

City of Cambridge

Executive Department

YI-AN HUANG
City Manager

CMA 2026-113
IN CITY COUNCIL
April 27, 2026

To the Honorable, the City Council:

Please see the attached Cambridge Street Active Use zoning petition in response to Policy Orders 2025-164, 2026-72, 2026-73, and 2026-74.

Very truly yours,

Yi-An Huang
City Manager





To: Yi-An Huang, City Manager

From: Melissa Peters, Assistant City Manager for Community Development
Megan B. Bayer, City Solicitor

Date: April 22, 2026

Re: **Cambridge Street and Massachusetts Avenue: Active Use Zoning Petitions**

Background

On December 22, 2025 and January 26, 2026, the City Council adopted two zoning amendments creating new zoning districts for Massachusetts Avenue and Cambridge Street, respectively. The new zoning for both corridors encourages street activity by requiring active ground floor uses in new residential developments that exceed a certain height. On Mass. Ave., active uses are required to enable residential heights above 4 stories for several blocks south of Porter Square, and above 8 stories everywhere else. On Cambridge Street, active uses are required to enable residential heights above 6 stories only in Lechmere and the Webster/Windsor area. Residential heights above 6 stories are not allowed on the rest of Cambridge Street.

During the hearing process for both amendments, the Council expressed a desire for stronger active use mandates than were initially proposed. However, some changes could not be made by amending those petitions but required new petitions and a new hearing process. Before adopting the amended zoning, the City Council adopted Policy Order 2025-164 on December 8, 2025, instructing City staff to prepare subsequent zoning petitions to strengthen active use requirements on both corridors.

The Ordinance Committee of the City Council held two hearings on March 11, 2026 and April 6, 2026 to discuss different ways to implement stronger active use requirements. The following sections of this memo and the attached zoning petitions respond to Policy Orders 2026-72, 2026-73, and 2026-74, which emerged from those Ordinance Committee hearings.

Overall Approach

The proposed zoning petitions maintain the general approach of requiring active uses in new developments that exceed a certain height, which will result in active ground floors as a part of major redevelopment but allows for flexibility in cases where active uses are not feasible or preferred, such as smaller-scale preservation projects and development on unusual lots. Where active uses are required, those uses must also meet certain minimum floor area and location

standards. Specifically, active uses must occupy at least 60% of the interior floor area within 50 feet of the primary street (Mass. Ave. or Cambridge Street).

The proposed zoning includes some additional changes and clarifications to allow for flexibility where active uses may not be a priority:

1. Active uses are not required on lots that do not abut a primary street.

The active use requirements are intended to reinforce the existing mixed-use character of the main streets in each district. Therefore, it is not appropriate for the same requirements to apply to lots within the districts that do not abut a main street. The proposed petitions include clarifying edits confirming that developments on lots that do not abut a primary street can be built to the heights allowed in that district without providing active ground floor uses.

2. Allow modifications to active use requirements by Planning Board special permit.

Under the current Mass. Ave. and Cambridge Street zoning, the Planning Board may allow other non-residential uses to be considered active uses by special permit if the Board finds the use will positively contribute to an active streetscape. The proposed petitions establish a new Planning Board special permit to allow minor changes in the amount and/or location of required active uses. The purpose of these special permits is not to grant an exemption from the active use requirements, but to give the Planning Board the opportunity to consider alternatives given the unique characteristics of a site or project. The proposed zoning text includes specific special permit criteria to ensure modifications to this standard are the exception, not the norm.

