

East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Study Committee – Version 2.0

Charles Sullivan and Eric Hill
Cambridge Historical Commission
July 20, 2022

Tonight's Agenda

Introduction of study committee members and staff

The conservation district study to date

1. Neighborhood outreach experience
2. Postcard poll results
3. Future Directions

Comments from members of the public after each item

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.

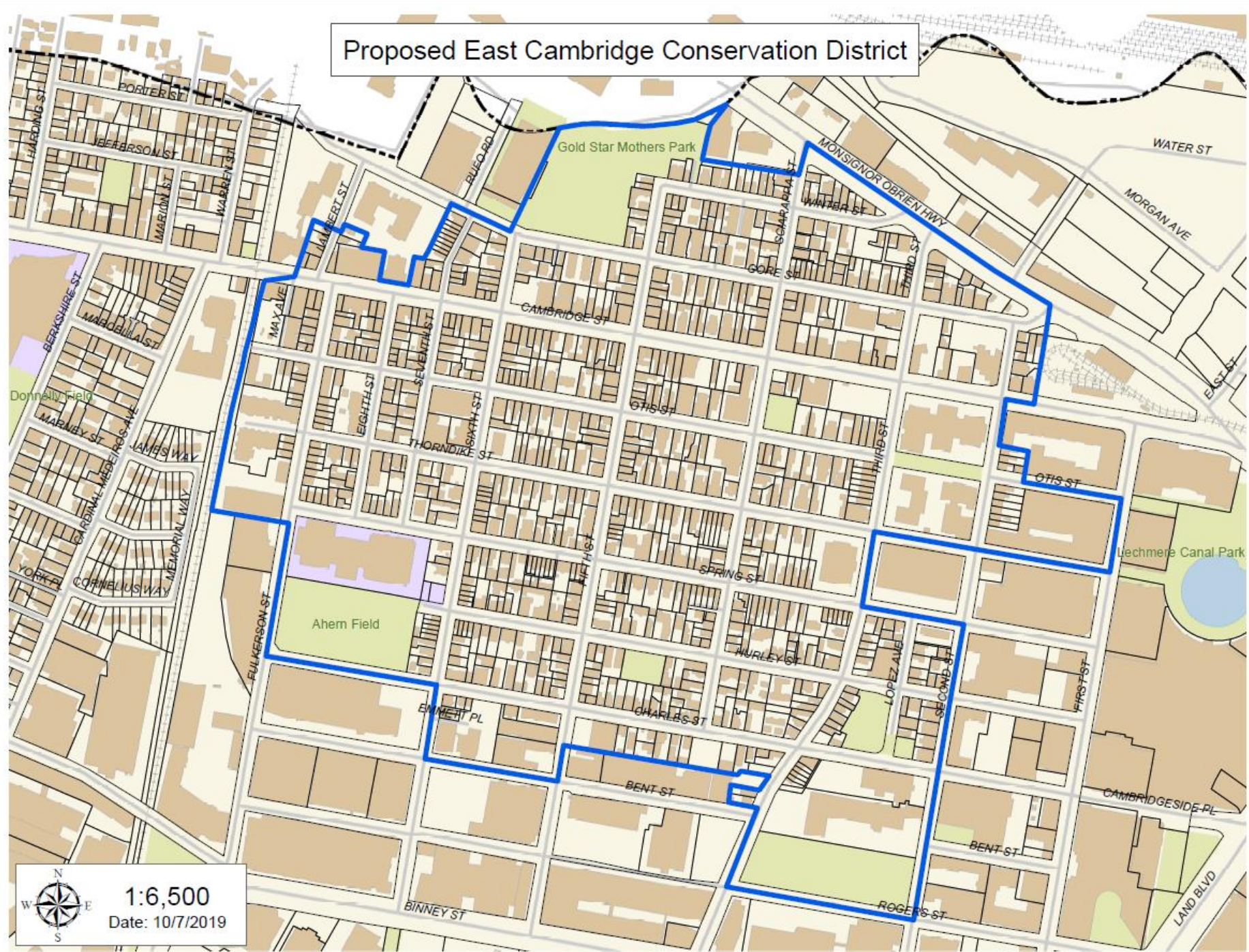
Cambridge has approximately 2,500 National Register-listed properties.

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. Neighborhood Outreach

Preliminary Report approved April 20, 2022

- ✓ Posted on CHC website
- ✓ Available at O'Connell Branch
- ✓ Available by mail upon request

Presentations to East Cambridge Planning Team and other venues

Walking Tours and Personal Outreach

Neighborhood Outreach – Walking Tours

✓	Saturday, May 14, 11:00 AM	Half Crown-Marsh NCD	Eric Hill and Jim Van Sickle	20
✓	Saturday, June 4 , 11:00 AM	EC history and architecture	Susan Maycock	25
✓	Saturday, June 11, 11:00 AM	EC conservation & development	Eric Hill and Charlie Sullivan	25
✓	Thursday, June 16, 6:00	EC conservation & development	Eric Hill and Charlie Sullivan	25
✓	Saturday, June 25, 11:00	Office hours at Centanni Park	Eric Hill and Charlie Sullivan	2
✓	Monday, June 27, 6:00	Office hours at Toomey Park	Eric Hill and Charlie Sullivan	
✓	Thursday, June 30, 12:00	Office hours at O'Connell Branch	Eric Hill and Charlie Sullivan	7
✓	Thursday, July 6, 5:00	Office hours at O'Connell Branch	Eric Hill and Charlie Sullivan	8

THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Spring 2022 Walking Tour Series

Posted on **MAY 4, 2022** by **CAMBRIDGEHISTORICALCOMMISSION**

This spring, the staff of the Cambridge Historical Commission will offer walking tours exploring the history, development, and uses of neighborhood conservation districts. What is an NCD? How are they created and by whom? What makes a neighborhood special and worth preserving?

The four-part series will begin on May 14 with a walk through the Half Crown-Marsh NCD in Old Cambridge. Tours on June 4, 11, and 16 will explore the proposed East Cambridge NCD. Each tour will take about 90 minutes.

Saturday, May 14: Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District at 11:00am. Meet on Mt. Auburn Street at the corner of Brewer Street (in front of Darwin's).

Tour leaders Eric Hill, the CHC's survey director, and Jim Van Sickle, a longtime member of the district commission, will provide an overview of the Half Crown-Marsh NCD and highlight some of the area's history and architecture. This NCD of approximately 200 buildings represents a blending of what were once two separate NCDS. The district is west of Harvard Square between Brattle Street and the river; it is bounded by Hilliard Street on the east and Lowell Street on the west and bisected by Longfellow Park.



