

Zoning Amendments to Promote Sensible Neighborhood Development

Presented to
the Cambridge Planning Board
by Doug Brown

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About Me

- 1) Lots of online theories!!!
- 2) Longtime Cambridge resident (27 years)
- 3) Property owner
- 4) Serial renovator
- 5) Parent to 3 teens
- 6) Block party organizer
- 7) Neighborhood association officer
- 8) Youth coach
- 9) Concerned citizen
- 10) And yes, I'm also from Connecticut!



My Prior Zoning Efforts

- 1) **2015** Barrett Petition to expand ADU & basement use (co-author)- PASSED
- 2) **2018** Nakagawa/Brown Petition for Climate Resilient Zoning & Green Factor (co-author)- PLACED ON FILE; ULTIMATELY PASSED AS PLANNING BOARD PETITION IN 2022 (SERVED AS WORKING GROUP CO-CHAIR)
- 3) **2022** Alewife Moratorium Petition (author)- PASSED; NEW ALEWIFE ZONING PASSED AS CITY COUNCIL PETITION IN 2023 (SERVED ON WORKING GROUP)
- 4) **2023** Douglas Brown Multi-Family Zoning petition (author)- REJECTED; CONCEPTS INCORPORATED IN MFHO
- 5) **2024** Ronayne et al Multi-Family Zoning Petition (co-author)- REFERRED TO HOUSING COMMITTEE; CONCEPTS INCORPORATED IN MFHO

Why I Proposed These Amendments

- 1) Serious community concerns being expressed in every neighborhood.
- 2) Changes can't wait. Discussion needs to begin now.
- 3) To frame future conversations, we need to present the community's areas of concern in an actionable format.

Additional observation: The elimination of FAR as a development control was a much bigger change than most people realized. Compared to past zoning, the new limits allow a huge multiple (up to 12x!)

Basic Principles

- 1) Zoning changes should always be the minimum necessary to address the issues at hand.
- 2) Zoning should provide predictability to:
 - a) buyers and sellers
 - b) owners and neighbors
 - c) The City itself
- 3) Incremental development is preferred to wholesale demolition.
- 4) Being a good neighbor matters.
- 5) This is a conversation about options. We can always strike any proposed changes without needing to refile.

Envision Cambridge: Balancing Growth & Preservation

“The future of urban growth is a hotly contested issue in many cities. While community members may have many different opinions and perspectives, Cambridge must forge a shared vision of its future and pursue policies that both address the city’s challenges and promote a common set of values. With Cambridge’s thriving economy, high quality of life, and robust public services, the demand for housing and commercial space is likely to remain high through 2030. This demand will continue to put strains on affordability but also enable continued urban redevelopment.”

*“The tensions this creates also provides an opportunity. **Envision Cambridge aims to take a balanced approach toward regulating development, one that would generally maintain current policies regarding the scale and type of new development** while suggesting novel approaches to improve urban form and to leverage the value of increased development to create additional affordable housing, open space, civic amenities, and more.”*

*“**This approach also values the existing historic resources of the city, preserving existing patterns of development and encouraging the preservation and reuse of existing structures** where they are economically viable. If scaled and sited with care, new development will add to the city’s character and meet the needs of today’s community, as well as future generations, so that all will have an opportunity to thrive.”*

*“**Residential Neighborhoods should be areas of low expected growth, largely retaining their existing fabric** while allowing for complementary infill development, consistent with broader city goals. More varied, mixed-use development may occur along secondary transportation corridors.”*

Areas Covered by the Petition

(see excellent CDD Summary of Proposed Changes)

- 1) Height
- 2) Setbacks (as recommended by CDD)
- 3) Stepbacks
- 4) Sidewall Length (as recommended by Tim Love)
- 5) Open Space definition
- 6) Parking (including front yard parking)
- 7) Design Review for large projects (above 20,000 sf)

