Cambridge . . . .
What Kind of City?
Bringing the Image of the City into Focus

In the past year, several zoning petitions have been filed suggesting changes to the zoning ordinance to advance visions for how the physical environment of Cambridge should evolve. Would these proposed changes, and others being discussed, help to make Cambridge a better city in the future? How do these changes relate to recent and historical patterns of development? The Community Development Department (CDD), working with the Citywide Growth Management Advisory Committee (CGMAC), will be bringing these important questions before the broader Cambridge community over the next several months.

Questions will range from the broad level of "What should the city become in the coming decades?" to a more detailed focus on how the zoning ordinance might be changed to promote specific goals such as reducing traffic impacts due to development.

Over the next year, the Committee will take up issues such as the appropriate density in commercial areas using the Cambridge Growth Policy Document: Towards a Sustainable Future as a starting point. Public outreach is a critical aspect of this effort, and the Committee will continue to work towards the fullest possible involvement of community members.

Fall Update on the Growth Management Process

In 1997, a group of citizens petitioned the City Council to make substantial changes to the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance to guide future development in the city. The City Council adopted many of these proposed changes. The Planning Board recommended further study of several issues and, with the Community Development Department, proposed a two to three-year process to study and act on them. At the Council's request, the City Manager appointed a Citywide Growth Management Advisory Committee (see page four for membership) composed of community residents, business people, and representatives of the city's major institutions to advise the Department on the appropriate community outreach process and information needed for the planning study. This Citywide Rezoning Bulletin - Volume II provides a progress report on the Committee's discussions and actions.

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 the City Council in March 1998.
2. Limits on infill development and loss of open space in residential areas. A rezoning proposal on this issue, which was introduced in a previous Bulletin, was introduced to the Council in September and is currently under consideration by the Planning Board and City Council.
3. Transition "buffers" where high-density zones meet residential areas. This issue, which is discussed in this bulletin, is currently being studied and will be considered by the Planning Board with the intention to forward a formal zoning proposal to the City Council this winter.
4. Modifications in allowed use and use in commercial districts to promote mixed use and control growth of traffic and other impacts. The Committee will begin to discuss this issue in 1999.
5. Following the discussion of appropriate commercial area density, the Committee will take up a number of other items identified for further study.

The zoning district at the Bay Square project required that a transition be made by either lower scale housing or open space along Green Street. The Planning Board recommended that this requirement be removed. The zoning districts at the Bay Square project included a new provision that some transitions be made by either lower scale housing or open space along Green Street. The Planning Board recommended that this requirement be removed.
**Height Transitions Between Zoning Districts**

At several locations in the city, current zoning allows the construction of tall buildings overlooking and overshadowing neighboring districts. While existing buildings in a commercial or residential district may be taller than neighboring low-scale residences, zoning may allow additional taller buildings to be built in the future, upon redevelopment of a site. Such redevelopment, if not mitigated by appropriate modulations in height, may introduce a building which starkly overshadows a small-scale (e.g. 35' tall) residence.

Progress has been made recently in height control. Up until a few months ago, there were portions of the city with no height limits whatsoever. In September 1997, upon the Planning Board’s recommendation, the City Council adopted a 120 foot maximum height for these areas. However, there are areas where this height is still inappropriate.

The CGMAC has worked to identify those areas in the city which present the most likely locations for such transitional conflicts. The Committee has also discussed locations where existing regulation makes such conflicts unlikely.

### Understanding Zoning Options for Transitions

**Setbacks**

When lots which allow taller and larger buildings abut lots which only allow smaller ones, establishing yard setbacks can be very effective in providing a reasonable transition between them. Setbacks can be useful between buildings of differing height both within a zoning district or between differing zoning districts. Often, in the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance, the larger the building, the greater its required setback from its property line. Also illustrated is a landscaped buffer which may be required in a setback.

**Transition Plane**

A transition plane is included in a revised commercial Zoning Ordinance. This plane introduces a transition area which allows different building heights in different zones. The transition area is intended to provide a gradual transition between two zoning districts, reducing the impact of taller buildings on the adjoining smaller ones. The adjacent diagram illustrates a 45 degree sloping plane, starting at an established cornice height, which sets back the height of the upper floors of the taller building to minimize its impact on its neighbors. This transition plane technique is currently used, for example, in the Harvard Square Overlay District and Parkway Overlay District.

