

THE

# CITYWIDE REZONING BULLETIN

Cambridge Community Development working jointly with the Citywide Growth Management Advisory Committee

Volume II

## 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.



Existing residences along Cardinal Medeiros Avenue are in a C1 district with a 35 foot height limit; across the street is an I1B district, which allows heights up to 120 feet.

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

*Continued on page 4*



## 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 rezoning study. This *Citywide Rezoning Bulletin - Volume II* provides a progress report on the Committee's work with particular focus on height transitions between zoning districts. 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 1998.
- (2) Limits on infill development and loss of open space in residential areas. A rezoning proposal on this issue, which was illustrated 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 density and uses 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 the Green Street frontage. Here, townhouse-scale housing relates to existing buildings across the street.



1000 Mass Ave is in the same zoning district as Bay Square. Here, a park was created along Green Street to meet the requirement for transitions.

## Height Transitions Between Zoning Districts

At several locations in the city, current zoning allows the construction of tall buildings overlooking and overshadowing neighboring buildings. While existing buildings in a commercial or residential zoning district may be no taller than a neighboring low scale residence, zoning may allow a significantly taller building 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.

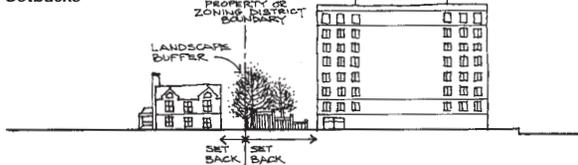
### Use Transitions

Extreme height contrasts are not the only conflicts which can occur where residential districts abut non-residential districts. 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 possible 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.

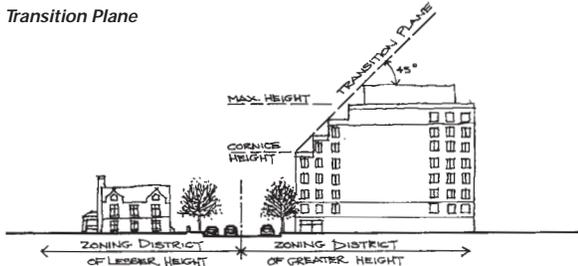
### Understanding Zoning Options for Transitions

#### Setbacks



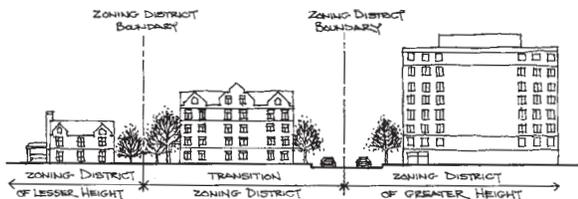
When lots which allow taller and larger buildings adjoin lots which only allow smaller ones, establishing yard setbacks is often effective in providing a reasonable transition between them. Setbacks can be useful between buildings of differing height both *within* a zoning district or *between* differing 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



Where a zoning district which allows taller buildings adjoins another district which allows shorter ones, a sloping transition plane can be an effective tool 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 so as to minimize its impacts 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



A Transition Zoning District is another technique to provide a gentle, rather than abrupt, transition between a zoning district which allows only small-scale homes and an adjacent one which allows significantly taller buildings. To accomplish this transition, a new zoning district is established *between* the two districts.

## 1 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 also identified areas of lesser concern. First, there are portions of the city in which the height differences between adjoining districts are relatively small, with only 2 or 3 stories (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 strict 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: Consider new regulations at small-scale residential district boundaries if there are substantial height differences with adjoining zoning districts unless**

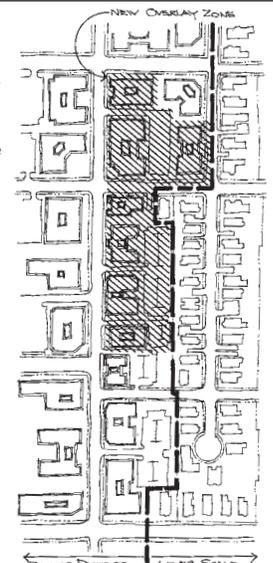
- The difference is mitigated by existing regulations.
- There is stable common ownership.
- Redevelopment is unlikely.

## 2 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.

## 3 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 attention. For instance, two blocks of a large C3 district could have transition requirements superimposed, 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.



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

### Transition Locations:

The Committee initially identified the following priority transition locations. Each of these locations is an area where low density districts abut zoning districts which allow significantly taller buildings.

#### Commercial to Lower Scale Residential

**A Putnam Avenue and Pleasant Street in Riverside and Cambridgeport: Office 3 to Residence C.** This residential area is characterized by a mix of 2- and 3-family wood frame structures with a few masonry multi-family buildings; the Residence C height limit is 35 feet. The Office 3 district includes the Polaroid property, which has a very large development potential. Heights have recently been capped at 120 feet, but there is no transition requirement that heights be lower near the residential district boundary.

**B Main Street to Medeiros Way in Neighborhoods 3 and 4: Industry B to Residence C1.** The Industry B district, which allows up to 120 feet in height, is located across the street from residential structures at Washington Elms and Newtowne Court along Main Street, and across from wood frame 2- and 3-family structures along Medeiros Way, in a C1 district with 35 foot height limits. There is currently no transition requirement.

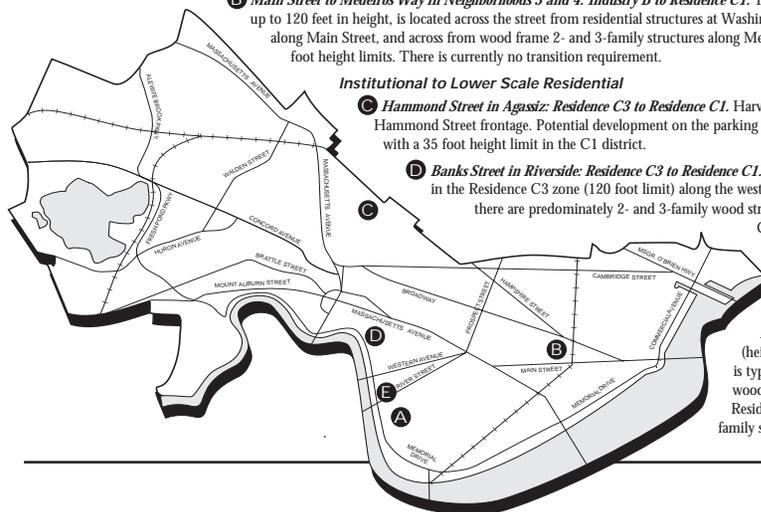
#### Institutional to Lower Scale Residential

**C Hammond Street in Agassiz: Residence C3 to Residence C1.** Harvard has a large parking lot along its Hammond Street frontage. Potential development on the parking lot is capped at 120 feet, compared with a 35 foot height limit in the C1 district.

**D Banks Street in Riverside: Residence C3 to Residence C1.** Harvard University owns properties in the Residence C3 zone (120 foot limit) along the western side of Banks Street, on which there are predominately 2- and 3-family wood structures in the abutting Residence C1 district (35 foot limit).

#### Higher Scale Residential to Lower Scale Residential

**E Western Avenue in Riverside: Residence C2 to Residence C1.** The Residence C1 (height limit of 35 feet) neighborhood is typified by a mix of 2- and 3-family wood frame structures. The adjacent Residence C2 zone would allow multi-family structures at 85 feet.



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 at fax number 349-4669

#### PHONE

Contact Stuart Dash at 349-4640

#### CABLE T.V.

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