CITY OF CAMBRIDGE | CDD Community Development

To: Cambridge Planning Board

From: Community Development Department (CDD) Staff

Date: September 17, 2026

Re: Alexandria TDR Zoning Petition

## Overview

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| **Petitioner:** | **Alexandria Real Estate Equities** |
| **Zoning Article:** | Article 13.000 and Zoning Map |
| **Petition Summary:** | Amend Section 13.59.42 to allow for the transfer of 250,000 square feet of Gross Floor Area from the PUD-4C Zoning District to a newly created "Technology Square Transfer Receiving District" within the Industry B (IB) Zoning District in exchange for the conversion of the existing commercial brick and beam structure at 161 First Street (~37,394 sq ft) into 100% Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO) project under Section 11.207. |
| **Planning Board Action:** | Recommendation to City Council. |
| **Memo Contents:** | Summary of the proposed zoning, background information on the topic of the Petition, and considerations and comments from staff. |

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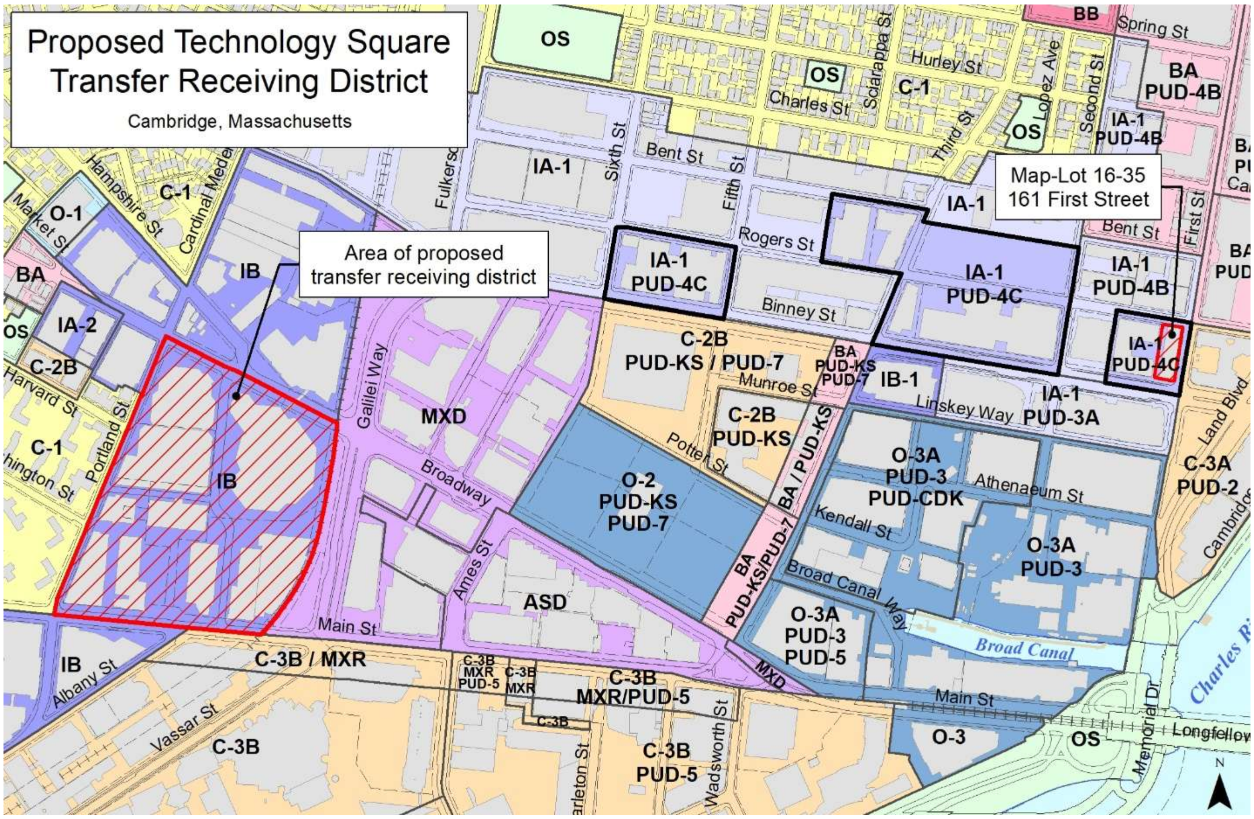
### Summary of Petition Facts

The petition requests a text amendment to Section 13.59.42 and a map amendment establishing the "Technology Square Transfer Receiving District," bounded by Broadway, Main Street, Portland Street, and the Grand Junction Railroad. This petition would allow an additional 250,000 sq ft of commercial development at Technology Square subject to the creation of approximately 37,000 square feet of affordable housing at 161 First Street.