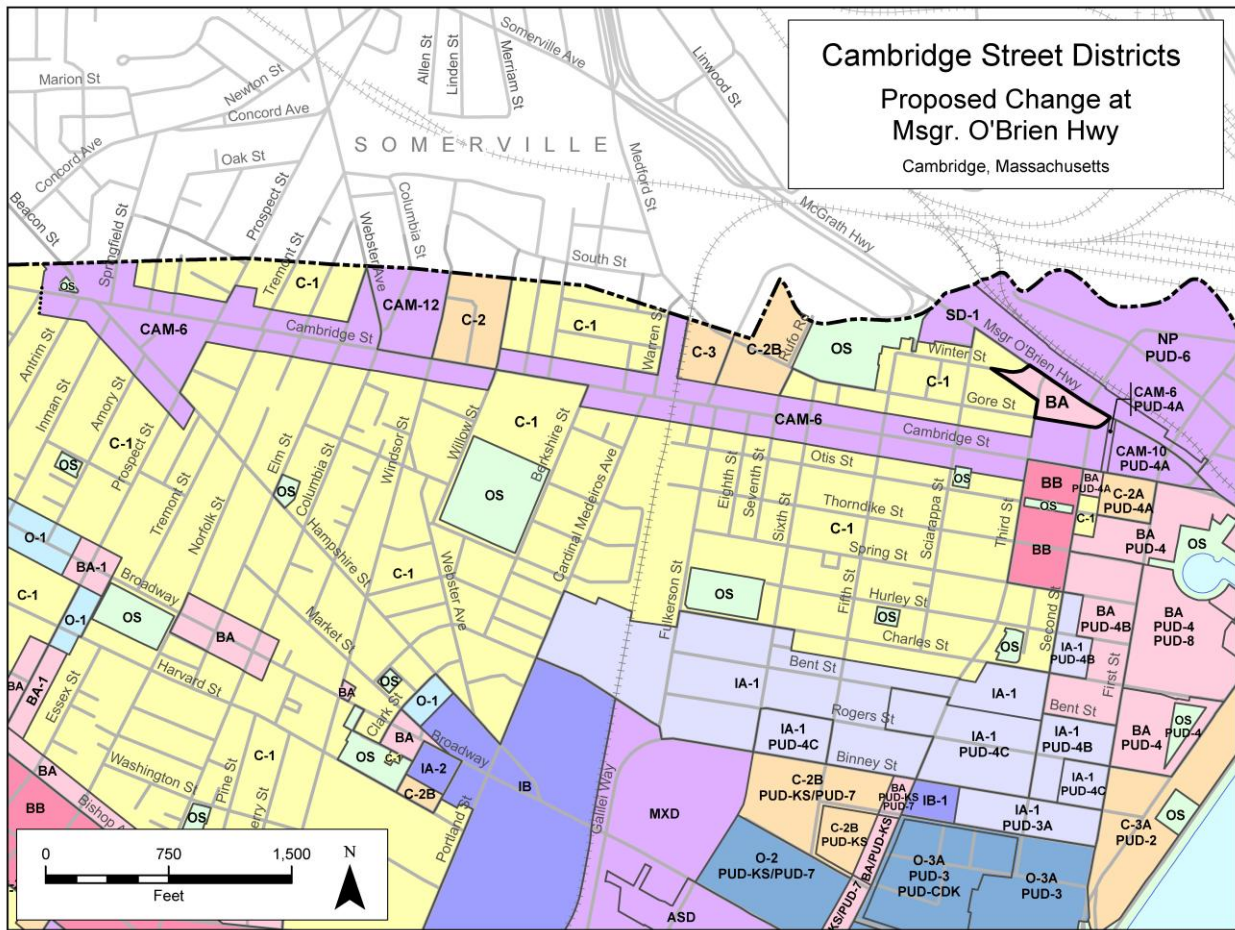
Massachusetts Avenue

The proposed Mass. Ave. zoning petition strengthens active use requirements on the corridor by amending the Zoning Map to expand the MAS-12A district, in which active uses are required in buildings that exceed 4 stories. This district is currently mapped south of Porter Square, and the petition would increase the MAS-12A district to span the entire length of the corridor from Cambridge Common to Linear Park. The section north of Linear Park would remain in the MAS-12 district, which requires active uses above 8 stories. The proposed zoning petition also requires active uses above 4 stories in the MAS-18 district in Porter Square.

and design standards of the Cambridge Street districts seem less coherent given the existing character of the highway. The Business A zoning district also allows up to 6 stories of residential development, and non-residential uses and density limits remain largely the same. The proposed district would also incorporate a section of the Residence C-1 district at the intersection of Third Street and Gore Street to include the existing retail use.

