



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board
From: Jeff Roberts, Senior Manager for Zoning and Development
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Re: **Central Square Restoration Zoning Petition**

Overview

The zoning petition by Nabil Sater, et al., called the “Central Square Restoration Zoning Petition,” proposes several changes to the requirements of the Central Square Overlay District in Section 20.300. The key changes include the following:

- Increasing allowed residential FAR from 3.0 to 4.0 in the Business B (BB) district, and allowing an increase in total FAR to 4.0 by special permit anywhere in the overlay district, so long as non-residential FAR does not exceed base zoning limits.
- Exempting residential balconies and publicly-enjoyable rooftop spaces from FAR limitations.
- Exempting retail spaces of 1,500 square feet or less from FAR limitations.
- Removing the limit on the total number of fast order food establishments in the district, and establishing a special permit requirement for formula business.
- Allowing, by special permit, entrances to establishments where alcohol is served and where dancing or entertainment is provided to be located off of Massachusetts Ave., Main Street or Prospect Street.
- Allowing yard setbacks and open space requirements to be reduced, and allowing required open space to be provided at above-grade levels, by special permit.
- Establishing maximum parking ratios for some uses, allowing required parking to be reduced by an “in-lieu-of” payment for public improvements, and allowing required parking for a use to be located on another lot within the overlay district.

This petition is supported by a number of community members, including members of the Central Square Business Association. The petition is based in part on the zoning recommendations that emerged from the Central Square component of the “K2C2” Planning Study but have not been adopted outside of the “Mass and Main” subdistrict that was created in 2015.

Intent of Proposal

The intent of the petition is explained in the introduction. The major stated aim is to restore the historic status of Central Square as a commercial hub and strengthen its identity as a cultural district, with specific objectives including “to increase the potential for housing, expand the local retail footprint, enliven side streets, and activate the streetscape.”

The petition references the Central Square component of the Kendall Square Central Square Planning Study (typically referred to as the “C2 study”), completed in 2013, and the preceding Central Square “Red Ribbon” report completed in 2011. The goals of the C2 study, which include public spaces, diversity in retail, cultural and non-profit enterprises, increased housing, connections, and sustainability, align with the stated intent of this petition. Moreover, the petition incorporates some, but not all, of the zoning recommendations that were included in the C2 study, as discussed in more detail below.

The petitioners contend that the 1987 Central Square Action Plan, which is the basis for the current Central Square Overlay District requirements, guidelines and review criteria, is “antiquated, largely unimplemented, and not sensitive to the needs of today,” and notes that despite more recent planning efforts, there have been few recent changes to the zoning or the physical composition of Central Square. However, the petition only suggests changing specific zoning requirements; if this proposal is advanced, it would be worthwhile to consider amending the purpose and criteria sections of the Central Square Overlay District in order to align with those more recent planning goals and objectives. It may also be helpful to reference the updated Central Square Design Guidelines created through the C2 study, although those guidelines do not align perfectly with the proposed zoning requirements.

Specific Proposed Changes

Increased FAR

One of the most substantial proposed changes is an increase in the allowed development density for residential uses, which is conceptually similar to the recommendation of the C2 study. First, the petition proposes increasing the allowed residential FAR to 4.0 in the Business B (BB) portion, superseding the allowed residential FAR of 3.0 in the base district (it may be necessary to clarify this in the text, because where the base and overlay zoning provide different requirements, the stricter provision usually applies). Furthermore, the petition would allow, by special permit, a total FAR of 4.0 (including both residential and non-residential uses) anywhere in the overlay district, which includes areas beyond the BB core (see attached map). Non-residential uses would still not be allowed to exceed the FAR limit of the base zoning district.

The latter provision matches the recommendation of the C2 study, except that the C2 study recommended allowing the total FAR of 4.0 by special permit only within the area designated “Heart of Central Square,” which generally includes areas of the district between Bishop Allen Drive and Green Street. Other “Neighborhood Edge” areas were meant to remain at a lower density, to provide a transition to the lower-scale neighborhoods beyond.

