



To: Cambridge Planning Board

From: Community Development Department (CDD) Staff

Date: April 24, 2025

Re: East Cambridge Community Enhancement Overlay District Zoning Petition

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## Overview

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**Petitioner:** BMR-320 Charles LLC c/o BioMed Realty, L.P.

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**Zoning Article:** 20.000 (Overlay Districts)

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**Petition Summary:** Create a new overlay district called the East Cambridge Community Enhancement (ECCE) Overlay District that would 1) allow for increases in height and floor area by special permit to facilitate the conversion of older industrial properties to new structures in a way that will 2) 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 in East Cambridge.

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**Planning Board Action:** Recommendation to City Council.

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**Memo Contents:** Summary of the proposed zoning, background information on the topic of the Petition, and considerations and comments from staff.

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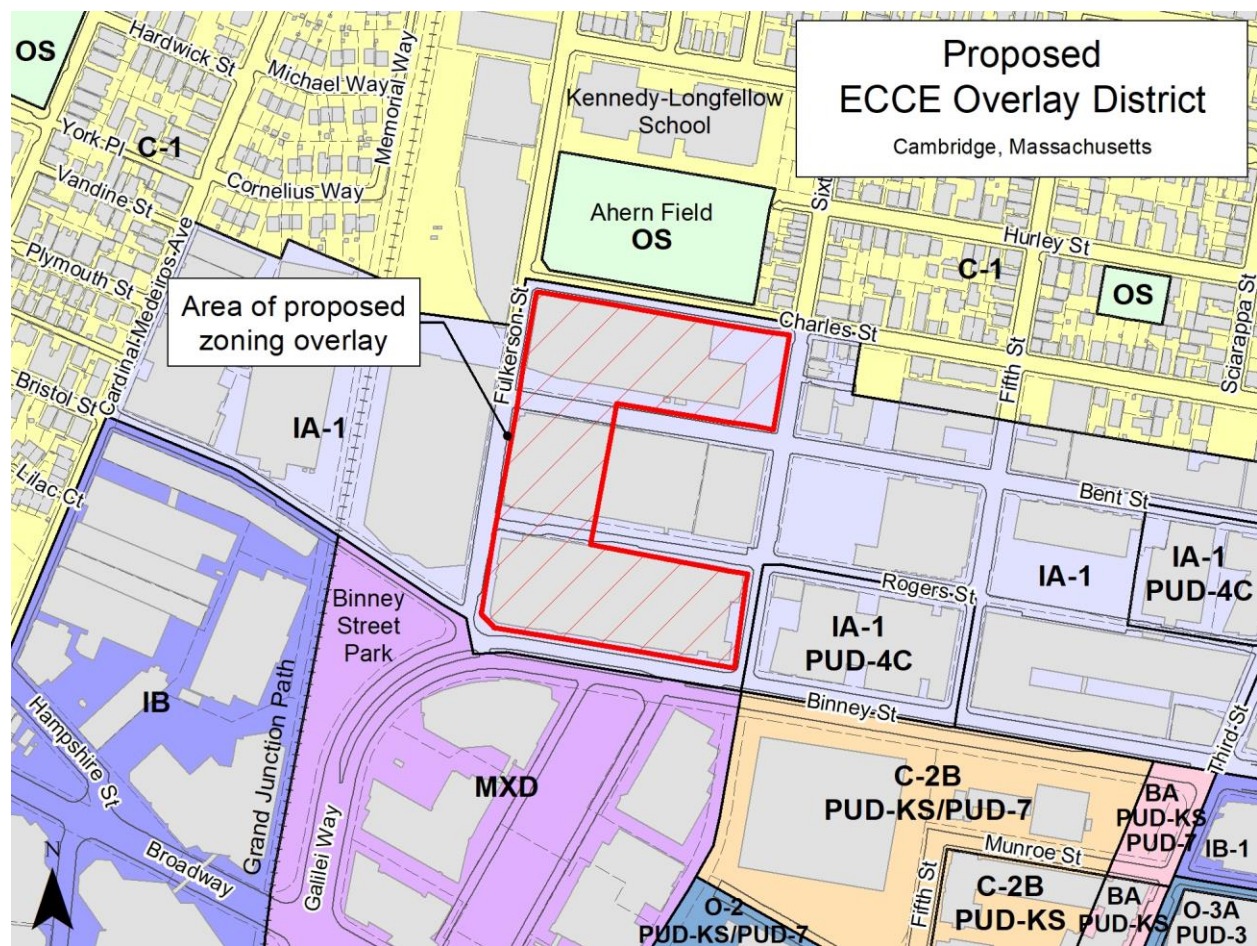
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**Melissa Peters** | Acting Assistant City Manager for Community Development  
**Sandra Clarke** | Chief of Administration & Operations