*Map prepared by Brendan Monroe on September 15, 2026. CDD GIS*

The proposed petition does not establish a calendar deadline or phased construction schedule. Instead, the procedural sequence established in the petition triggers the receiving district rights upon the issuance of a Building Permit to convert 161 First Street into an Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO) residential project.

Prior to a Building Permit for 161 First Street, which would come before the unlocking of the additional 250,000 sq ft of commercial development at Tech Square, both a Minor Amendment to the PB-243 Final Development Plan and a Planning Board Special Permit for proposed new development would be required. If the development rights from 161 First Street are "transferred" as suggested, it would remove most remaining commercial development capacity from PB-243.

## Background

### *Alexandria PUD (PUD-3A/PUD-4C District; Special Permit PB-243)*

In 2001, the areas just to the north and south of Binney Street were rezoned following the Eastern Cambridge Planning Study ("ECaPS") process. The new zoning reduced allowed commercial density while maintaining a higher residential density to encourage housing. It also established planning goals and design guidelines for review.

In 2007, Alexandria Real Estate Equities ("ARE") proposed a rezoning of sites that it had acquired along Binney Street. In 2009, the City Council adopted the PUD-3A and PUD-4C Overlay Districts, which restored higher commercial densities for those sites (including a 3.0 FAR limit) and included several public commitments, including:

- Minimum of 220,000 square feet of housing, including units for low, moderate and middle income households
- Conveyance of about 2.3 acres of land and funding to the City for public open space, which have now been completed as Timothy J. Toomey Park on Rogers Street and Triangle Park at the intersection of Binney Street and Edwin Land Boulevard
- Conveyance of the Foundry Building at 101 Rogers Street to the City
- Preservation and adaptive reuse of four buildings, including 161 First Street

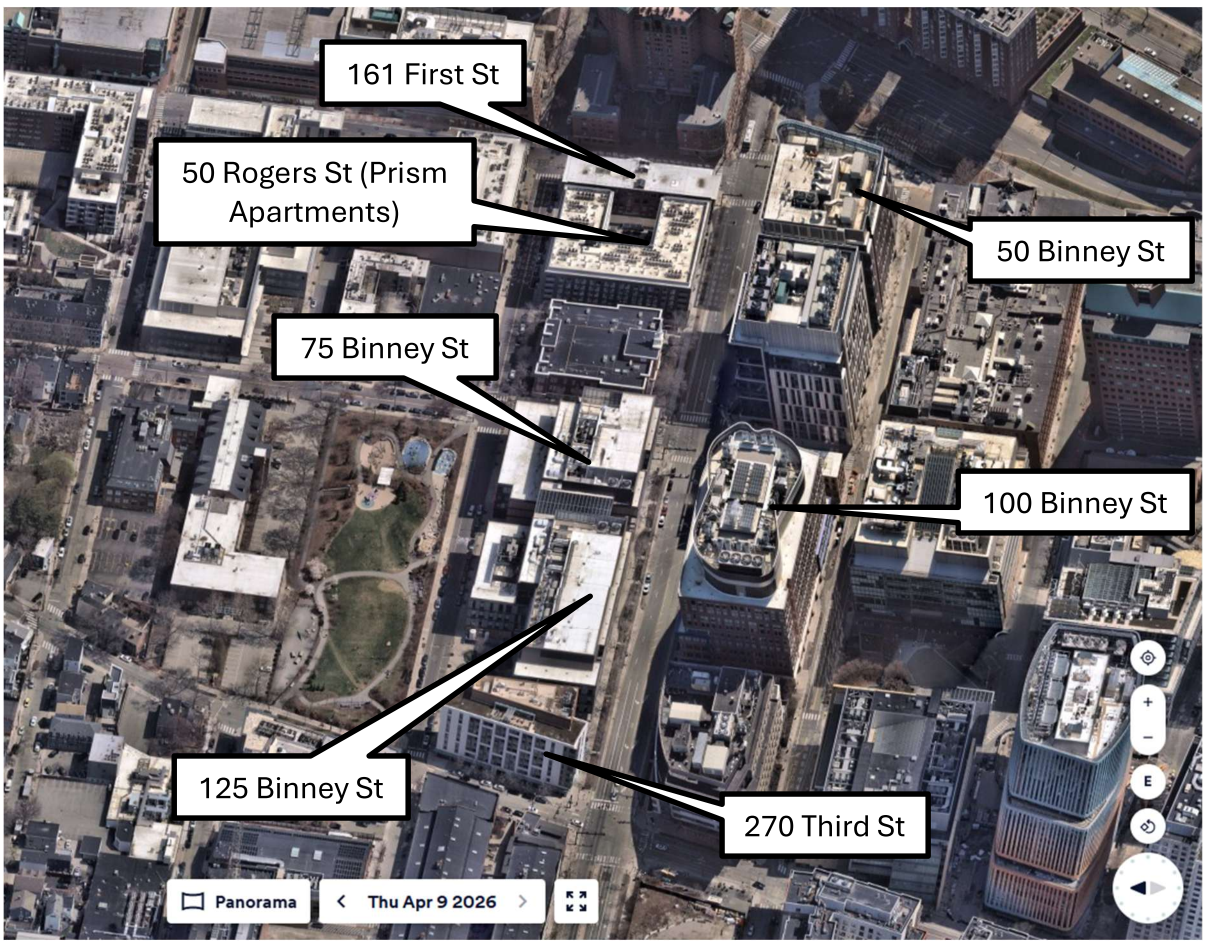
In 2010, the Planning Board approved a Planned Unit Development (PUD), now called "Alexandria Center," with six commercial buildings (1,533,200 total square feet of GFA) and two residential buildings (220,000 total square feet of GFA) in the PUD-3A and PUD-4C Districts. Construction occurred in phases throughout the 2010s and the project is now largely complete, including the committed land conveyances, funding contributions, and transportation improvements and mitigation.