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HOURS & INFO



831 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge MA 02139
617-349-4683

Please note: Due to COVID-19, the City of Cambridge is currently not accepting in-person appointments.

Saturday June 4: East Cambridge History and Architecture at 11:00 AM. Meet at Centanni Park, Third Street at Otis Street.

East Cambridge is one of the city's oldest neighborhoods. It was developed in the late 18th century by Andrew Craigie, a land speculator, who convinced Middlesex County to build its new courthouse not in Old Cambridge but in East Cambridge. The tour will be led by the architectural historian Susan Maycock, the author of *Survey of Architectural History: East Cambridge* (1988) and co-author of *Building Old Cambridge* (2016).



Saturday, June 11: East Cambridge Preservation and Development at 11:00 AM. Meet at 11:00 AM at Gold Star Mothers Park, corner of Winter and Fifth streets.

East Cambridge is one of the oldest and most densely settled neighborhoods in the city, with a rich mixture of early- to mid-19th century architectural styles, traversed by a traditional neighborhood shopping street. It is also a source of naturally occurring affordable housing. Trends in Cambridge real estate often increase the pressure for development, which can lead to inappropriate alterations or destruction of significant buildings. Charles Sullivan and Eric Hill of the Cambridge Historical Commission will discuss the current proposal to establish a neighborhood conservation district in the area.



Thursday, June 16: East Cambridge Preservation and Development. Meet at 6:00 PM at Timothy Toomey Park, Third and Bent streets.

[current hours and research assistance.](#)

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Half Crown-Marsh NCD Walking Tour, May 14



East Cambridge Architecture and History Walking Tour, June 4



East Cambridge Conservation and Development Walking Tour, June 11



East Cambridge Architecture and History Walking Tour, June 11



2. Postcard Poll

“Postcard poll” mailed during the week of June 20

- ✓ Summary and pre-paid postcard sent 1st class mail to 1,324 East Cambridge property owners on the current Assessors list.
- ✓ Summary and pre-paid postcard sent 1st class mail to 1,732 East Cambridge residents who responded to the latest city census.

Tabulation of postcards received by July 20.



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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To: East Cambridge Residents and Property Owners

The East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Study Committee has been meeting for two years to address concerns about development trends in the area and now needs your feedback on its recommendations.

The proposed East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District (NCD) would regulate demolition, new construction, and important alterations to existing buildings with the goal of protecting the architectural character of the area while supporting appropriate change and development and without being as stringent as an historic district. Similar districts were established in Mid Cambridge in 1983 and Harvard Square in 2000.



Neighborhood Conservation Districts protect historic resources by regulating building permits affecting exterior features visible from a public way. To address conditions in East Cambridge without unduly burdening property owners, the Study Committee recommends automatic approval of activities including new siding; alterations that do not change window or door locations and leave significant historical features intact; replacement windows (with certain conditions), vents, heating and air conditioning equipment; solar panels, charging stations, most roofing materials, and skylights; and fences less than 4' high in front of a building or less than 6' high elsewhere on the property. On Cambridge Street, restoration of original storefronts would be encouraged, and zoning-compliant signs would be exempt from review. Interior alterations, landscaping, paint colors, repairs in kind, and ordinary maintenance activities are not regulated.

If an NCD is adopted by the City Council, the City Manager will appoint East Cambridge residents and property owners to a commission that will review building permit applications for new construction, demolition, and alterations to properties in the district. Demolition and new construction would always be subject to review; decisions on alterations would be binding or non-binding based on the nature of the work and whether or not the property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places (see map).

East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Table of Jurisdiction

Type of Work		National Register	Non-National Register
Demolition		Binding Review	Binding Review
New Construction		Binding Review	Binding Review
Alterations including:			
A	New siding or paint on exterior masonry	Binding Review	Non-Binding Review
B	Removal of significant original features	Binding Review	Non-Binding Review
C	Change roof form, shape or height; new dormers	Binding Review	Non-Binding Review
D	Replacement of slate roof with other material	Binding Review	Non-Binding Review
E	Change door or window locations or sizes	Binding Review	Non-Binding Review
F	Fences >4' in front or >6' high behind front plane	Binding review	Non-binding Review
Most other activities exempt from jurisdiction or subject to staff review			

Proponents argue that the public benefits of a district would help conserve significant buildings in the historic core of East Cambridge; protect generational ownership and "naturally occurring" affordable housing; support smart growth; provide a public forum for comments on development projects; and encourage storefront revitalization on Cambridge Street.

Opponents disagree with these findings. They argue that the unintended consequences of a neighborhood conservation district might include increased costs; the prospect of deferred maintenance; a stifling of creativity; unnecessarily long delays; and arbitrary and capricious decisions by an NCD commission.



Manuel Sears house, 66 Hurley Street (1907), before and after restoration with a Certificate of Appropriateness from the Cambridge Historical Commission.

We encourage everyone to read the *Preliminary Report of the Study Committee* for a fuller understanding of the proposal. The Report, along with minutes, documents, and recordings of past Study Committee meetings, is available on the Cambridge Historical Commission webpage at <https://tinyurl.com/ECNCDstudy>. Requests for copies can be sent to Eric Hill at the Cambridge Historical Commission at ehill@cambridgema.gov or by phone at 617-349-4688. CHC staff will also be available to answer questions at the following locations:

- Saturday, June 25, 11:30-1:00 Centanni Park
- Monday, June 27, 6:00-7:30 Toomey Park
- Thursday, June 30, 12:00-1:30 O'Connell Branch Library

We ask that respondents return the enclosed postcard by July 11; if you received two mailings please fill out and return both cards. The Study Committee will take the results into account as it prepares a Final Report to the Cambridge Historical Commission. The Commission will formulate a recommendation to the City Council, which alone has the authority to enact the designation.

Charles Sullivan
Executive Director

East Cambridge NCD Postcard Poll

1) Your name: _____

2) Check all that apply:

- I'm a property owner in the study area.
- I live in the study area.

3) Your address in the study area: _____

4) Do you support the creation of a neighborhood conservation district in East Cambridge?

