



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

IRAM FAROOQ
Assistant City Manager for
Community Development

To: Planning Board
From: Jeff Roberts, Land Use and Zoning Planner
Date: April 12, 2016
Re: **Richard Avenue Zoning Petition (Stern, et al., Revised Version)**

Overview

The “Richard Avenue Neighborhood Protective Zoning Proposal” filed by Elizabeth Stern, Sarah Bell, and others, proposes to remove the section of the Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District (MAOD) located north of Richard Avenue from the “North Massachusetts Avenue Subdistrict” (NMA), which was established in 2012 in order to promote mixed-use development with retail activity along the northern Massachusetts Avenue corridor. *See maps on Page 3.*

Background

The area affected by the petition is the same as a prior Stern, et al., Zoning Petition, which was heard by the Planning Board in August, 2015. That petition proposed a base rezoning of the subject area from Business A-2 (BA-2) to Residence B, as well as removing the area from the MAOD. The Planning Board made no recommendation on that petition.

Rather than change the base zoning, the current petition would effectively remove the special requirements of the NMA, which includes a requirement for retail or other non-residential active uses at the ground floors of new buildings. Thus, the applicable zoning requirements would be those of the BA-2 district as modified by the normal provisions of the MAOD. The differences in those requirements are summarized in the chart on the following page.

Affected Lots

The lots affected by the proposed zoning change are 7 Richard Ave, a three-family residence built in the 1920s, and 2551 Massachusetts Ave, a paved lot with a very small commercial building that was built in the 1930s and was most recently used by a laundry business. *See images on Page 4.*