#### *161 First Street*

The remaining undeveloped site in the PUD is 161 First Street, which contains a 19th-century brick-and-beam industrial structure considered historically significant by the Cambridge Historical Commission. Immediately prior to the 2010 PUD Special Permit, this building was used for various commercial uses. The 2010 Final Development Plan would have preserved the historic structure for residential use, while demolishing a rear 3-story addition from the 1980s and surface parking to construct a new residential-use annex to the existing building.

In 2017, the City Council adopted a zoning amendment requested by ARE that would enable an additional 10,000 square feet of exempted commercial GFA for "innovation space," or commercial space set aside for smaller companies on more flexible leases, within the existing building at 161 First Street. In 2018, the Planning Board approved an amendment to special permit PB-243 that allowed the historic portion of 161 First Street (documented at the time as having 30,319 square feet of floor area) to remain in commercial use with approximately 10,000 square feet of innovation space. A new building site, 50 Rogers Street, was created on the western portion of the lot to accommodate a standalone residential building with 132,231 square feet of residential GFA.

The 50 Rogers Street residential building (called "Prism Apartments") was completed in 2022, which fulfilled the minimum residential requirement for the PUD District (along with 270 Third Street). The 161 Rogers Street building remains undeveloped, as the demand for office space has waned in the period following the COVID-19 pandemic.




*Aerial view of Binney Street showing key buildings in the Alexandria Center PUD (PB-243)*

The current proposal envisions reverting the proposed use of 161 First Street to residential, and developing it as an all-affordable adaptive reuse project. The project would be planned in accordance with the standards of the Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO), which allows flexible zoning standards and as-of-right permitting for all-affordable housing developments.

While ARE would own the development, their stated intent is to partner with an experienced affordable housing developer who would seek financing through conventional sources such as tax credits and public grants. The developer, Beacon Communities, has had discussions with the Housing Department and is now preparing a request for funding from the Cambridge Affordable Housing Trust which is expected to be discussed by the Trust later this year.

***Technology Square (Industry B District; Special Permit PB-144)***

In 1963, the first office/R&D building in Technology Square was completed. Technology Square was Cambridge's first "urban renewal" project, undertaken by Cabot, Cabot & Forbes in partnership with MIT. Starting in the 1950s, existing development was cleared in the block bounded by Main Street, Portland Street, Broadway, and the Grand Junction Railroad. Over the following decades, the R&D complex grew to include a total of three nine-story buildings and one three-story building framing a large courtyard along Main Street. A larger building was later built on the northeast corner of the block, which became (and remains) occupied by Draper Laboratory. The uses were originally served by surface parking. Later, adjoining parking garages for Technology Square and Draper Laboratory were built on the block's northwest corner.