- Yes**
- No**
- Not sure**

Please enter comments or suggestions

Gray cards to property owners

Yellow cards to census respondents

Postcard Poll – All Responses

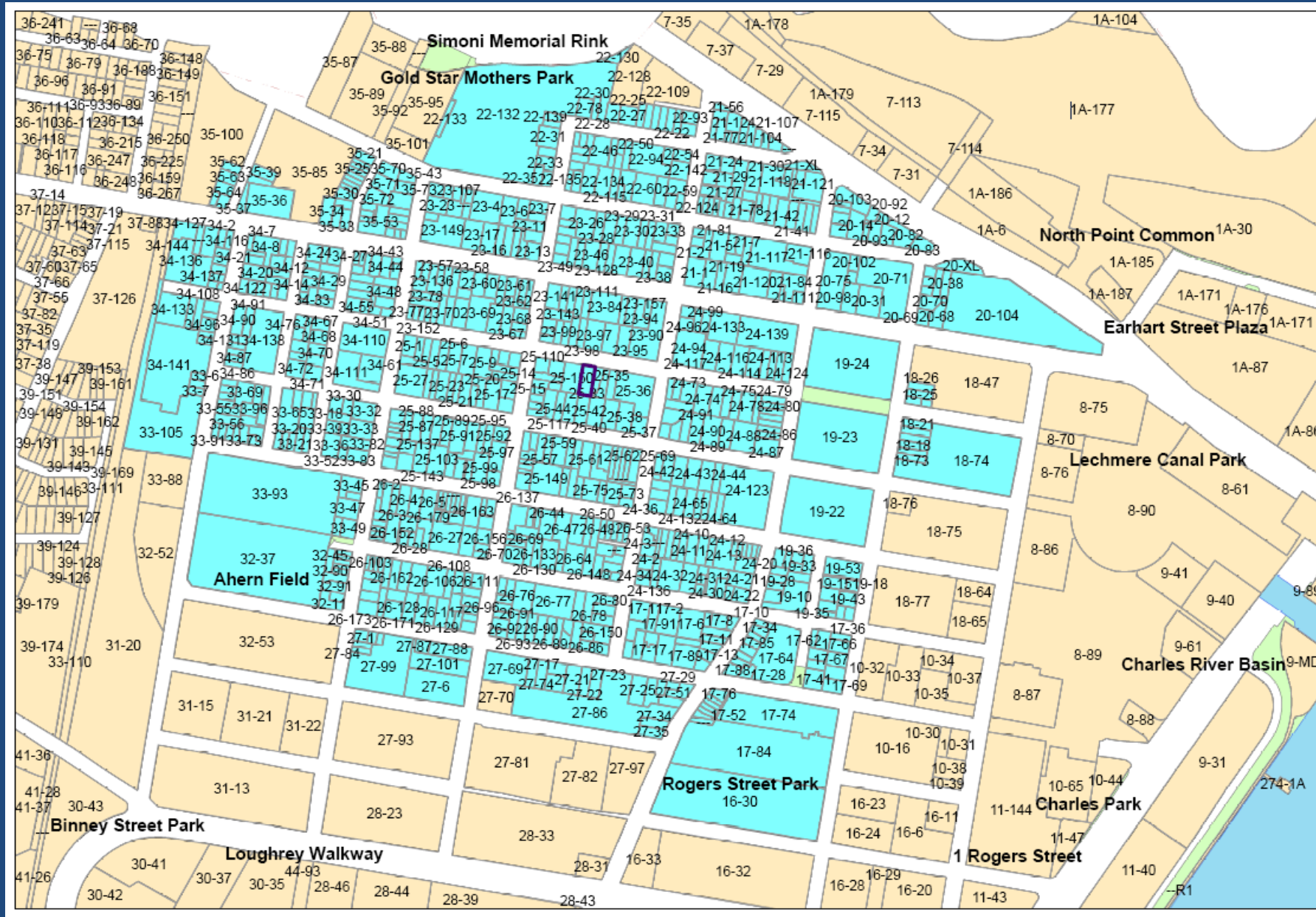
Owners:

Mailings sent out	1,324	
Responses	212	16.9%
Returns	73	

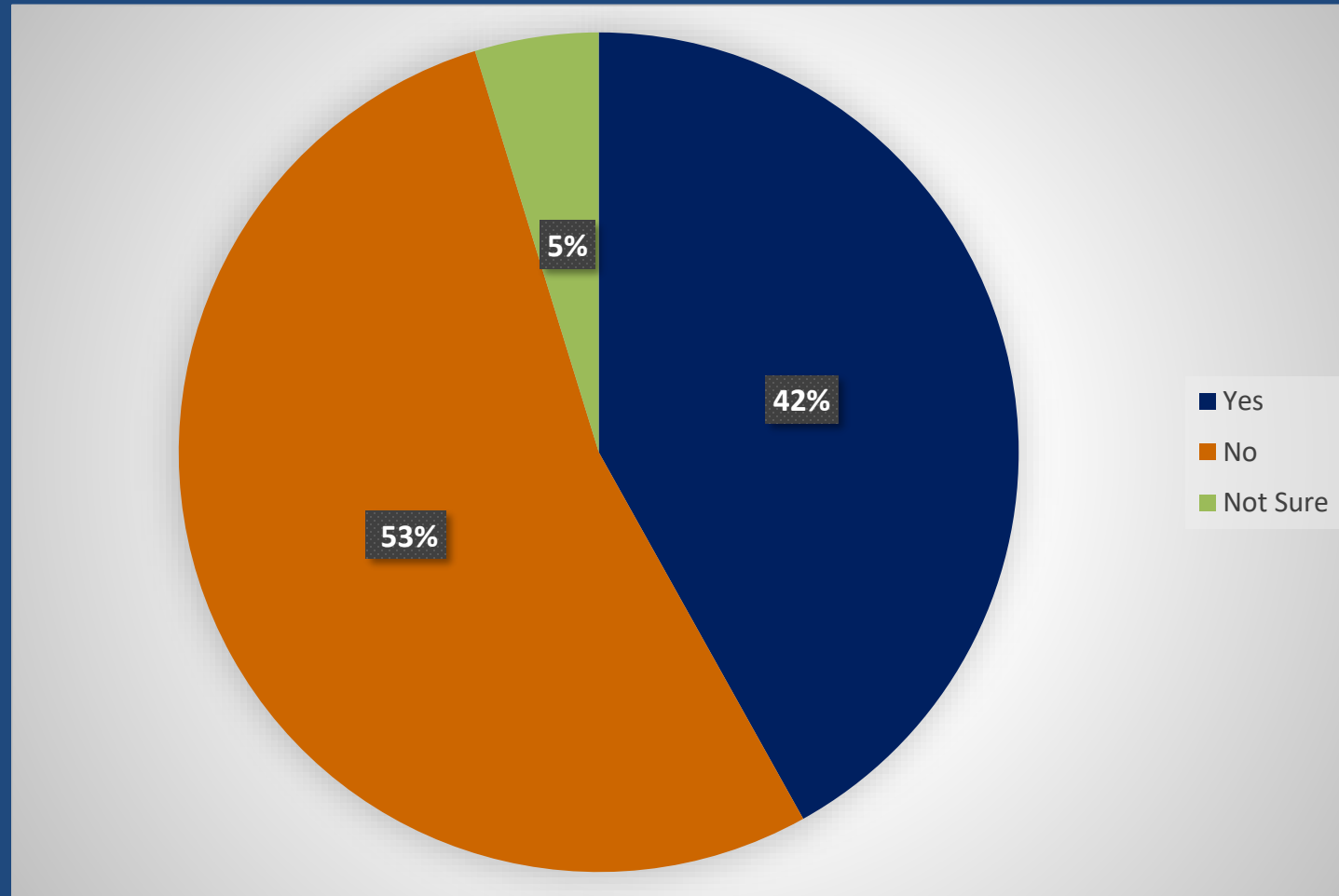
Voters:

Mailings sent out	1,732	
Responses	322	19.0%
Returns	40	

Postcard Poll to All Property Owners and Active Voters

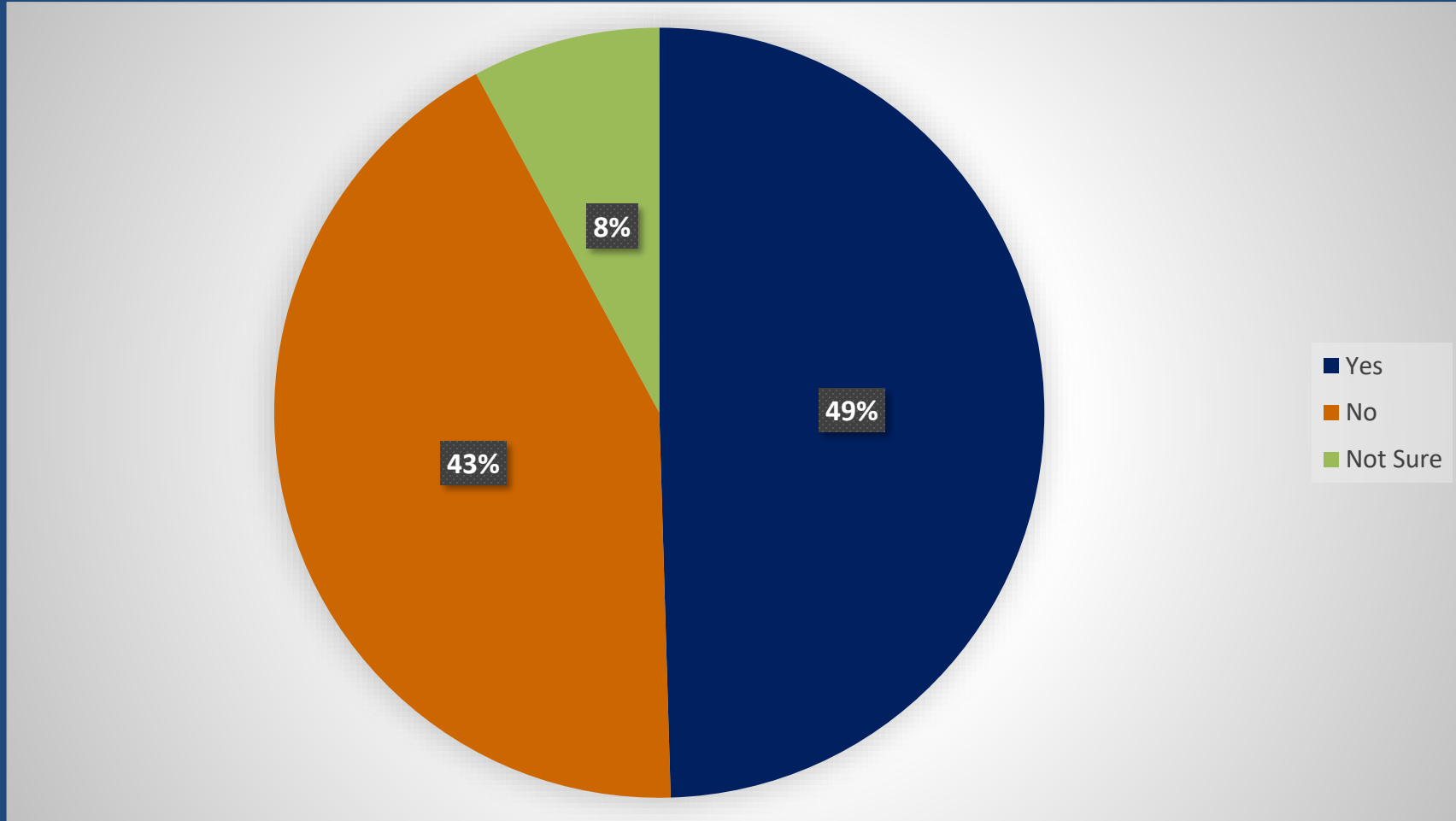


All Properties - Assessed Owners



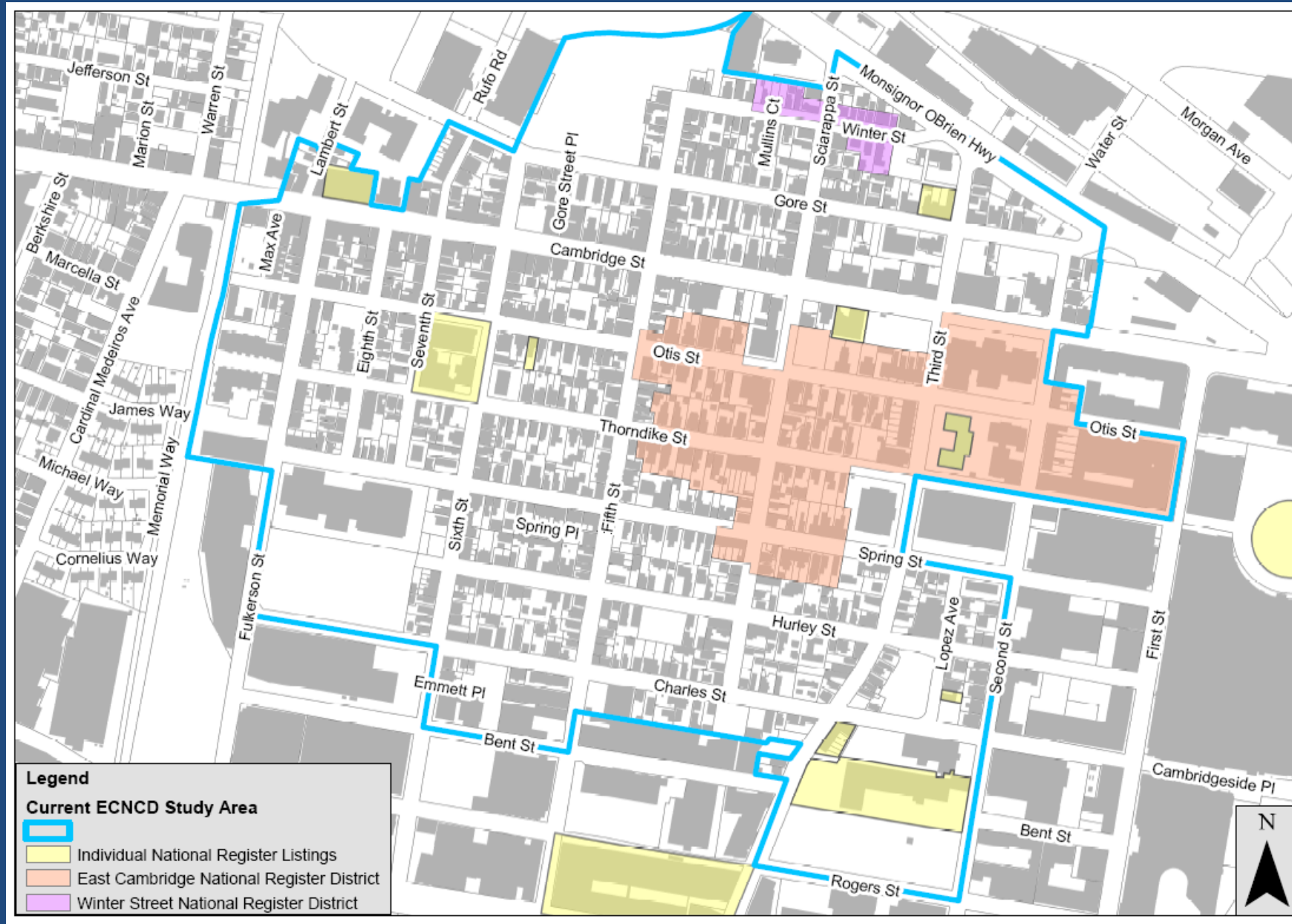
In favor:	42%
Opposed:	53%