What Has Not Changed

- 1) Multi-family housing still allowed everywhere
- 2) Elimination of lot area per unit, minimum lot size, minimum lot width
- 3) Elimination of FAR limitations
- 4) No limits on unit sizes or counts
- 5) Heights along corridors and in squares (as proposed by Envision)
- 6) Dimensional requirements outside of the Resident C-1 district

Height/Stories Above Grade

- 1) Context-based height concept
- 2) Reduction of AHO projects in Residence C-1 district from 9 stories to 6 stories. 9-story buildings are not common in Cambridge due to the costs associated with steel construction.
- 3) Reduction of 20% Inclusionary Zoning projects from 6 stories to 4 stories unless all abutters are 4 or more stories. This allows for incremental growth across the neighborhood, with properties gradually increasing to 4 stories. Once enough properties are 4 stories tall, new projects could go to 6 stories.

Setbacks, Stepbacks, & Sidewalls

- 1) Increased setback on one side allows room for a driveway, as well as tree plantings for shade.
- 2) Stepbacks reduce the bulk of upper stories, creating a more cohesive appearance with existing homes and streetscapes.
- 3) Limits on sidewall length reduce oppressiveness of new structures, particularly when only 5' from the property line. *(This requirement could be modified to limit the length of any one structure, but not limit the number of separate structures on a lot).*

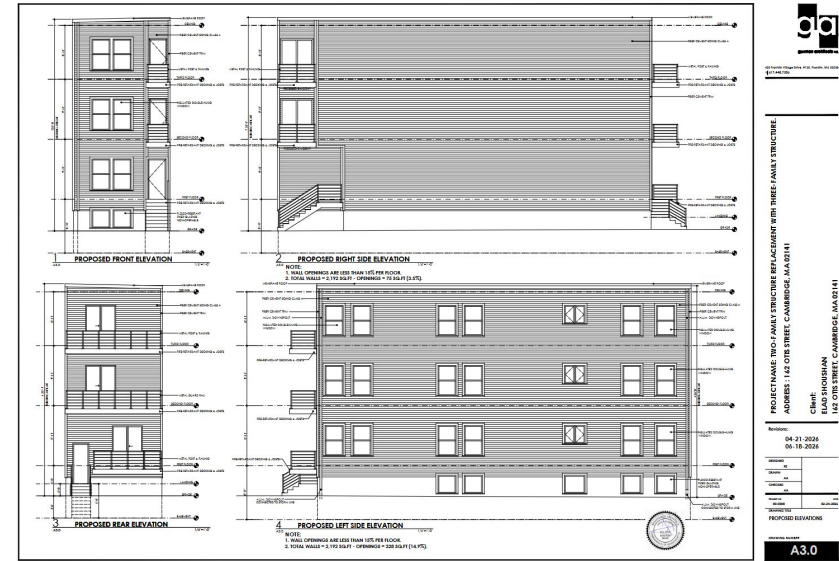
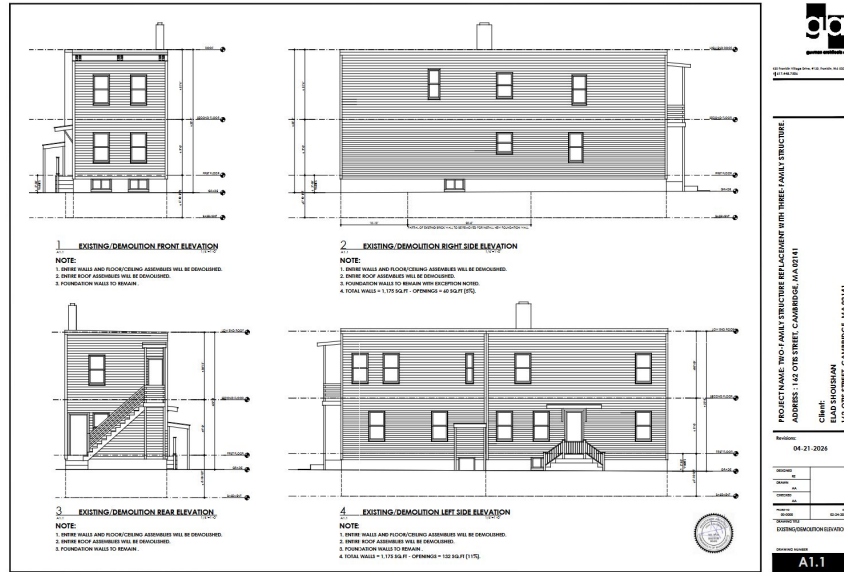
Example of Significant Sidewall Changes (162 Otis Street)