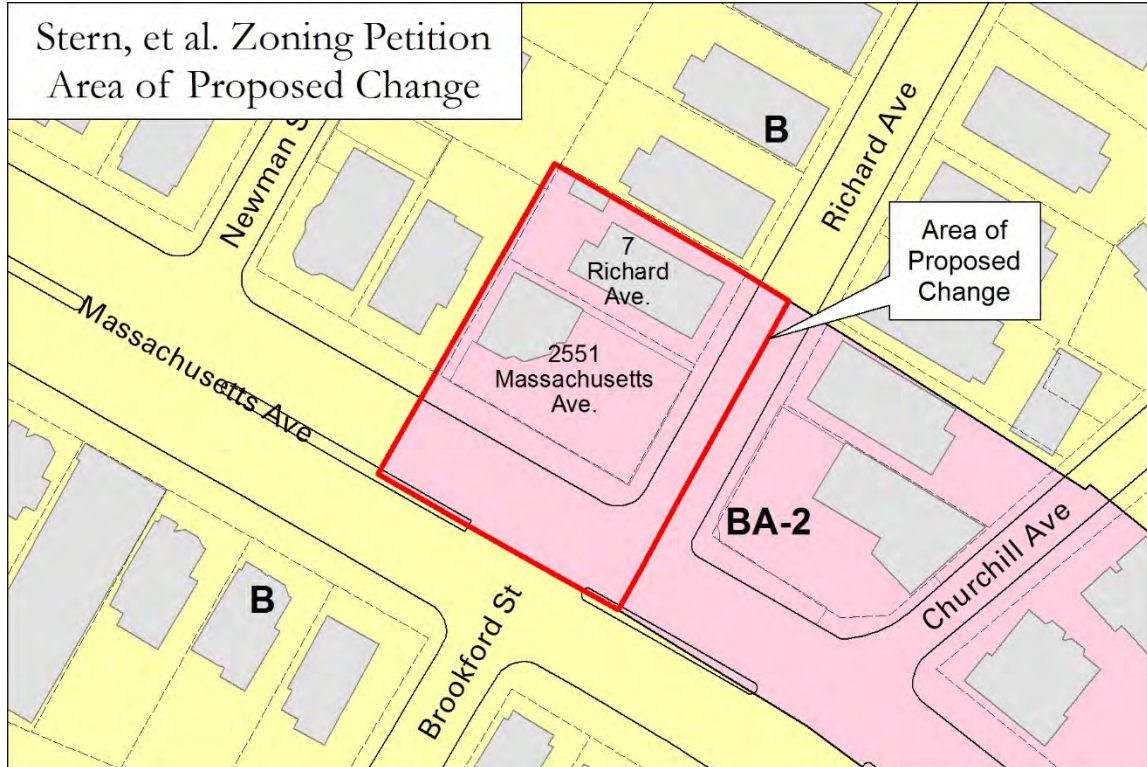
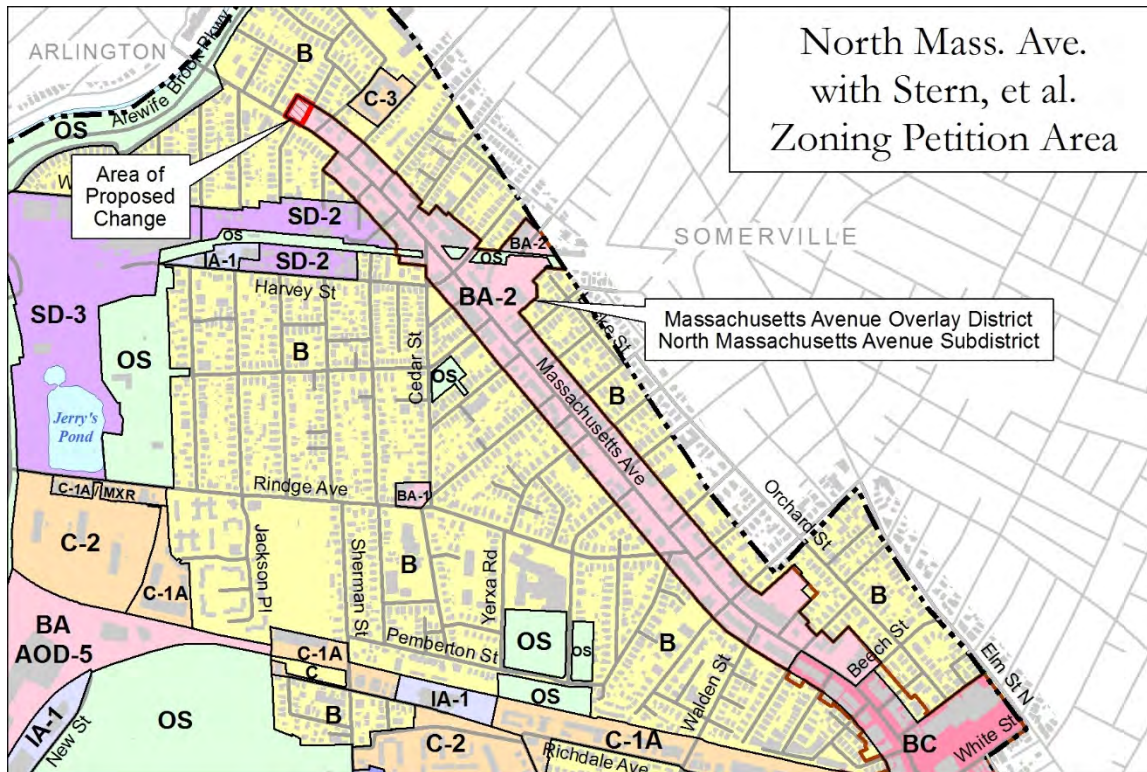
A proposed mixed-use project with 5 residential units and ground-floor retail space at 2551 Massachusetts Avenue was heard by the Board in July, 2015, and remains an active case. That proposal seeks modifications to the design requirements of the NMA, which would become unnecessary if the proposed zoning were adopted. The proposed zoning would also allow an entirely residential development as an alternative to mixed-use development with retail at the ground floor.

Summary Comparing Requirements in North Mass. Ave. Subdistrict (NMAS) to Business A-2 / Mass. Ave. Overlay District (BA-2/MAOD)

	<i>Current – NMAS</i>	<i>Proposed – BA-2/MAOD</i>
Allowed Uses (summarized)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single-family, two-family, multifamily residential • Institutional, dormitory • Office, retail (limited) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single-family, two-family, multifamily residential • Institutional, dormitory • Office, retail (limited)
Maximum FAR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1.75 for mixed-use (residential above ground-floor non-res.) • 1.00 for single-use residential (only allowed by special permit) • 1.00 for non-residential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1.75 for residential • 1.00 for non-residential <p><i>(Mixed-use lots have a maximum FAR between 1.00 and 1.75 based on the relative proportion of residential and non-residential uses.)</i></p>
Minimum Lot Area per Dwelling Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 600 square feet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 600 square feet
Maximum Height	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50 feet for mixed-use (residential above ground-floor non-res.) • 45 feet for single-use residential • 35 feet for single-use non-residential <p><i>(Reduced to 35 feet within 50 feet of a lower-scale residential district)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 45 feet for residential <p><i>(Reduced to 35 feet within 50 feet of a lower-scale residential district, and within a 10-foot step-back from front façade.)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35 feet for non-residential
Minimum Yard Setbacks (summarized)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 feet front (or match front setback of an adjacent building) • 10 feet side • 20 feet rear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 feet front (or match front setback of an adjacent building) • 10 feet side • 20 feet rear
Urban Design Requirements (summarized)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-residential use on ground floor for minimum 75% of frontage, 40 feet depth, 15 feet height (may be modified by Planning Board) • Parking not allowed between building and public street • Building entrances must face Mass Ave • Ground-floor office and retail spaces must have individual entrances • Front facades must have 25% clear glass, 50% at ground floor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ground floor must be residential, institutional, office or retail for minimum 20 feet depth (may be modified by Planning Board) • Parking not allowed between building and public street • Building entrances must face a public street • Ground-floor office and retail spaces must have individual entrances • Front facades must have 25% clear glass, 50% if commercial uses located at ground floor