Not sure:	5%

All Properties - Active Voters



In favor:	49%
Opposed:	43%
Not sure:	8%

Postcard Poll to Owners and Residents of National Register Properties



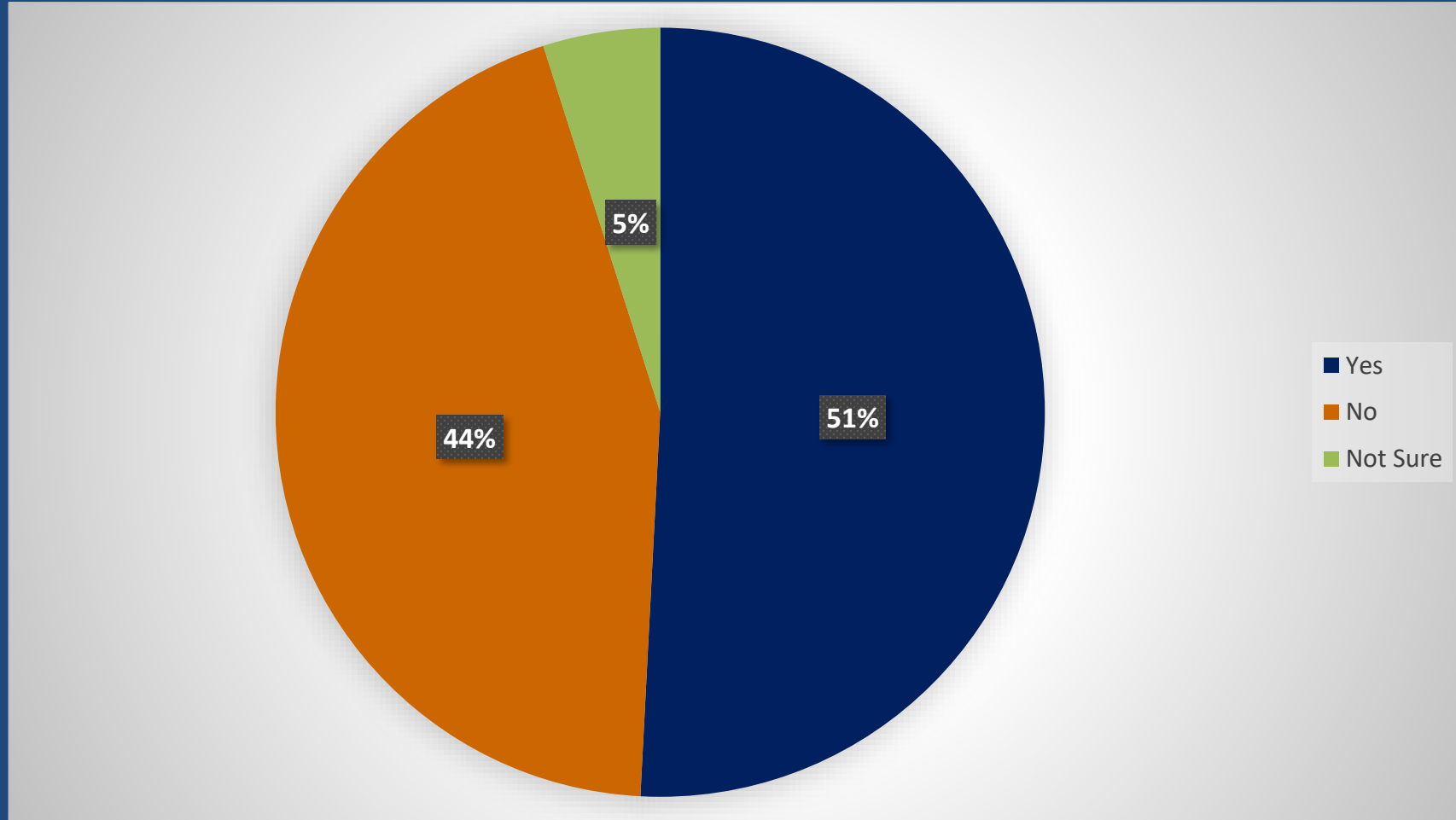
National Register-Listed Properties in East Cambridge