Sidewall length increase: 17% (to 76%)

Sidewall area increase: 78%

Building is 7" from property line

No Windows!!!



Stepback Examples from Current Proposals

95 Cushing Street



9-25 Birch Street



Open Space

- 1) Fundamental philosophical point that open space should be:
 - a) Located on the ground
 - b) Large enough dimensionally to provide for recreational use
 - c) As Green as possible



Parking

- 1) Greatest area of concern for most neighbors. A single project of the size of 9 Wyman Road can completely overwhelm a neighborhood with new cars on the street.
- 2) New requirements don't apply to 1-, 2-, or 3-family homes which are often on smaller lots and unable to add parking without zoning relief.
- 3) Projects of 4 or more units required to add 1 space for every two units, half the prior requirement.
- 4) The increased side setback to 10' allows for driveway parking.
- 5) Front yard parking would require a variance.

Design Review

- 1) Belief that the Design Review process produces better buildings than the by-right process.
- 2) Design Review allows the Planning Board to lend its expertise to projects that are likely to impact neighborhoods significantly.
- 3) This is true both inside and outside the building, for both residents and neighbors. (For example, the design of 9 Wyman Road has no accommodations for loading zones or for handling trash).
- 4) A 4 story building covering 100% of a 5000 square foot lot would not require review.

Scenario Modeling (So what does this all look like?)



Effects on 100% Affordable Projects

- 1) Height reductions, Parking requirements, and Design Review process would only apply to AHO projects within the Resident C-1 district. 52 New Street is not in the Res C-1 district (though 37 Brookline and 240 Broadway are).
- 2) Setbacks for AHO projects would only be increased to distances (5' + 10') recommended by CDD in their prior presentation.
- 3) The amendments don't prohibit balconies and roof decks; they just don't count them as open space. Actual open space would benefit all the residents of AHO projects.
- 4) Increased setbacks and parking would benefit both AHO residents and neighbors through increase air and sunlight and more transportation options. Residents of affordable housing should not need to suffer with less parking, reduced open space, or decreased sunlight compared to market-rate residents.
- 5) Design Review process would also benefit both AHO residents and neighbors.
- 6) Stepbacks and sidewall length requirements are Good Neighbor efforts that have already been adopted by numerous other projects.

Fallacy: But Isn't Bigger Always Better?

Regent International Center, Hangzhou, China

675' High

15.8 million square feet (363 acres)

11,250 individual apartments

20-30,000 residents

Prices as low as \$209/month for a windowless apartment

Described as “claustrophobic” and “dystopian”



But Isn't Bigger Always Better? (Part 2)

Old Man River's City (1971)

Designed by Buckminster Fuller to house all the residents of East St. Louis.

125,000 residents (entire population of Cambridge)

Glass bubble measuring 1 mile in diameter and 1000' tall.



Alternatives



- 1) Convene a Working Group to draft MFHO changes
- 2) Develop a new demolition ordinance setting rules for demolition procedures and neighborhood impacts.
- 3) Consider Institutional Use Overlay District changes to compel MIT & Harvard to house ALL their students (Current housing deficit of 6000+ students)
- 4) Add a requirement for Essential Worker Housing to address missing middle families
- 5) Citywide height restriction
- 6) Citywide FAR restriction
- 7) Support a moratorium until changes are completed.

Questions & Comments?

THANK YOU!!!