The significance of limiting the total FAR, while also limiting the non-residential FAR within the total, is that it enables mixed-use development and provides opportunities to develop additional housing on

sites that are currently commercial. Under normal zoning, when there is a non-residential FAR limit and a distinct residential FAR limit, the total FAR limit for a mixed use lot is determined by a “mixed use formula,” which puts the total allowed FAR somewhere between the two limits. For example, since the petition proposes a residential FAR limit of 4.0 in BB and the base zoning non-residential FAR limit is 2.75, the total FAR limit for a mixed-use development would range between 2.75 and 4.0 depending on the relative proportion of each use. In the special permit case, any combination of residential and non-residential development could be built so long as the non-residential FAR is no more than 2.75 and the total combined FAR is no more than 4.0.

A key variation from the C2 study is that the petition proposes no increase in allowed height. Therefore, even though the FAR could be increased to 4.0, the height limit would remain 55 feet as-of-right (or lower in some districts), and increase to as much as 80 feet by special permit in some areas. The C2 study recommended allowed heights up to 140 or 160 feet to accommodate additional residential density. Within current height limitations, such density may not be reasonably achievable on many lots, especially within the lower-scale edges of the overlay district. It is not unreasonable to adopt a strategy that is more dimensionally-based, where the major limiting factor to development is height rather than density. However, it may raise concerns for property owners and neighbors if a lot is allowed a higher density “on paper” than it could actually achieve.

Another provision recommended in the C2 study that is not included in the petition is to allow lots to be aggregated and for the allowed development to be transferred across lots, such as within Planned Unit Development overlay districts. The objective would be to enable development rights to be used flexibly so that historic buildings and open spaces, for instance, could be preserved. Excluding this provision may continue to help naturally limit opportunities to develop sites, but it may also provide fewer options to property owners who wish to fully utilize the allowed density on their sites.

Residential Balconies and Rooftops

The Planning Board often encourages outdoor spaces such as balconies, porches and decks, especially for new housing where they help to impart residential character and amenities. Zoning requirements can often be an impediment because such spaces, if they are either covered with a roof or located above the third floor, are counted as part of the building’s Gross Floor Area. More permissive rules might encourage greater incorporation of outdoor spaces in new projects. However, consideration should also be given to the rationale for including these spaces as Gross Floor Area – primarily, because it is often difficult to enforce distinctions between outdoor and indoor space, and without clear standards a developer might be encouraged to enclose outdoor spaces as much as possible in order to maximize the value of the benefit. Some additional standards, such as a minimum amount of the perimeter that must be open to the air, could help provide clarification.

Retail Exemption

The petition proposes an exemption from Gross Floor Area for retail spaces of 1,500 square feet or less. This is similar in concept to the recommendation of the C2 study, which would allow an exemption of retail at ground floors if a certain minimum percentage consists of spaces of 1,500 square feet or less,

but also allows for some larger spaces to be exempted along with other uses such as indoor public spaces, community-oriented non-profit establishments, child care, and basement retail space. The reason for encouraging smaller spaces is that they tend to be more desirable to local businesses, although that is not always the case – some types of national businesses (such as mobile phone stores) might work well in smaller spaces, and some local businesses (such as restaurants) might need larger spaces. While this petition does not allow an exemption that applies as broadly as recommended in the C2 study, there may be a benefit to keeping the provision more simple.

Formula Business and Fast Order Food

As recommended in the C2 study, the petition proposes eliminating the limit of no more than 14 fast order food establishments in the district as a whole, and creating a definition and special permit requirement for “formula businesses.” The restrictions on fast order food establishments have been a concern for some time, because they have constrained opportunities for local businesses and other food-based business types that may be desirable to the community. The requirements have been difficult to change because the concept of “fast food” carries the connotation of being generic, unhealthy and low quality, while the zoning definition of “fast order food” includes a range of businesses serving prepared food for quick service or take-out, including many unique, local establishments.