Individual Listings	Location	Number of Properties
American Net and Twine Company Factory	155 Second St	1
Benjamin Hoyt House	134 Otis St	1
Bottle House Block	204-214 Third St	1
East Cambridge Savings Bank	292 Cambridge St	1
Isaac Underwood House	42 Lopez Ave	1
Lechmere Point Corporation Houses	45-51 Gore St and 25 Third St	4
Old Middlesex County Superior Courthouse*	90 Third St	1
Sacred Heart Complex	Sixth St and Thorndike St	1
Union Railway Car Barn	613-621 Cambridge St	1
Districts		
East Cambridge NR District	Otis and Thorndike between First and Fifth streets	114
Winter Street NR District	Winter Street near Sciarappa Street	18

Total Number of Properties = 143

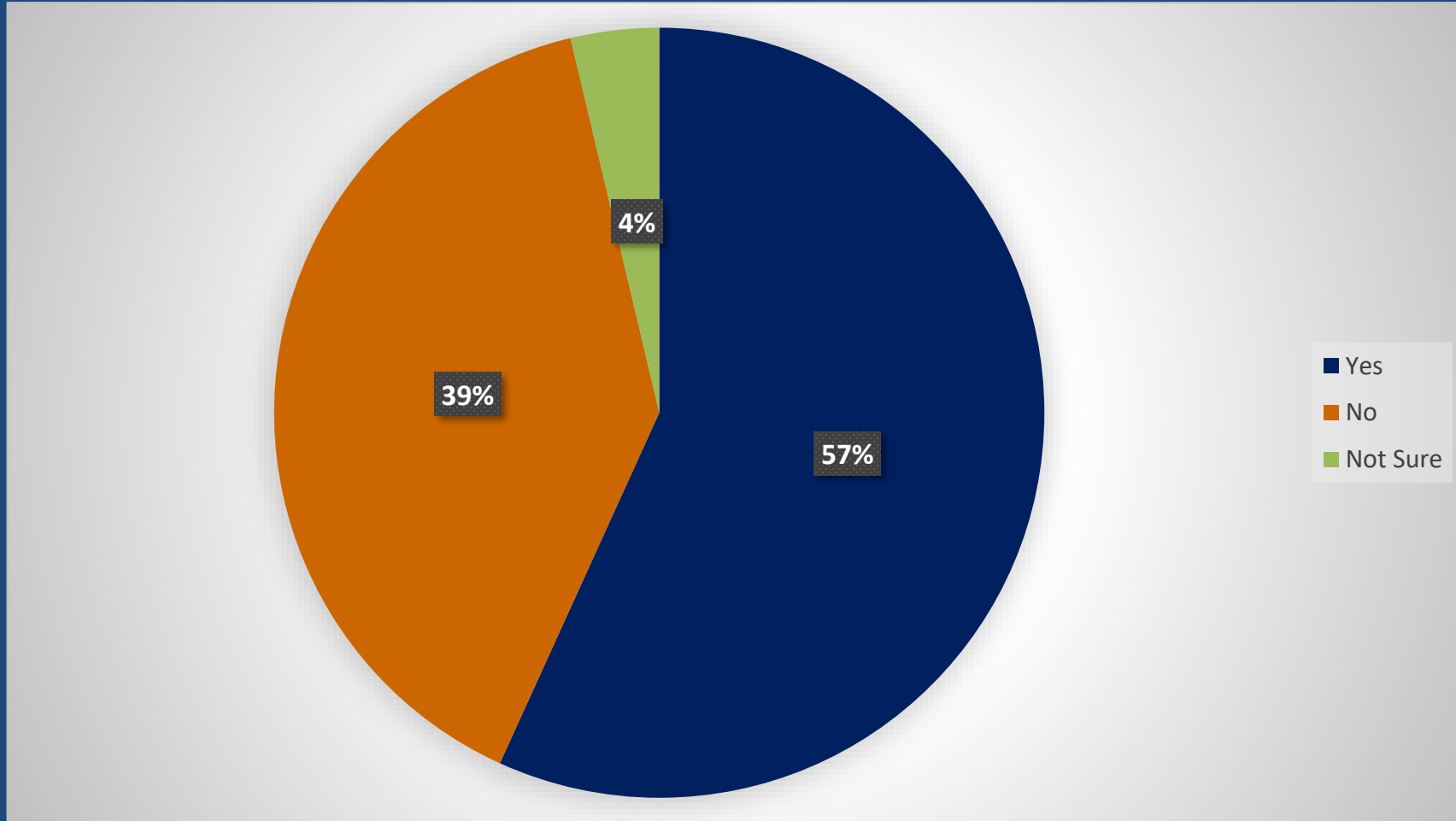
*Old Middlesex County Superior Courthouse also included in the East Cambridge NR District