In 1999, the Planning Board issued a special permit (PB-144) for an expansion of Technology Square, including four new commercial buildings and demolishing the one existing three-story building. This special permit was an Interim Planning Overlay Permit (IPOP) process, a predecessor to the Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20) that was created during the study process leading to the 2001 Citywide Rezoning.

The approved new development increased the commercial GFA within the block from about 1.04 million square feet (1.80 FAR) to about 1.64 million square feet (2.53 FAR). Because one of the buildings was later reduced in size, the GFA currently built on the block is about 1.53 million square feet (2.22 FAR).

Most of the surface parking was removed as part of this expansion, but the total structured parking was increased to 2,596 spaces, about 1.7 off-street parking spaces per 1,000 square feet of commercial GFA. Because the project was permitted before the 2001 Citywide Rezoning, the structured parking does not count as GFA for the purpose of zoning limitations.

The expansion slightly reduced the size of the courtyard but maintained its orientation along Main Street. The courtyard was improved with plantings and pathways to make it more usable and inviting, plus restaurants and retail were added along Main Street to activate the space. The resulting development is documented as having 40% open space. However, there is no minimum requirement for open space in the Industry B district and no "special" zoning, like a PUD overlay, that would require publicly beneficial open space.

In 2001, MIT acquired Technology Square (excluding Draper Laboratories, which continues to own its land independently) as an investment property, and assumed responsibility for building out the permitted expansion. In 2006, MIT sold Technology Square to ARE through a long-term ground lease arrangement, in which MIT retains fee ownership of the land but ARE effectively controls the development. Apart from some renovation and rehab of facilities, there has not been substantive development since that time.

After the expansion was permitted, the 2001 Citywide Rezoning reduced the allowable commercial FAR in the Industry B district from 4.00 to 2.75. The height limit remains 120 feet and there are no minimum requirements for setbacks or open space.

**Planning Considerations**

Though brief, this zoning proposal touches on a range of planning issues. This section is organized into three major parts – the change in use at 161 First Street, the increase in commercial GFA at Technology Square, and the mechanics of the proposed "transfer" between the two districts.

***161 First Street – Commercial to Residential GFA***

The proposal to convert 161 First Street to affordable housing is strongly supported by the City's planning objectives. It also aligns closely with the planning for Kendall Square and the Alexandria rezoning, all of which treat housing development, affordability, and historic preservation as important public objectives that should complement future commercial growth.

It is typically the Planning Board's role to determine whether a change to a PUD is considered a major or minor amendment. However, this proposed change would likely be treated as a minor amendment because it is a very small component of the PUD, the change in use does not impact its built form, the residential use was approved as part of the original PUD, and changes in use to residential are conventionally treated as minor amendments so long as they conform to zoning.

It is also likely that the proposed change to affordable housing does not require a zoning change at all, although there is some ambiguity that is helpful to clarify. There is no obligation under zoning to develop commercial uses, only a limit on non-residential FAR.

The AHO provides wide latitude to develop affordable housing under flexible regulations, including by not counting residential GFA as part of the FAR limitations of the district.

However, the PUD-4C zoning contains the provision that “Residential Gross Floor Area approved in the Final Development Plan exceeding 220,000 square feet of Gross Floor Area shall be subject to the FAR limitations of the PUD Districts and shall be subject to the provisions of Section 11.200” (Section 13.59.4). The zoning amendment should be worded to clearly resolve that ambiguity.

### *Technology Square – Additional Commercial GFA*

The larger effect of the proposed zoning would be the addition of 250,000 SF of commercial GFA capacity at Technology Square. The proposed “receiving district” currently contains about 1.53 million square feet of commercial GFA, with an existing FAR of about 2.22, below the current Industry B FAR limit of 2.75. The proposed addition of 250,000 SF of allowed GFA would effectively raise the allowed FAR to about 3.12, which would generally align with the effective commercial FAR in nearby areas like the Alexandria Center PUD. It would raise the total limit on commercial GFA to about 2.15 million square feet, or about 618,000 SF more than existing development (excluding structured parking). A chart on page 10 summarizes these figures.