While Cambridge does not currently have formula business requirements, they have been implemented in other communities where there is a desire to maintain a unique character within a particular area and not to be overwhelmed by national branding. These requirements apply to retail establishments, but are based on the design of the space rather than the specific retail use. While “chain” businesses would still be allowed, any business that shares standardized elements such as trademarks, architectural design and color schemes with a group of other establishments across the state or a larger area would be required to seek a special permit to ensure that the “formula” elements of the design would not diminish the character of Central Square that is meant to be achieved by the zoning.

Formula business requirements may be a better way to address the community’s concerns, but like fast order food restrictions, they could restrict businesses that are otherwise desirable. For instance, locally-based businesses can often expand to enough locations within the city that they might fall under the definition of a formula business. Also, national or regional formula businesses might be better suited than independent businesses to serve some needs that have been articulated by the community, such as convenience goods and affordable clothing. There may also be businesses looking to expand from other parts of the country or internationally, which would be “unique” to the Cambridge context but could fall under the definition of formula business. While the special permit requirement is not as onerous as a strict “cap” on the number of allowed establishments, it may be enough to dissuade some businesses from locating in Central Square.

Bar and Nightclub Entrances

Current zoning requires that establishments where alcohol is served and where dancing or entertainment is provided must have their entrance on Massachusetts Ave., Main Street or Prospect

Street. The proposed zoning would allow entrances in other locations by special permit. This is a topic that was discussed as part of a zoning petition several years ago. While it was found that there are other parts of Central Square where it would be reasonable to have the entrance to such an establishment on a side street, there was still concern raised by neighbors about impacts of noise on the abutting neighborhood.

Setbacks and Open Space

Because residential uses (but not commercial uses) are required to meet requirements for yard setbacks and private open space, mixed-use development in a predominantly commercial area like Central Square can be challenging. In areas with ground-floor commercial activity, it can be impractical to create private residential yards at grade, and designing true mixed-use buildings is difficult when the ground-floor commercial component has to meet a different set of dimensional requirements than the upper-floor residential. The zoning currently allows the Planning Board to reduce yard setbacks for development that conforms to the Central Square design objectives. The proposed zoning would also allow private open space to be reduced or relocated onto upper floors, which would remove some additional barriers to residential and mixed-use development.

Parking and Loading

The proposed zoning conceptually follows the C2 study recommendation of establishing maximum parking ratios and allowing minimum parking ratios to be more flexible. The proposed ratios themselves are somewhat different from the C2 recommendations, which were based on observed demand for parking and goals for limiting traffic impacts. In general, the proposed commercial ratios are higher than what was recommended in C2, and the residential parking ratios are somewhat lower. The table below summarizes the differences, with all requirements expressed as a ratio of parking spaces per dwelling unit, per hotel room or per 1,000 square feet of Gross Floor Area:

Use	C2 Study	Petition
Residential	Maximum 0.75 sp/unit Minimum 0.5 sp/unit	Maximum 0.5 sp/unit
Office (Non-Technical)	Maximum 0.9 sp/1,000 SF	Maximum 2.0 sp/1,000 SF
Technical Office (Lab)	Maximum 0.8 sp/1,000 SF	Maximum 1.25 sp/1,000 SF
Retail	Maximum 0.5 sp/1,000 SF	Not mentioned (established in base zoning)
Hotel	Maximum 0.25 sp/room	Maximum 0.25 sp/room

The proposed zoning also introduces the notion that minimum parking could be reduced for an in-lieu-of fee, which was not contemplated in the C2 study but is currently allowed in the Harvard Square Overlay District. This is an interesting concept that has the potential to provide revenue to support other public goals for the area, such as investment in transportation infrastructure, historic preservation and cultural programming. However, it is difficult to predict how much revenue could be generated and what types of enhancements could be realistically expected to result from that source.

The petition also proposes allowing parking to be located off-site within the district, which was recommended in the C2 study, and has the potential to enable shared parking arrangements to make redevelopment feasible on sites that are currently constrained due to parking requirements.

Central Square Overlay District and Base Zoning Districts

City of Cambridge CDD