## CDD Staff Report

### Summary of Petition Facts

The proposed zoning petition requests a new overlay district that would apply to an area generally bounded by Charles St to the north, Sixth St to the east, Binney St to the south, and Fulkerson St to the west. The area covers three blocks – the entire northern and southern block of the proposed overlay district and the western-most lot of the middle block with frontage on Fulkerson St and a depth of approximately 100 feet. All of the lots within the proposed overlay district are owned by the petitioner.



The current zoning includes an Industrial A-1 (IA-1) base zoning district with an overlay district called the East Cambridge Housing Overlay (ECHO). The base zoning district and the ECHO cover a similar area 11-13 blocks in size generally bounded by Charles St to the north, Second St to the east, Binney St to the south, and Cardinal Medeiros Ave to the west. Just to the west of the site is the Grand Junction Pathway Overlay District, created in 2020 following a zoning petition by





<b>Max. Building Height</b>	45 feet non-residential 6 stories above grade and 75 feet residential	Increased height for residential mostly superseded by base zoning (Multifamily Zoning Amendment)	65 feet by SP with a 45-degree bulk control plane starting at a 35-foot height measured from the center of Charles St
<b>Max. FAR</b>	1.25 non-residential No FAR limit residential	Increased FAR for residential mostly superseded by base zoning (Multifamily Zoning Amendment)	2.8 by SP for block bounded by Charles St, Sixth St, Bent St, and Fulkerson St
<b>Required Setbacks</b>	None	Same as base zoning	Same as base zoning
<b>Required Open Space</b>	None	Same as base zoning	Same as base zoning
<b>Max. Vehicle Parking by Use</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Residential: no max</li> <li>General office: 1 per 400sf</li> <li>Technical office/lab: 1 per 525sf</li> <li>Restaurant: 1 per 200sf</li> <li>Retail store: 1 per 500sf</li> <li>Industrial: no max</li> </ul>	Same as base zoning	Same as base zoning
<b>Min. Long-term Bicycle Parking by Use</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Residential: 0 to 1.05 per unit depending on number of units</li> <li>General office: 0.30 per 1,000sf</li> <li>Technical office/lab: 0.22 per 1,000sf</li> <li>Restaurant: 0.20 per 1,000sf</li> <li>Retail store: 0.10 per 1,000sf</li> <li>Industrial: 0.08 per 1,000sf</li> </ul>	Same as base zoning	Same as base zoning
<b>Min. Short-term Bicycle Parking by Use</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Residential: 0 to 0.10 per unit depending on number of units</li> </ul>	Same as base zoning	Same as base zoning

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General office: 0.60 per 1,000sf</li> <li>• Technical office/lab: 0.60 per 1,000sf</li> <li>• Restaurant: 1 per 1,000sf</li> <li>• Retail store: 1 per 1,000sf</li> <li>• Industrial: 0.60 per 1,000sf</li> </ul>		
<b>Other District Standards or Requirements</b>	None	Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines referenced where review is required	List of criteria for Planning Board approval of increased height and FAR

## Updated Materials

Before the Planning Board hearing, the Petitioner submitted supplemental materials including diagrams and proposed revisions to the zoning text. The revisions would establish a better-defined building envelope with progressively more restrictive setbacks and height step-backs along Charles, Sixth, and Fulkerson Streets. The step-backs would also apply to rooftop mechanical penthouses, which would be limited in height to 23 feet above maximum height limit in the district (88 feet above grade in total). Refer to the provided diagrams which illustrate the proposed building envelope and provide shadow impact studies based on the proposed envelope.