It is not clear from the Petition how the allowed new GFA would be used in a future development plan. Given the current state of the commercial laboratory market, there are probably no immediate plans to build a large amount of additional space. Representatives from Alexandria discussed possibly using the additional GFA to build additions or reconstruct portions of existing buildings to meet tenant needs, which is logical because many of the current buildings in Technology Square are smaller in both GFA and footprint area than more recent commercial laboratory/office buildings.

Technology Square, despite its history as a prototype for Kendall Square’s modern economic and urban development, has not had the same level of planning study as other redevelopments in Kendall Square over the past quarter century. The Alexandria Center PUD, MIT’s Kendall Square Initiative (“SoMa” and “NoMa”), Boston Properties’ “Kendall Center,” Biomed Realty’s “Canal District” (once known as “Cambridge Research Park”), and MIT’s more recent Volpe Site Redevelopment (“Kendall Common”) have all been subject to focused planning discussions and the adoption of PUD zoning or similar mechanisms that incorporated planning objectives into the development process. Technology Square remains subject to the Industry B base zoning, which is the most unrestricted zoning classification in Cambridge. However, Citywide project review by the Planning Board is one mechanism that has helped to incorporate general planning and urban design objectives into the development process, and helped shape the most recent phase of development.

CDD staff, in consultation with other departments, have identified some issues that might be incorporated into thinking about future development at Technology Square. Other issues may emerge during the hearing process.

- **Transition Area**. The 2001 Citywide Rezoning identified the planning objective of mitigating transitions between higher-density commercial districts and lower-density residential districts. Article 19.000 includes standards to ensure gradual changes in height and to shift density away from residential areas. Technology Square is one of the few instances of a high-density commercial district directly abutting a lower-density residential neighborhood, including public housing at Newtowne Court and Washington Elms. Expectations for how additional development can help improve the interface between the commercial district and the neighborhood will be an important aspect of any future development review. Specific objectives might include public realm permeability, active ground-floor amenities, and pedestrian access to break down historical barriers between public housing residents and the commercial campus.
- **Historic Development / Courtyard.** Post-war, mid-century development has not always been treated as "historic," but the form of Technology Square reflects an approach to planning and architecture that has historic significance 60+ years later as a starting point in Kendall Square's transition to a worldwide high-tech center. The original arrangement of buildings around a courtyard is an ensemble that continues to have relevance as a space that blends the public and private realms, even as it was retained and updated as an important amenity during the latest phase of redevelopment. Under current zoning, there are no explicit protections or provisions that encourage the retention of open space. There are also no historic protections, though Cambridge Historical Commission staff have indicated that it may take an interest in plans that would impact the original courtyard configuration.
- **Retail / Activation.** The most recent phase of redevelopment notably incorporated retail and restaurant space along the ground story of Main Street, though it was not required by zoning. In other parts of Kendall Square, ground floor activation has been incorporated as an objective in zoning, in some cases with specific standards to be met. Flexibility is important to adapt to market conditions for retail, but it would be important to continue to prioritize ground floor activation in the future.

- **Transportation.** Redevelopment at a large scale would be subject to citywide Project Review, requiring a Transportation Impact Study (TIS), but the zoning for other districts in Kendall Square incorporate other provisions that advance transportation planning goals. Notably, the current off-street parking ratio at Technology Square is higher than typically allowed for new commercial development in the area, so it could be helpful to make lowering the parking ratio an explicit objective similar to other areas in Kendall Square.
- **Infrastructure.** The Department of Public Works (DPW) has identified critical infrastructure needs along Hampshire Street and Galileo Galilei Way to connect stormwater separation systems to the Broad Canal under the City's long-term Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) plan. Although infrastructure is typically discussed not at the zoning stage but as part of later development review, it may be helpful to discuss high-level expectations before any designs are undertaken.

The current Petition proposes as the only special permit consideration that "the Planning Board shall find that the converted structure supports the Purpose of the PUD 4C Zoning District," which may be appropriate for approving the change in use on the 161 First Street site but may not provide adequate guidance for reviewing future development plans for Technology Square.

The Petition also states that new development would be "subject to the use regulations of Article 4.000 for the Industry B Zoning District and the dimensional requirements of Article 5.34." Presumably, this is intended to encompass regulations that would apply to all development of its scale, including Project Review in Article 19.000, sustainable development requirements in Article 22.000 including Green Building Requirements, Green Roof Requirements, Flood Resilience Standards, and Green Factor Standard, and Incentive Zoning contributions to the Affordable Housing Trust in Section 11.202. The latter point may be important to clarify, because development under the PUD-3A and PUD-4C standards is explicitly exempt from Incentive Zoning contributions.