**Transition Zoning Districts**

When a zoning district which allows taller buildings abuts another district which allows shorter ones, a sloping transition plane can be effective to limit the impacts of those taller buildings on the adjoining smaller ones. The adjacent diagram illustrates a 45 degree sloping plane, starting at an established cornice height, which sets back the height of the upper floors of the taller building to minimize its impact on its neighbors. This transition plane technique is currently used, for example, in the Harvard Square Overlay District and Parkway Overlay District.

### Use Transitions

Extreme height contrasts are not the only conflicts which can occur where residential districts abut non-residential ones. Commercial properties can sometimes introduce impacts due to noisy equipment, floodlights, dumpsters, or unsightly outdoor storage. Apart from these "mechanical" impacts, there may be issues around hours of operation, traffic, or the behavior of visitors or patrons. The potential conflicts described above and perhaps others are "use" conflicts. Zoning changes might help deal with some of these issues, working with city staff, the Committee intends to address these during the study process. Reforms in other city regulations (the noise ordinance, health code, etc.) might also be appropriate.

### Priority Areas... These are the Committee's ideas... What are yours?

#### Transition Locations:

- Commercial to Lower Scale Residential
- Institutional to Lower Scale Residential
- Higher Scale Residential to Lower Scale Residential
- Scaled Transition Overlay Districts
- Transition Zones

Where a zoning district which allows taller buildings adjoins another district which allows shorter ones, a sloping transition plane can be effective to limit the impacts of those taller buildings on the adjoining smaller ones. The adjacent diagram illustrates a 45 degree sloping plane, starting at an established cornice height, which sets back the height of the upper floors of the taller building to minimize its impact on its neighbors. This transition plane technique is currently used, for example, in the Harvard Square Overlay District and Parkway Overlay District.

### Criteria for Identifying Areas Needing Better Height Transition Rules

In its deliberations regarding transitions, the Committee first asked which areas are most important to address. It then identified areas where small-scale residential development is adjacent to any potentially tall building, whether commercial, industrial, or institutional.

The Committee has also identified areas of lesser concern. First, those areas which are relatively small, with only 2 or 3 homes (20 or 30 feet of difference). Second, there are many areas in which existing regulations provide sufficient protection. Such areas may have special height and setback regulations, addressing non-residential uses next to residential uses. There are other cases where district controls are imposed by historic districts, such as Neighborhood Conservation Districts. Third, there is less concern about height differences between two commercial districts in this case, impacts would not generally affect residential uses.

In summary, the following criteria are suggested:

- The height difference is mitigated by existing regulations.
- There is stable and common ownership.
- Redevelopment is unlikely.

### What to Do?

The Committee hopes to ensure that any new regulations affect only those areas needing more controls, and do not unduly affect areas where there are no significant problems.

### A Possible Solution: Transition Overlay Districts

In general, when the requirements of a zoning district are changed, everything within that district is subject to the same rules. To affect only targeted areas within a district, transition overlay districts can be introduced. This tool allows the underlying zoning to remain, while modifying only the area needing transition. For instance, a block of a large C3 district could have transition requirements imposed, while leaving the rest of the district unchanged. Such an overlay district could contain any of the techniques discussed on the facing page: setbacks, transition planes, buffers, transition zoning districts, and overlay zoning districts.

Please Let Us Know What You Think

**COMMITTEE MEETINGS**

All meetings of the CGMAC are open to the public. Meetings are held on the first and third Thursday of each month. E-MAIL: sdash@ci.cambridge.ma.us

WEB PAGE

The CGMAC website is accessible through the City’s website at "www.ci.cambridge.ma.us"

FAX & PHONE

Please leave a message at the fax number 349-4660, or phone 349-4660 to suggest an agenda item or ask a question.

**CABLE T.V.**

Send comments via e-mail to: sustainable.cambridge.nu
**Public Meetings**

**Please Come!**

**Public Meeting on Transition Zoning**

Wednesday, December 2nd, 1998

at 7pm

Cambridge Senior Center
806 Mass Avenue

**Please Come!**

**Public Meeting on The Big Picture**

Wednesday, February 3rd, 1999

at 7pm

Cambridge Senior Center
806 Mass Avenue

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**Planning Board/City Council**

Beginning in January 1999, the Planning Board will hold hearings on any proposed transition zoning changes. A Planning Board recommendation will go to City Council for a hearing in late spring 1999.

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**Next Steps**

**What's in the Backyard Rezoning Proposal?**

Now under consideration by the Planning Board and City Council, the proposed backyard rezoning changes include:

- reduced densities in the city's low-scale residential districts
- enhanced open space requirement, including a new provision that some portion be unpaved
- increased rear yard setbacks while allowing for modest additions to existing residences

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**It's your turn!**

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

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