The proposed revisions also would require a minimum of 20% open space for a development utilizing the ECCE provisions, including at least 14,000 square feet of open space along Charles Street.

The Petitioner has offered these revisions as potential amendments to the Petition. The Planning Board could recommend that the Petition be amended with these revisions.

## Background

The site is located in a transitional area along Charles St between commercial and industrial uses around Kendall Square and the residential East Cambridge neighborhood. Historically, the zoning has reflected this transitional character. The northern block of the project area was located in a R-3 (Residence) zoning district that covered the East Cambridge neighborhood when zoning was first adopted in 1924. The district allowed housing up to four stories or 60 feet in height. The middle and southern block of the project area were zoned U2 in 1924, which was an “Unrestricted” district that allowed all uses in buildings up to six stories or 80 feet in height.

In 1943, all three blocks in the project area were zoned “Industry B” along with Kendall Square. The Eastern Cambridge neighborhood to the north of the project area retained residential zoning with a

C-1 district that remains to this day. The Industry B district limited uses to manufacturing with a maximum building height of 80 feet.

In 2001, the area was rezoned to its current IA-1 district among major citywide zoning changes and the Eastern Cambridge Planning Study (ECaPS). The area between Binney and Charles Streets was identified in ECaPS as a “Transition Area,” reflecting both the geographic transition between residential and commercial uses and the potential for the area to transition from older to newer forms of development. The study’s goals for the area included encouraging new residential development and creating strong pedestrian and bicycle connections between the neighborhood and Kendall Square.

The IA-1 district allows residential use as well as commercial and light industrial uses at a lower height and density than Industry B. Additionally, the ECHO was adopted, which provided an incentive for residential development within the designated district by allowing greater density and height for housing and permitting housing to be developed in combination with permitted non-residential uses where a mix of uses is desirable. However, the allowable heights scaled down to 35 feet in areas close to the East Cambridge neighborhood. The Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines were also created to guide review of development in the study area. Though some housing has been developed in the area since 2001, there has also been substantial new commercial lab/office development, some of which were enabled by rezoning.

Most recently, the Multifamily Zoning Amendment adopted in February, 2025, changed the limitations on residential use to allow buildings up to 6 stories and 75 feet above grade with no limitations on unit density or FAR. This change superseded many of the limitations of the ECHO district, but in a way that continues to incentivize residential use.

## Considerations

The Petition is a fairly straightforward example of a proposal by a property owner to increase the allowable development on a site in exchange for committing to specific benefits. The ECCE allows for height and FAR increases for the development parcel within the overlay area that has not been recently redeveloped (320 Charles St). An increase in FAR from 1.25 to 2.8 would result in about 165,000 square feet of additional non-residential development capacity on that site. That figure might be reduced somewhat if the dimensional standards place additional constraints.

The “benefits” from the proposal come in two basic forms. The first is the quality of the development outcomes from the proposed zoning. Within the ECCE, new development would require a special permit from the Planning Board, which would need to find that the development meets specified criteria. According to the proposal, the criteria would include enhancing pedestrian and bicycle corridors, providing for passive open space, and “if possible” providing for active programming at the ground floor, along with generally adhering to planning and design objectives for the area. Many of the criteria focus on improving the environment around Ahern Field and limiting negative impacts such as shadows. The special permit requirement means there would be a public review process to refine the design of the proposal to ensure it meets the purpose of the overlay district, Citywide and Eastern Cambridge design guidelines, and community needs. The revised zoning text provided by the Petitioner also suggests open space requirements above and beyond the base zoning.