### *Transfer of Development Rights Mechanism*

The wording of the Petition is that "an applicant may transfer density from the PUD 4-C Zoning District to certain land in the Industry B district [designated on the map as the Technology Square Transfer Receiving District]." The concept of "transfer of development rights" (or "TDR") has been included in Cambridge's zoning since at least the late 1990s. TDR usually has procedures for development that is allowed in a "donating district" to be built instead in a "receiving district," often subject to a special permit that controls permitted development on both sites. It is similar to a PUD mechanism that allows development on non-contiguous sites to be treated as one development parcel, but applicable across different districts.

*Amount of Transferred GFA*

Sometimes, there are incentives incorporated into the TDR mechanism. For example, some TDR districts permit all of the allowable commercial development to be transferred from a donating site while still allowing housing to be built on the donating site. For this Petition, as shown in the table below, the remaining allowable commercial GFA in the Alexandria PUD would be roughly 42,000 square feet. That assumes that the GFA of the proposed affordable housing would not be counted (which should be clarified, see above) and that the remaining commercial development would no longer be available within the PUD-4C District (which is not explicitly stated in the Petition, leaving some ambiguity as to whether the additional commercial development could still be utilized elsewhere in the PUD-4C district). The additional allowable commercial GFA in the Technology Square Transfer Receiving District would be 250,000 square feet. In that sense, the proposal might be viewed as a strong incentive or "bonus" to facilitate the creation of affordable housing.

| | **PUD-3A + PUD-4C (PB-243)** | **Technology Square Transfer Receiving District (PUD-144)** | **Total** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Land Area** | 491,320 SF | 689,534 SF | 1,180,854 SF |
| **Max. Non-Residential FAR** | 3.00 (plus bonuses for land transfers) | 2.75 | N/A |
| **Total Allowable Non-Residential GFA** | 1,533,000 SF (1,474,000 SF + 59,000 SF bonus) | 1,896,000 SF | 3,429,000 |
| **Existing Non-Residential GFA** | 1,491,000 SF | 1,528,000 SF | 3,019,000 |
| **Remaining Non-Residential GFA (before transfer)** | 42,000 SF | 368,000 SF | 410,000 |
| **Remaining Non-Residential GFA (after transfer)** | 0 (assumed, unless only the 37,000 SF of the existing building is transferred) | 618,000 SF | 618,000 |

***ALL FIGURES APPROXIMATE, GFA ROUNDED TO NEAREST 1,000 SF***

Given the nature of the proposal, CDD has engaged its on-call Development Economics consultant to provide a report to the City Council comparing the rough financial value of the zoning proposal to the property owner to the financial value of the benefit to the public, in this case the commitment to affordable housing. The Council would consider this information as part of its policy deliberations.

*Donating/Receiving Districts*

"Donating districts" tend to have planning objectives such as encouraging more modest development or creating and preserving open space. "Receiving districts" tend to be areas with characteristics that would accommodate or encourage additional development, such as taller height limits, a wider range of allowed uses, or availability of transportation infrastructure.

In those respects, the proposed assignment of "donating" and "receiving" areas makes logical sense as housing and historic preservation are objectives explicitly stated in the PUD-4C district, while the Industry B district has a taller height limit and broader range of allowed uses that makes it suitable for additional development.

*Procedures*

As part of the 2001 Citywide Rezoning efforts, TDR provisions were consolidated into Article 21.000 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance, which is not referenced in the Petition. In addition to identifying donating/receiving districts, Article 21.000 helps to provide a structured process for TDR approvals, including guidance on the following:

- Required application materials, including schematic plans for development on both sites, calculation of GFA reductions on the donating lot(s) and GFA increases on the receiving lot(s), and sequencing of development on both sites.
- Potential special permit conditions, including limitations on sequencing and regulation of interim conditions, legal instruments to ensure that public benefits are secured over the long-term if needed to enable additional development rights, and processes of approving final development plans.

The Petition states that the transfer of density is allowed "Upon the issuance of a Building Permit to convert an existing Commercial Building of not less than at least 37,394 square feet to an Affordable housing Overlay (AHO) Project." That helps provide some information about intended sequencing. However, it would be helpful to lay out in somewhat greater detail how the Planning Board approval process would work. The procedures could be similar to Article 21.000 with modifications tailored to this proposal, or could directly reference the procedures in Article 21.000.