



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date: October 27, 2025

Subject: Massachusetts Avenue Zoning Petition

Recommendation: The Planning Board RECOMMENDS adoption.

To the Honorable, the City Council,

On October 21, 2025, the Planning Board (the “Board”) held a public hearing to discuss a Zoning Petition (the “Petition”) by the City Council to amend the Cambridge Zoning Map and Ordinance in Articles 2.000, 3.000, 4.000, 5.000, 6.000, 11.000, 17.000, and 20.000 with the intent of establishing three new base zoning districts for the Massachusetts Avenue corridor in order to:

- (1) encourage patterns of development consistent with the vision of the *Mass Ave Planning Study (2025)*;
- (2) allow up to 12 stories of residential uses along the length of the corridor;
- (3) incentivize active non-residential uses on the ground floor;
- (4) establish building and site design standards to achieve urban design goals; and
- (5) create a Planned Unit Development Overlay District in Porter Square allowing up to 18 stories of residential uses in exchange for increased open space requirements and minimum retail density.

Hearing Process

The Board first heard a presentation on the Massachusetts Avenue petition from staff in the City’s Community Development Department (CDD), followed by another presentation from City staff on a separate zoning petition related to Cambridge Street. The Board then received public comment on both petitions and discussed both petitions together. These separate proposals were reviewed and discussed at the same hearing session because they share similar content and organization. Following a discussion with City staff and deliberating on the petitions, the Planning Board voted to transmit favorable recommendations on both petitions. This report covers the discussion specifically related to the Massachusetts Avenue zoning petition.

Report and Comments

Overall, Board members were strongly supportive of the Petition’s goals of prioritizing housing development and active ground story uses, and establishing standards to encourage good building and site design. Board members appreciated that the Petition advances the recommendations and goals of the *Mass Ave Planning Study*, which involved extensive

community engagement, as well as the *Envision Cambridge* process that recommended identifying areas that could support greater housing growth to address the city's needs.

Board members voiced support for the following aspects of the Petition:

- Allowing up to 12 stories of residential uses along the corridor and 18 stories in Porter Square. Board members agreed that major mixed-use corridors and squares are appropriate areas for the proposed height and densities.
- Proposed upper story setbacks above 8 stories reducing impacts of taller buildings on Mass Ave and creating height transitions from the corridor to the adjacent neighborhoods.
- Using residential height increases to incentivize the provision of active ground story uses.
- Including some office uses such as medical offices, accountants' offices, and insurance offices in the definition of "Active Uses," but specifically excluding general office uses, banks, and labs.

Board members raised general concerns for some aspects of the Petition as summarized below:

- Open Space. Some Board members expressed concern about the lack of open space requirements for buildings 8 stories or less, emphasizing the importance of encouraging additional landscaping and tree planting in new development. One Board member suggested open space requirements could be based on the length of street frontage, rather than the height of the building, to encourage more meaningful breaks in long facades. Some Board members suggested all required open space should be accessible to the public in the form of parks, plazas, or expanded sidewalk area.
- Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO). Some Board members raised concerns about the Petition's impact on the AHO's advantages for all-affordable housing developments. The Petition would increase the residential height limit from 6 stories to 12 stories while the AHO height limit would remain at 13 stories. One Board member expressed concern that minimizing the height difference could negate the AHO incentive and could result in the need for greater AHO height in the future, which was not part of the *Mass Ave Planning Study* recommendations.
- Active Uses. Planning Board members agreed that requiring retail uses in all new developments may be problematic. Some Board members expressed concern that new ground story non-residential spaces would be geared more towards large retail chains instead of small local businesses. Those Board members suggested City staff look into ways to encourage smaller Active Use spaces in the zoning petition.

The Planning Board voted 7-0 in favor of transmitting the above report.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,



Mary Flynn, Chair.