National Register Properties - Assessed Owners



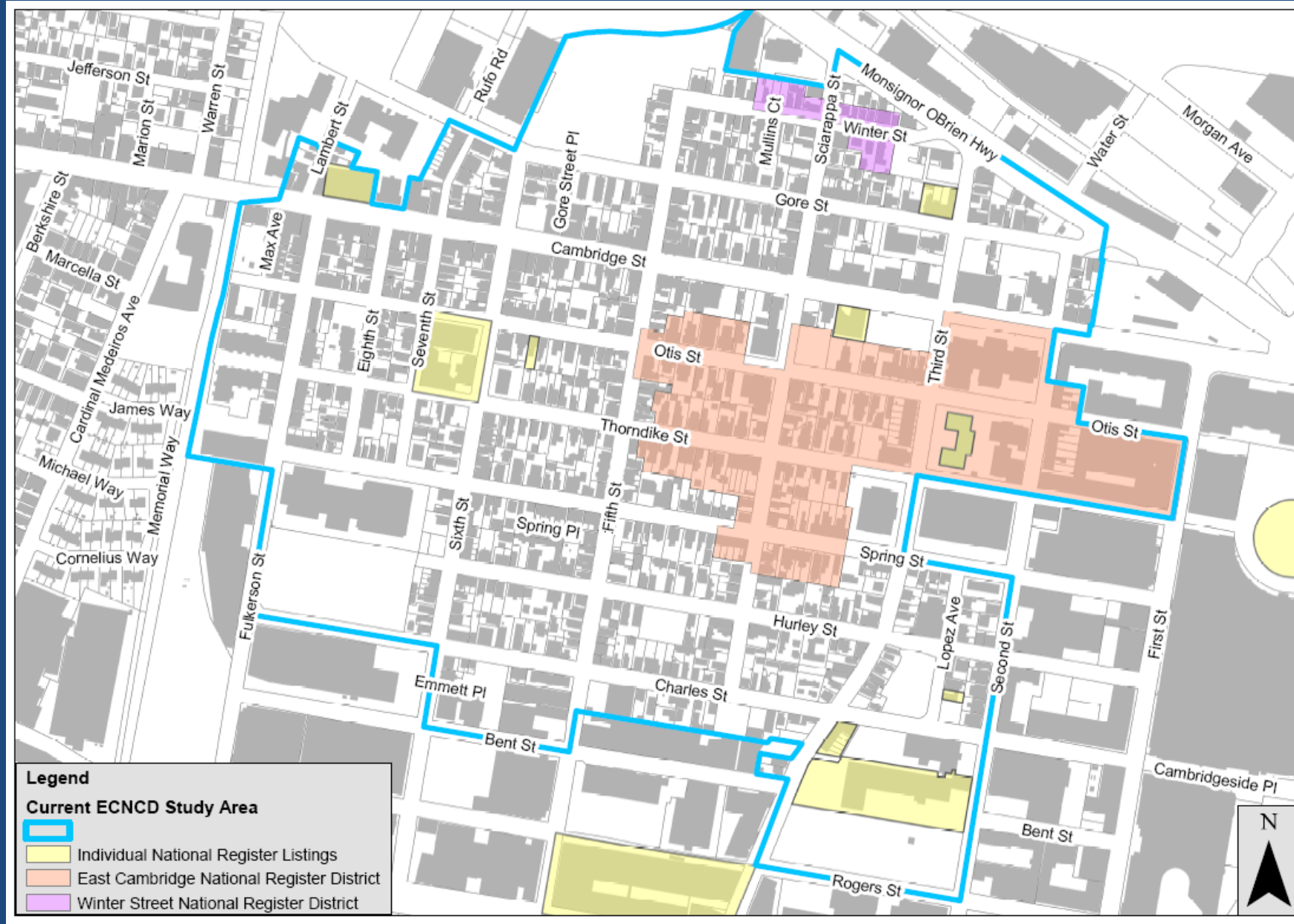
In favor:	51%
Opposed:	44%
Not sure:	5%

National Register Properties - Active Voters

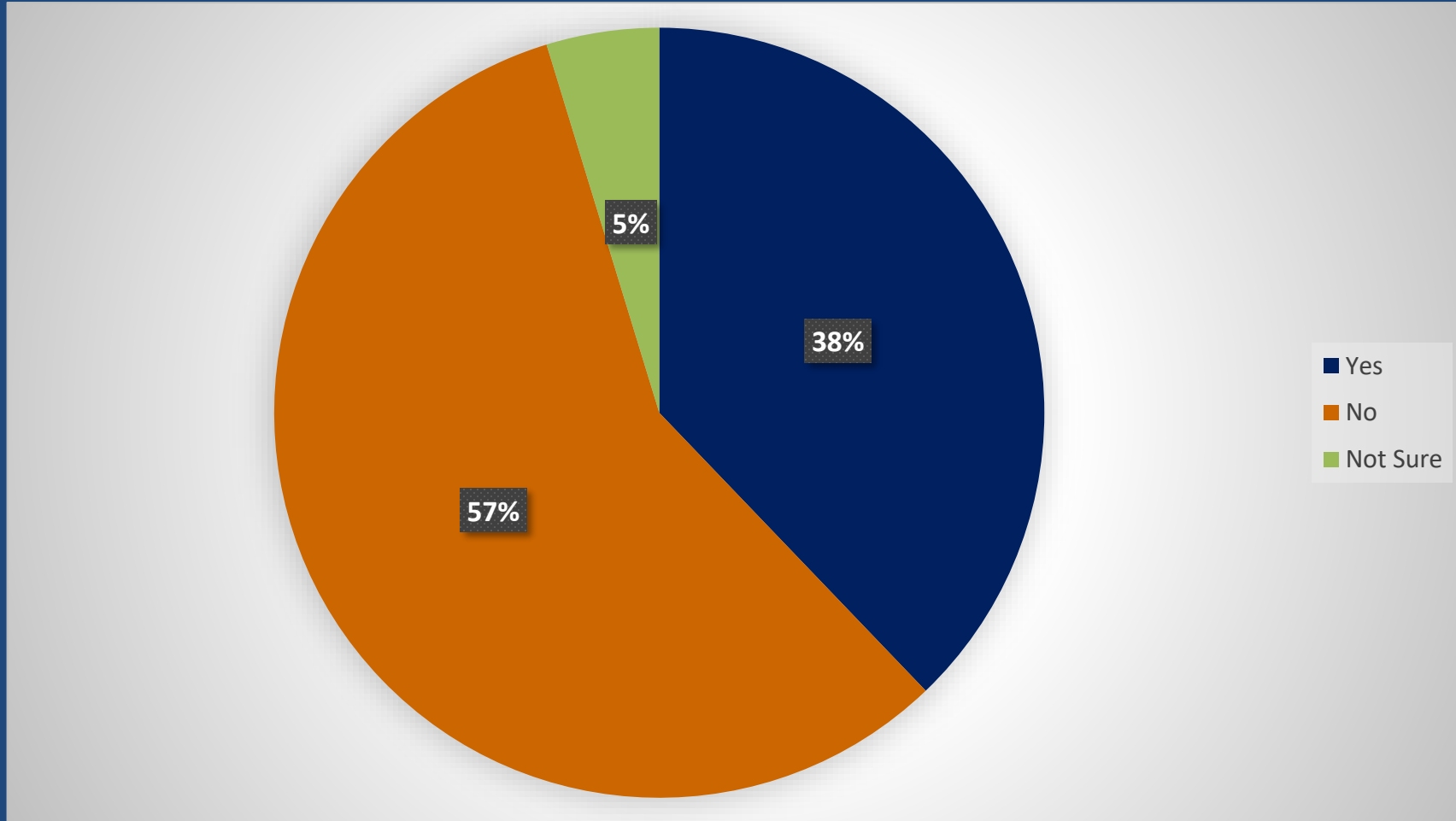


In favor:	57%
Opposed:	39%
Not sure:	4%

Postcard Poll to Owners and Residents of National Register Properties

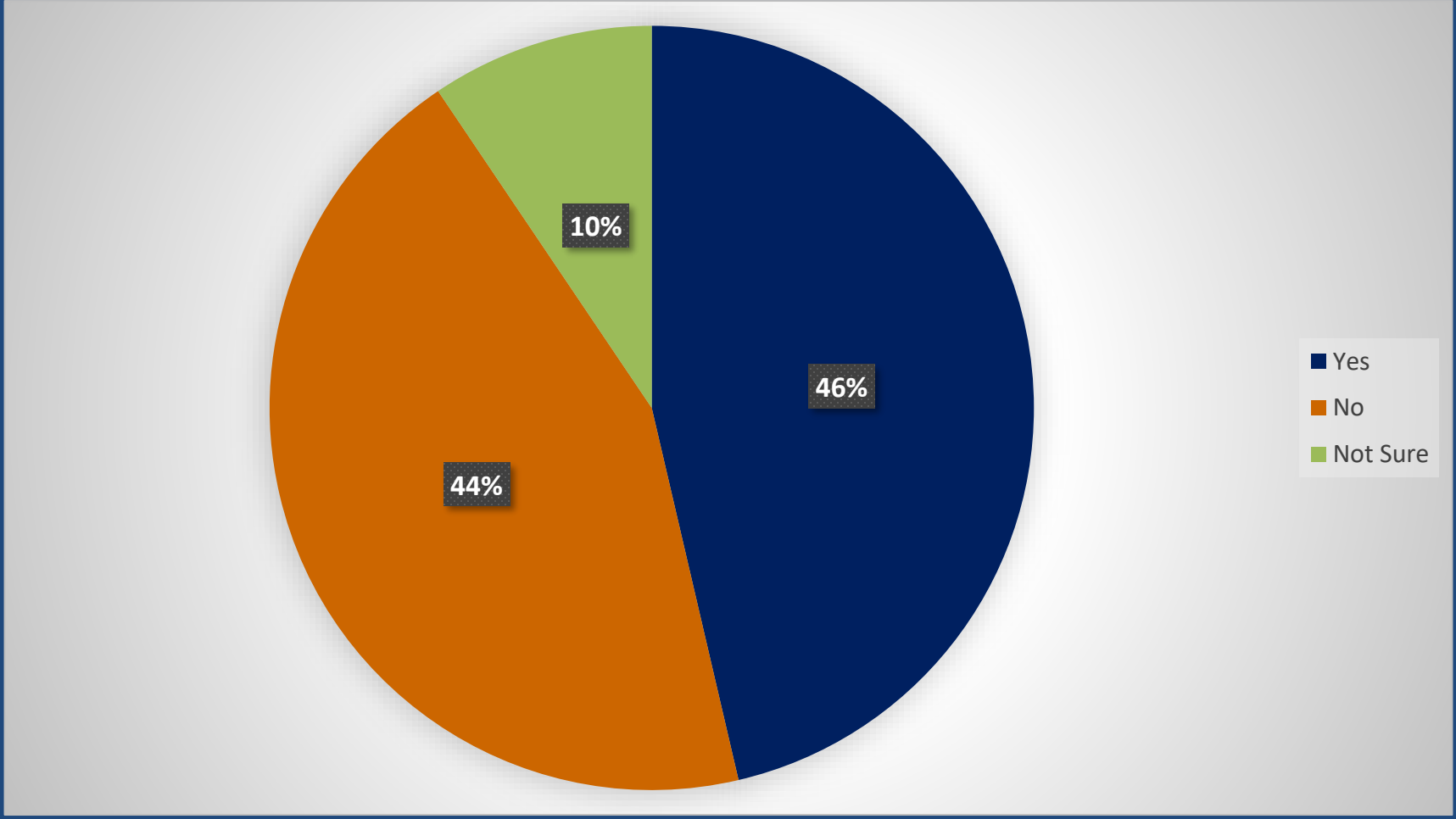


Non-National Register Properties – Assessed Owners



In favor:	38%
Opposed:	57%
Not sure:	5%

Non-National Register Properties: Active Voters



In favor:	46%
Opposed:	44%
Not sure:	10%

Conclusions – All Respondents

- A majority of all property owners (53% to 42%) oppose designation as a Neighborhood Conservation District
- Nearly half (49% - 43%) of all active voters support designation as a Neighborhood Conservation District

Conclusions – National Register Owners and Voters

- A majority of owners of National Register properties (51% to 44%) support
- designation of a Neighborhood Conservation District

- A majority of voters living in National Register properties (57% to 39%) support designation as a Neighborhood Conservation District

Conclusions – Non-National Register Owners and Voters

- A strong majority of non-National Register property owners (57% to 38%) oppose designation as a Neighborhood Conservation District
- A slight majority of non-National Register voters (46% to 44%) support designation as a Neighborhood Conservation District

Representative Comments in Support of Designation

- “I believe the proposed NCD has both the strength and flexibility to help preserve the historical quality of the neighborhood.”
- “I was drawn to this neighborhood because of the unique working class look and feel it would be a shame if that history was lost.”
