments received at the public hearings and because there is already a small business parking exemption in the zoning ordinance.

Through the alternate language, the intent and content of the original petition are maintained; however, all of the changes affect only the area of North Massachusetts Avenue that was considered as part of the planning study.

In addition to the alternate zoning language please also find attached:

- Photographs of a residential development on North Massachusetts Avenue built under current zoning and an example of a similarly sized residential development with non-residential uses at the ground floor and bay windows.
- A list of uses permitted in the base Business A-2 zoning district as well as a list of uses that qualify as meeting the non-residential ground floor use requirement as proposed.
- A sample listing of retail establishments by size.
- A list and corresponding map of historic and potentially historically significant properties on North Massachusetts Avenue.

In response to some of the points made by the Planning Board at the previous public hearing regarding the petition, we provide the following comments:

#### Character of North Massachusetts Avenue

It was observed that the Avenue seems to “open up” just outside and north of Porter Square. From a pedestrian perspective, starting at this location, there is a long straight view down the Avenue as retail uses give way to some housing with front yards, as well as parking lots and other automobile focused uses. While the more generous front yards may provide relief in some cases, in other cases the uses along the ground floor (including, in some cases, housing) tend to discourage pedestrian activity. The intent of the proposed zoning changes is to protect the existing character where there are historic buildings with landscaped front yards; however, as lots with parking or other automobile-oriented uses are redeveloped in the future, the zoning would help promote a more urban, pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use environment. It is not anticipated that the zoning changes proposed in the petition will lead to immediate or drastic changes to the character of the Avenue. Most likely, change will happen over time, on a few key sites.

#### Size and Depth of Stores

As shown in the attached sample listing of retail establishments, many neighborhood-focused retail establishments tend to be less than 5,000 square feet. The Planning Board could approve establishments of a greater size if they are consistent with the goals of the district. Also, based on a review of existing buildings, 40-50 feet is a typical depth for small retail spaces along Massachusetts Avenue. The Planning Board can modify this requirement as well if circumstances favor a more atypically shallow retail space.

#### Building Height and Façade Design

The current zoning requirements on North Massachusetts Avenue have, in some cases, not resulted in building designs that promote pedestrian friendly or inviting streetscapes. The changes to the bulk control plane and bay window regulations in the proposed zoning are intended to help accommodate the new proposed ground-floor non-residential use requirements and also better incentivize articulation in building

façade design. The bulk control plane requirements would still apply to rear portions of a building within 50 feet of a residential zoning district line. While a vertical break or cornice line might be appropriate in some cases to distinguish the top floor of a residential building, a strict standard may not be desirable. As seen in the example photos, forcing articulation at the top floor (as required under current zoning) does not always result in a more attractive design.