



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

# PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date: May 13, 2025

Subject: BioMed Realty, L.P. “East Cambridge Community Enhancement”  
Zoning Petition

Recommendation: The Planning Board recommends ADOPTION, with suggested  
amendments and comments.

To the Honorable, the City Council,

On April 29, 2025, the Planning Board (the “Board”) held a public hearing to discuss a Zoning Petition by BMR-320 Charles Street LLC c/o BioMed Realty, L.P. (the “Petitioner”) to amend the Zoning Map and Article 20.000 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance to create a new “East Cambridge Community Enhancement Overlay District” (the “Petition”). The intent of the Petition is to promote additional development that will improve the edge of the district adjacent to Ahern Field, improve the pedestrian experience within the zoning district, and/or provide support for community services within East Cambridge.

The Board heard a presentation from representatives of the Petitioner and comments from many members of the public. The Board also received written materials in advance from staff in the City’s Community Development Department (CDD) and from members of the public. Another set of materials received in advance from the Petitioner dated April 18, 2025, included a revised version of the zoning petition text with amendments intended to incorporate more articulated standards for building setbacks, step-backs, and open space.

After hearing testimony and discussing the Petition, the Planning Board voted to forward a report to the City Council with a positive recommendation. Specifically, the Board recommends adopting the version of the zoning text provided in the package from BioMed Realty dated April 18, 2025, with further comments and suggestions below. In making its recommendation, the Board has limited the scope of its deliberations to the proposed amendments to the Zoning Ordinance. While Board members acknowledged and appreciated the community benefits in the associated Letter of Commitment, they were not a factor in this recommendation.

The Board bases its recommendation on the following aspects of the proposal:

- **Community Engagement.** Based on the testimony received, the proposal has been developed with extensive community outreach and is responsive to feedback from many different voices. Though not all testimony was favorable, the Petitioner has clearly engaged in a robust dialogue with neighbors and that dialogue has informed the objectives and the specifics of the proposal.

- **Uses.** The current use of the site is commercial lab/office and the current zoning permits both residential and commercial uses. The zoning continues to promote housing based on the Eastern Cambridge Housing Overlay (ECHO) and recent citywide multifamily zoning amendments. While some Board members would see this as a desirable site for housing, that may not be a likely outcome because the conditions of the site and surrounding context make it an attractive site for commercial lab/office use. If it remains a commercial use, the Petition represents a well thought out approach to redevelopment of the site. A commercial redevelopment of the site would also support housing goals by contributing to the Cambridge Affordable Housing Trust through Incentive Zoning requirements.
- **Proposed Height and Massing.** The proposed massing has been very well articulated to address the primary concerns from neighbors regarding the visual impacts of building height to residents and shadows on Ahern Field. As revised, the proposal’s approach of stepping down from the police station and other large nearby buildings to the field and residential area is successful and results in an attractive building for that setting. The shadow studies show the limited impact that the proposed additional building space would have on the surrounding area.
- **Open Space.** Board members appreciate the commitment to publicly beneficial open space beyond the minimum requirements under current zoning. The opening at Sixth Street and Charles Street envisioned by the proposed setbacks (in the revised version) has the potential to be a meaningful space. Board members agree with the comment from CDD staff that it is important for the space to be usable and functional for the community, and not only a “buffer” separating the building from the surrounding public realm. This goal may benefit from more articulation in the special permit criteria in zoning and will be an important consideration in the Planning Board’s eventual review of a development proposal.
- **Active Edge.** Although it does not seem likely that a retail use would be viable in this location, it would be desirable to activate the Charles Street edge of the site as much as possible to complement the public use of Ahern Field. Although it is not clear at this time what approaches would be implemented, it is helpful to include this objective in the criteria for future review. Public bathrooms, which are noted as a possibility in the Petition, would be a great benefit for users of Ahern Field.

The Board has the following suggestions for further improvement and clarification of the Petition:

- **Parking.** As suggested by CDD, the Board recommends setting a maximum accessory parking ratio of 0.8 space per 1,000 square feet of lab/office Gross Floor Area, which is consistent with parking limitations for other commercial development in the area. Representatives of the Petitioner stated that they were willing to commit to this limitation.

- Text Review. As with all zoning petitions, the Board recommends that CDD and Law Department staff be asked to make a full review of the zoning text prior to adoption and to recommend any changes for clarity and consistency within the Zoning Ordinance. In particular, it should be made clear that the proposed zoning limitations would apply to non-residential uses, and would not impact the allowances for housing that are permitted following the recent Multifamily Zoning Amendment.

The Planning Board voted 5-0 in favor of transmitting the above report, with one member absent.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary T. Flynn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mary Flynn, Chair.