



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

# PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date: April 19, 2022

Subject: Update on Discussions of Allowing Multifamily Housing Citywide

To the Honorable, the City Council,

Since January, 2022, the Planning Board has held three discussions on the topic of allowing multifamily housing in all zoning districts of Cambridge. These discussions were initiated by a City Council request made on November 16, 2021, for “CDD to work with the Planning Board to develop concepts and principles to eliminate single family and two family only zones in the City of Cambridge, and to report back to the City Council as soon as practicable.”

Over the course of these discussions, staff from the Community Development Department (CDD) presented information about Cambridge’s current zoning requirements and the specific ways in which those requirements prevent multifamily housing in different parts of the city. CDD also presented information about the issues and goals articulated in the *Envision Cambridge* comprehensive plan and how they relate to the subject of restrictive single-family and two-family zoning districts.

After the most recent discussion, the Board voted to send a report to the City Council with an update on its process so far and a request for further guidance from the Council on the intended policy goals and outcomes of a zoning change that would eliminate single and two-family only zoning and permit multifamily housing citywide.

Below is an update on the Board’s discussion to date.

## Zoning Principles

The Board’s discussion raised several important planning issues, which highlight the need for clear policy guidance in order to evaluate the benefits and tradeoffs of different zoning strategies. They reflect the range of viewpoints expressed by Board members.

- Zoning should allow for an equitable range of housing types and unit sizes in all residential districts. In other words, some neighborhoods should not be exclusively limited to large, single-family and two-family homes while other neighborhoods allow more variety in housing types. There is no compelling reason to prohibit multifamily housing and townhouses throughout the city.

- More housing opportunities could be created in restrictive zoning districts, which currently do not support as much housing as other neighborhoods of the city. New housing opportunities in residential neighborhoods should be viewed in the context of the City’s overall strategy for housing growth, as articulated in *Envision Cambridge*.
- Residential neighborhoods should have open space for children and families, as well as tree canopy and other features that have a larger environmental benefit to the public as well as residents. However, that should not necessarily be a justification to oppose the creation of any new housing opportunities.
- Neighborhood streets should not be overburdened with parking. Although there is a desire to plan for a future that is less reliant on private automobile use, the impacts on public resources, including on-street parking, need to be considered.
- Housing costs are a major concern. Some Board members noted that new market-rate housing units are likely to be very expensive and accessible only to wealthier households, and that a change to allow multifamily housing throughout the City, in isolation, would not produce new affordable housing units. Other Board members noted that housing is already expensive, whether it is existing or new, and that retaining the current restrictive zoning in some neighborhoods would result in fewer units that will still be out of reach to all but the wealthiest households. Board members also acknowledged that demand for housing has led to increased property values, placing pressure on longtime residents.
- Opportunities to create affordable housing are desired. Changes to zoning should be carefully assessed for how they might affect the viability of opportunities pursued under the Affordable Housing Overlay.
- It is worthwhile to identify and preserve building exteriors that contribute positively to the architectural character of a neighborhood. However, there can be flexibility to make changes within the interiors of buildings and develop complementary infill.

### Concepts for Amending Zoning

Board members agreed that in order to enable multifamily housing citywide, it would be necessary both to increase the allowed range of housing types in Residence A-1, A-2, and B districts, and to amend the “minimum lot area per dwelling unit” requirements which currently limit housing in those districts to fewer, larger-sized units.

- **Allowing More Housing Types:** There is broad support for allowing multifamily and townhouse development in Residence A-1, A-2, and B districts. Planning Board members discussed the following specific options:
  - Allow the same range of uses as in Residence C and C-1 districts. These would include multifamily, townhouse, and some group housing such as elderly congregate housing and lodging houses. Board members had differing views on

whether to allow group housing, noting that they can provide more affordable alternative housing options, but can also have parking impacts.

- Allow a broader range of uses, but with limitations on building size. This would allow for additional unit types while keeping building sizes consistent with the prevailing neighborhood patterns.
- Allow multiple buildings on a lot. Currently, only a single principal building is allowed per lot in Residence A-1 and A-2 districts, and there are some limitations on detached buildings on a lot in Residence B. Allowing more flexibility would allow for different building and site development options that could be tailored to different sites.
- **Recalibrating Unit Density:** Residence A-1, A-2, and B districts have higher ratios of allowed floor area to allowed number of units than other zoning districts. There is broad support for changing the limitations so that more units could be allowed in those districts within the same amount of floor area. Planning Board members discussed the following specific options:
  - Reduce the minimum lot area per dwelling unit in those districts so that, when combined with floor area ratio (FAR) limitations in that district, it results in a consistent average unit size across neighborhoods. Some Board members suggested that an average Gross Floor Area per dwelling unit of 1,200 square feet could be a consistent standard across neighborhoods.
  - Instead of lot area per dwelling unit limitations, rely on other limitations such as allowed building types (such as three-unit, four-unit, six-unit buildings) without specific limitations on unit density.

Board members discussed other zoning requirements that could be changed, but would likely require more extensive study that could delay the implementation of the immediate objective of allowing multifamily housing citywide.

- **Parking:** The requirement to provide parking affects the feasibility of housing production, but also impacts the availability of public on-street parking. Board members are aware that the City Council and CDD are studying parking policies more broadly, and the outcome is likely to affect any discussions related to housing.
- **Dimensional Standards:** Dimensional requirements such as height, setbacks, and open space can affect housing development. Because they interact in complex ways, it would require exhaustive study to evaluate options for changing them and what outcomes would likely result. Overall, Board members were supportive of retaining requirements for setbacks and open space, though the specific requirements could be studied further and adjusted if desired. Some Board members discussed whether changes in allowed height could provide more open space, while others appreciated the consistency of the 35-foot height limit across neighborhoods.

- **Affordability:** It is very difficult to create affordability requirements that are both effective and legally enforceable. However, Board members emphasized that it is important to continue working toward possible strategies that could increase the supply of affordable housing in all neighborhoods.
- **Broader Housing Production:** Some Board members suggested taking a more holistic view of the housing goals of *Envision Cambridge*, such as looking at whether more housing can be permitted in transit-served areas. These ideas may be worthwhile to discuss, but would be somewhat different than the current discussion, which is focused on a citywide approach to eliminating zoning that restricts certain types of housing in certain areas. If the Council's policy goal is to create new housing opportunities more broadly, it may be worthwhile to look beyond only the most restrictive residential districts.

#### Next Steps

The Board welcomes input from the City Council on specific policy objectives that would help to further refine the zoning concepts under discussion. With that guidance, CDD and the Planning Board can further pursue options for zoning changes that would meet the stated objectives.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,

*Catherine Preston Connolly*

Catherine Preston Connolly, Chair.