- “New buildings are almost always luxury apartments and unaffordable”
- “An enthusiastic YES! Process has gone on far too long w/ spacious arguments against the proposed district. Essential to preserve/conservate unique housing stock in older residential core of 02141.”
- “I support creating restrictions on developers wanton disregard for community fabric with hideous buildings-for-profit. I also believe its vital that buildings of contemporary design be permitted”

Representative Comments Opposed to Designation

- “True preservation means sinking the neighborhood back into the Charles.”
- “I feel that Cambridge Zoning already substantially regulates building and renovation work!”
- “It would be an undue burden on property owners and developers.”
- “It is unnecessarily restrictive. I support updating and modernizing and this will inhibit needed improvements.”
- “I support the idea in principle, but not as proposed. The boundary is drawn too wide. There are too many non-historically significant parcels included around the periphery. While I support preservation, we also have an obligation to find ways to incorporate greater density of housing units where such doesn’t compromise preservation and some of the boundary areas could support that aim.”

3. Future Directions for the Study Committee

Possible future milestones:

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| August 17, 2022 | Review outreach results, discuss jurisdiction and boundaries, amend Preliminary Report as necessary and formulate recommendation to Historical Commission |
| September 21, 2022 | Additional Study Committee meeting if necessary |
| October, 2022 | Cambridge Historical Commission public hearing |