The other way in which benefits would be provided is through direct contributions described in a “Letter of Commitment,” which would be made a condition of any new development under the proposed zoning if it is adopted. The initial Letter of Commitment included with the Petition would include monetary contributions to the East End House, to “neighborhood planning in East Cambridge,” to the East Cambridge Scholarship Fund, and to the East Cambridge Open Space Trust for improvements to Ahern Field.

As described by the Petitioner, the proposal has been shaped by extensive outreach with community members in East Cambridge and Wellington-Harrington, taking place since last year. Many aspects of the proposal appear to be a direct response to priorities expressed during that outreach process. The supplemental text revisions suggested by the Petitioner also seem to be a direct response to community concerns.

Because the Planning Board’s role is to advise the City Council on the merits of the zoning, this memo focuses mainly on the proposed zoning changes and not on the public benefits being offered in the Letter of Commitment. CDD has secured a development economics consultant to perform an independent financial analysis of the proposed change, which will be provided to the City Council as was done with other recent rezoning proposals of this type.

### *Height and Bulk*

Based on feedback from community meetings, the ECCE was designed to shift the building bulk and height towards Bent St and away from Ahern Field to avoid shadow impacts on the public



recreational space and transition height from the low-scale residential part of the neighborhood to the taller, denser development patterns around Kendall Square. The modest proposed height increase from 45 to 65 feet and the proposed bulk control plane reflect these goals by requiring lower heights on Charles St, across the street from Ahern Field. The supplemental zoning text goes further by setting a limit of 3 stories and more explicit step-backs in height at upper stories, along with a limit on the height of rooftop mechanical penthouses. The supplemental diagrams show how this approach reduces shadow impacts on Ahern Field. It will also likely result in the building having a very long, low profile that will make it less visible from areas further back in the neighborhoods.

Though the intended outcomes are fairly clear in the context of the proposal, some aspects of the zoning could use further clarification. For example, it is important to note that these proposed height limits should only be for non-residential use. Otherwise, there could be potential conflicts in interpretation between the proposed zoning and the recently adopted multifamily zoning amendment.

There may need to be further clarification of the 23-foot height limitation on “Roof Top Mechanical Penthouses” suggested in the revised zoning text. In general, height limits in zoning apply up to the roofline of buildings, not to appurtenances normally situated above the roof like mechanical equipment. Some commercial buildings contain equipment within enclosed penthouses, but it is also common for equipment to be installed in unenclosed or partially enclosed areas (often visually or acoustically screened) above the roof. The suggested revised text uses the term “enclosed” but it might need to be clarified whether all equipment above the roof line would be subject to a 23-foot height limit or whether some equipment would be allowed to exceed that height limit if it is not fully enclosed.

#### *Setbacks and Open Space*

Public realm improvements are important features of the City’s urban design goals and purpose of the ECCE overlay district. Open space requirements were not established in the proposed zoning text, though developments of 25,000 square feet or more are generally subject to a 15% open space requirement per Section 19.59 (unless modified by special permit). The revised text suggests a 20% minimum open space, which is more typical of recent development on larger sites. It also suggests at least 14,000 square feet of open space along Charles Street in addition to a 15-foot minimum setback, which is deeper than is typical in the neighborhood.

In considering the public benefits of open space, the quality of open space can be as important as the amount. The proposed criteria in the zoning text emphasize passive open space with seating and other amenities, which should provide meaningful benefits to both the surrounding community and workers in the building. The suggested approach to massing and setbacks along Charles Street may result in open spaces primarily serving as visual buffers. This may be seen as a desirable goal from some perspectives, but it limits opportunities for active or engaging public amenities and can weaken the building’s relationship with the sidewalk and Ahern Field.