Note: Summary only. Refer to Cambridge Zoning Ordinance for more detailed description of requirements.

Context Maps



Maps prepared by Brendan Monroe on July 24, 2015. CDD GIS.

Context Images



2551 Massachusetts Ave



7 Richard Ave

Zoning History

Since the earliest versions of the Cambridge Zoning Map, there has been a commercial-zoned corridor north of Porter Square extending 100 feet (typically) on each side of Massachusetts Avenue. The current northern boundaries of that corridor (ending between Richard Ave and Newman Street on the east side, at Cottage Park Avenue on the west side) were established in the 1943 Zoning Map. Since then, the base zoning has remained commercial, though the specific district designation has changed.

In 1986, the current Business A-2 (BA-2) and Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District (MAOD) zoning were enacted, putting in place the current base dimensional standards (see Page 2) while imposing other design standards and project review requirements.

A change in the requirements for this particular area was then enacted in 2012, when a community-initiated planning process led to the creation of the North Massachusetts Avenue Subdistrict (NMAAS). The new zoning strictly requires ground-floor non-residential uses in new residential developments, while providing some flexibility in FAR and height for mixed-use buildings.

Comments

The prior Stern, et al. Zoning Petition would have rezoned this area from BA-2, which allows multifamily housing and commercial uses, to Residence B, which allows only single-family, two-family, or townhouse residential at a low density. The current petition, to retain the BA-2 and MAOD zoning while removing the NMAAS requirements, is a far less drastic change. The most substantial effect is that retail would no longer be required along Massachusetts Ave., and the zoning flexibility allowed for mixed-use buildings (maximum height increase from 45 to 50 feet, combined base FAR of 1.75) would no longer be available. The petitioners have provided the rationale that retail is difficult at this location, where the Massachusetts Ave. commercial corridor transitions to a section with a more residential character. The petitioners also noted the heavy auto traffic on nearby Alewife Brook Parkway.

Because 2551 Massachusetts Avenue is the only site within the area of change that fronts Massachusetts Ave., it is the only lot substantively affected by the removal of the requirement for retail.

A mixed-use building with ground-floor retail would still be allowed under the proposed zoning, but would be far less likely given the constraints of the site, and even more unattractive to a property owner given the height and FAR constraints for a mixed-use building. The more likely options for redevelopment under the proposed zoning would be a stand-alone residential building at an FAR up to 1.75 or a smaller stand-alone commercial building at an FAR up to 1.00.

After review of the prior petition, the Planning Board encouraged affected property owners and neighbors to discuss mutually agreeable development outcomes. Attached to the current petition is an illustration of a “Version 2” design concept for 2551 Massachusetts Ave., showing an all-residential townhouse-style development. Such a concept would probably conform to the proposed zoning requirements of the BA-2 base district and MAOD and could likely be developed as-of-right without seeking relief from the Planning Board. However, that would not be the only possible development outcome under the proposed zoning.

Relationship to “MAPOCO” Petition

The specific language of the petition has raised a peculiar issue, because it diverges from the Planning Board’s recommended approach to the “Friends of MAPOCO” zoning petition proposed by Peter Kroon, et al., from earlier this year.

In response to concerns about future development without active ground floor uses in the section of Massachusetts Ave. between Porter Square and the Common, the Planning Board recommended that the requirements of the NMAS be expanded to all BA-2 districts within the MAOD rather than just the area north of Porter Square. If such a provision were adopted, it would mean that the boundaries of the NMAS would no longer be relevant. This is not necessarily a critical issue, and there could be ways to resolve it if both the Richard Avenue petition and the MAPOCO petition were being considered for adoption.