2. Warren Street.

City staff identified the Warren Street spur as a possible area to remove from the Cambridge Street districts for the same reasons as those above. However, after discussing with the Ordinance Committee at the meeting on April 6, the Council voted to keep Warren Street within the CAM-6 district. Since Warren Street is not considered a primary street, the active use requirements would not apply to a lot that does not directly abut Cambridge Street. Residential uses on Warren Street with no frontage on Cambridge Street would be allowed up to 6 stories without active uses, similar to the Residence C-1 district on the opposite side of the street. However, all non-residential uses that are allowed in the Cambridge Street districts would still be allowed on Warren Street. Although Warren Street has some history of commercial use, most retail activity has ceased. It may be helpful to allow commercial use on Warren Street in the future, but staff believe that Cambridge Street should be prioritized for future active use. Additional requirements could inhibit opportunities for residential redevelopment.



Formula Businesses

In addition to reviewing these active use mandates, the Ordinance Committee discussed and voted to request zoning text that would require a special permit for formula businesses on Cambridge Street. In Article 2.000 of the Zoning Ordinance, a formula business is defined as:

An individual Retail or Consumer Service establishment that is required by virtue of a contract, franchise agreement, ownership or other similar legal obligation to conform or substantially conform to a set of common design and operating features that serve to identify the establishment as one of a group of establishments for business, marketing and public relations purposes. Specifically, an establishment shall be considered a Formula Business if it shares at least two (2) of the following three (3) characteristics with ten (10) or more other establishments in Massachusetts or within twenty (20) or more other establishments.

1. *Trademark, service mark or logo, defined as a word, phrase, symbol, or design or combination thereof that identifies and distinguishes the source of the goods or services from others;*
2. *Standardized building architecture including but not limited to façade design and signage;*
3. *Standardized color scheme used throughout the exterior of the establishment, including color associated with signs and logos.*

Because zoning cannot directly regulate ownership structures or business practices, this definition primarily centers on exterior architecture, design, and signage of formula businesses.

The attached Cambridge Street zoning petition includes similar zoning language to the Central Square Overlay District to establish a formula business special permit. The intent is to allow the Planning Board an opportunity to review and comment on the façade design and signage of the proposed formula business, and to place conditions on the special permit to ensure the design of the use is compatible with the unique, historic character of the area. The Planning Board has approved several formula business special permit requests in Central Square, with some positive changes to proposed façades and signage.

As discussed at the Ordinance Committee, the formula business special permit has not been shown to be an effective tool to limit chain businesses or provide support for small, local businesses. Formula businesses are typically able to obtain a special permit and are willing to work with the Planning Board to make any necessary design changes. Nevertheless, most healthy commercial districts in Cambridge tend to have a mix of formula and non-formula businesses with the majority of storefront businesses being local or independent.

Petition: To amend the Zoning Map and Article 17.000 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance as follows with the intent of strengthening active use requirements on Cambridge Street.

Amendments to the Zoning Map.

See attached Zoning Map and descriptive text.

Amendments to Article 17.000.

Amend Section 17.704.2.1 to read as follows:

- 17.704.2.1** ~~Additional Height for Ground Story Active Uses. The following limitations shall apply in addition to the Table of Height Limitations below: As set forth in the Table of Height Limitations, greater height shall be permitted for portions of buildings containing Residential Uses if the Ground Story is occupied by one or more Active Uses, as defined in Section 17.703.3, comprising at least 60% of the interior portion of the Ground Story that is within 50 feet of a Primary Street.~~
- (a) ~~On lots abutting one or more Primary Streets, residential uses shall be limited to 3 stories above grade and 35 feet above grade if the Ground Story is not occupied by one or more Active Uses, as defined in Section 17.703.3, comprising at least 60% of the interior portion of the Ground Story that is within 50 feet of a Primary Street.~~
 - (b) ~~Upon granting a special permit, the Planning Board may approve modifications to the Active Use floor area and location standards in paragraph (a) above to permit residential heights up to those set forth in the Table of Height Limitations if the Board finds that all of the following criteria are met in addition to those in Section 17.707.2 and may impose conditions to ensure ongoing conformance:
 - (i) Active Uses shall be provided in a manner that generally meets the intent of the requirement to provide for reasonably continuous active ground floor frontage along the Primary Street, and
 - (ii) the total floor area of required Active Uses is not substantially reduced, and
 - (iii) the modifications directly respond to unique site-specific conditions that make the application of paragraph (a) infeasible.~~
 - (c) ~~Lots that do not directly abut a Primary Street shall not be subject to the additional limitations of paragraph (a) above; however, (i) within 50 feet of the street line of a Primary Street, the permitted residential heights shall not exceed the applicable limitations set forth in paragraph (a) above, and (ii) the limitations set forth in paragraph (a) above shall apply to the entire area of any lot that abuts a Primary Street on April 27, 2026, including any lots or portions of lots that are later subdivided so that they no longer abut a Primary Street.~~
 - (d) ~~The additional limitations of this Section shall not apply to an AHO Project.~~

Amend Section 17.704.3 to read as follows:

17.704.3 Table of Height Limitations.

	CAM-6	CAM-10	CAM-12
Non-Residential Uses (Section 4.30 except 4.31 a-j., 4.33.b.7 & 4.33.a)	35 feet and 3 stories above grade	45 feet and 4 stories above grade	35 feet and 3 stories above grade
Dormitory Uses (Section 4.33.b.7)	45 feet and 4 stories above grade	45 feet and 4 stories above grade	45 feet and 4 stories above grade
Residential Uses (Section 4.31 a-j.) & Religious Purposes Uses (Section 4.33.a)	75 feet and 6 stories above grade	75 feet and 6 stories above grade	75 feet and 6 stories above grade
Residential Uses (Section 4.31 a-j.) with Ground Story Active Uses (Section 17.703.3)	75 feet and 6 stories above grade	120 feet and 10 stories above grade	145 feet and 12 stories above grade

Formula Business Special Permit

Amendments to Article 17.000.

Create a new Section 17.703.4 to read as follows:

- 17.703.4** **Formula Businesses.** A Formula Business as defined in this Ordinance may be established in a Cambridge Street District only after the issuance of a special permit from the Planning Board. In reviewing an application the Planning Board shall take the following into consideration:
- (a) The extent to which the design of the proposal reflects, amplifies, and strengthens the established historical character of existing buildings and store fronts on Cambridge Street.
 - (b) The extent to which the particulars of the building or storefront design is varied from the formula or standard design of the chain in order to reflect the unique character and conditions of Cambridge Street generally or the specific location in particular.
 - (c) The extent to which the standard elements of the enterprise as they define it as a Formula Business are modified to respect and provide unique expressions of Cambridge Street history and traditions as well as innovation in physical design and marketing that will distinguish the Cambridge Street location from other locations of the Formula Business.

Description of proposed district boundaries based on the maps submitted with petition materials for the April 27th, 2026 City Council Meeting:

Cambridge Street Active Uses

Business A (BA) District – Legal Description

Create a Business A (BA) district on the Zoning Map of the City of Cambridge with the following boundaries:

Beginning at the northwesternmost point of the existing CAM-6/PUD-4A District where it meets the street centerline of Monsignor O'Brien Highway and the southern boundary of the SD-1 District, and proceeding along the western boundary of the CAM-6/PUD4A District in a southerly direction; thence continuing in a southerly direction along the western boundary of the CAM-6/PUD4A District to the intersection of the street centerline of Gore Street; thence turning in a southwesterly direction along the street centerline of Gore Street to the intersection of the street centerline of Third Street; thence turning in a northerly direction along the street centerline of Third Street to the intersection of the street centerline of Third Street and the northern boundary of the C-1 District; thence turning in a northwesterly direction and proceeding along the C-1 District boundary to the intersection of the street centerline of Monsignor O'Brien Highway and the southern boundary of the SD-1 District; thence turning in a southeasterly direction along the boundary of the SD-1 District to the point of beginning.