Opportunities for publicly beneficial open space might incorporate a plaza, shaded seating areas, pedestrian-friendly connections, sustainable green infrastructure, and possible community programming, such as informational displays or public art. Such spaces should engage and complement Ahern Field and encourage social interaction, relaxation, and connectivity. They should also be intentionally designed to serve a functional, usable, and inviting purpose. These qualities can all be considered as part of the design review process, as long as the intent is clear in the zoning and the dimensional requirements enable these types of outcomes.

### *Parking*

For many years, limiting new parking through zoning (particularly for commercial uses) has been part of Cambridge's overall strategy for reducing transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions and improving traffic safety. Although there is an interest in allowing enough parking to meet the anticipated demand, providing more parking than is needed has the effect of worsening traffic impacts because parking availability is a strong incentive to drive.

The ECCE overlay district relies on the base zoning for parking space maximums of 2.5 spaces per 1,000 sf for general office and 1.9 spaces per 1,000 sf for technical office uses, which is far more than what is typically needed for commercial development in this area. Other areas that have undergone rezoning have had lower maximum amounts of parking. For example, the Grand Junction Pathway Overlay (325 Binney Street) and other areas around Eastern Cambridge and Alewife have set a maximum ratio of 0.8 spaces per 1,000 sf of floor area for lab/office uses, which is more typical of the parking demand in the area. In addition, a recent study by the Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization's Central Transportation Planning Staff found that the average occupancy of laboratory parking in Cambridge is less than 0.8 spaces per 1,000 sf.

In relation to bicycle parking spaces, CDD staff support the minimum ratios required by the base district zoning.

### *Design Review Criteria*

The proposed criteria are generally aligned with the broad planning and design principles established through past planning for the area. One item that may require special consideration at the zoning or design review stage is the treatment of the ground floor to activate the streetscape and serve community needs in relation to Ahern Field. The proposed zoning suggests, if possible, the inclusion of community space or public restrooms and avoiding blank walls. Because true "active uses" such as retail might not be practical given the location and anticipated program for the site, additional ground floor activation strategies should be considered to ensure that the ground floor positively contributes to the surrounding neighborhood and supports the City's broader urban design goals of vibrancy and pedestrian-friendly streetscapes. The following approaches should be considered, among others:

- Where feasible, providing publicly accessible uses at the ground floor, particularly along key pedestrian frontages, such as:
  - retail, café (if feasible)

- coworking, exhibit spaces, gallery, artists' studios
- educational programming or informational elements
- community meeting space
- a clear and welcoming building lobby with publicly accessible restrooms
- At least one clearly defined primary building entrance on each street oriented toward the sidewalk or public open space.
- Ground floor transparency to maximize visual connections between the interior and the public realm.
- Where office or lab use is accommodated on the ground floor, strategies that ensure the ground floor enhances the pedestrian experience.

These recommendations would strengthen the purpose of the district and create a foundation to build on during the special permit stage for future development.

#### *Other Zoning Considerations*

The proposed zoning includes a “Condominium Property Regime” provision. Similar provisions have been included in PUD zoning districts to clarify how special permit conditions might be applied where a development is permitted and then subdivided into component sites under separate ownership. The idea in such districts is to ensure that the conditions related to each phase or development site are clear to avoid situations where no one owner is responsible for collective conditions. It’s not clear how this would be of practical use for the proposed zoning scenario, which envisions new development on a single site.

The proposed zoning also includes a provision for “Minor Modifications,” which is not typically found in the Zoning Ordinance, explicitly to approve other retail or consumer service establishments or “other modifications” which could be authorized in the special permit without needing to be amended in the future. This seems similar to a “Minor Amendment” in a PUD. In general, it is favorable to allow the Planning Board to authorize specific future changes within the conditions of a special permit if they serve to advance the planning goals of the area, though further legal review may be needed to determine if a modification would be allowable as described. Further, the provision would not allow approval of retail or consumer service establishments not otherwise allowed by the base zoning. The IA-1 zoning does allow a broad range of retail uses, but further review may be needed if specific uses are anticipated that would not be allowable without additional relief.