



To: Cambridge Planning Board

From: Community Development Department (CDD) Staff

Date: July 8, 2026

Re: **Brown, et al. Zoning Petition**

Overview

Petitioner: Douglas Brown, et al. (group of 10 or more registered voters), represented by Douglas P. Brown

Zoning Articles: 2.000, 5.000, 6.000, 11.000, and 19.000, Sections 5.22.1, 5.28.25, 5.40, 6.31, 6.35.1, 6.44, 11.207.5.2.1, 11.207.5.2.3, 11.207.5.2.4, 11.207.6.1, 19.23, and Table 5.1

Petition Summary: Amend height, setback, and open space requirements, introduce step-back and building depth and width requirements, and reinstate off-street parking minimums for some residential uses in Residence C-1 districts, including the Affordable Housing Overlay, as well as reducing the Project Review Special Permit threshold from 75,000 to 20,000 square feet for residential uses in Residence C-1 districts, among other changes that would impact religious uses in C-1 districts and AHO citywide.

Planning Board Action: Recommendation to City Council.

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

CDD Staff Report

The stated intent of the petition is of “promoting sensible neighborhood development by adjusting height, setbacks, parking, open space, and design review requirements.”

Summary of Proposed Changes

The table below summarizes the changes proposed by the petitioners, highlighting applicability in C-1 Zoning Districts, the AHO, and citywide.

Subject	Current Zoning	Proposed Zoning
Maximum height for residential uses and AHO in C-1	- Base height is 4 stories / 45 ft - Increase up to 6 stories / 74 ft if: a) Inclusionary housing applies b) Lot area $\geq$ 5,000 sq ft - AHO in C-1 – 9 stories / 100 ft	- Base height is 4 stories / 45 ft - Increase up to 6 stories / 74 ft if: a) Inclusionary housing applies b) Lot area $\geq$ 5,000 sq ft c) All abutters exceed 3 stories - AHO in C-1 – 6 stories / 74 ft
Minimum setbacks for residential & religious uses in C-1 and AHO citywide	- Side or Rear min. 5 ft - Side yard reduction allowed if total of two sides $\geq$ 10 ft and there’s no existing abutting building within 10 ft - AHO citywide – Side no min. - Rear min. 5 ft	- Side or Rear min. 10 ft - Side yard reduction to 5 ft allowed if total of two sides $\geq$ 15 ft and there’s no existing abutting building within 10 ft - AHO citywide - Side min. 10 ft (can be reduced per above) - Rear min. 5 ft (no change)
Minimum step-backs for residential & religious uses in C-1 and AHO citywide	No requirements	5 ft side and rear step-back per floor above 3rd story
Maximum lot depth and width for residential and religious uses in C-1 and AHO citywide	No limitations on façades based on lot depth or width	60% of lot depth for side façades 80% of lot width for rear façade
Minimum Parking in C-1, including AHO	0 spaces per unit - Reduction allowed by BZA special permit (retained from prior zoning)	0.5 space per dwelling unit for buildings with 4+units - Reduction still allowed, but affordable housing not included as a basis for reduction

Open Space (OS) citywide, including AHO	• Private OS may include at-grade space or balconies/decks, with min. dimensions • Publicly Beneficial OS may include open-air or covered areas like loggias/arcades • AHO exempt from Private OS dimensional limitations • Waivers for non-residential to residential conversions by-right	• Private OS must be at grade, cannot include balconies/decks • Private and Publicly Beneficial OS redefined to be a “portion of a lot” and exclude “portion of a structure” • Waivers for non-residential to residential conversions by Planning Board special permit
Project Review Special Permit	• 75,000 sf for residential uses citywide (except AHO)	• 20,000 sf for residential uses in C-1 (except AHO)

Effects of the Petition

Several provisions within the petition may have major substantive implications for residential building feasibility, mainly for AHO and inclusionary projects.

In general, the petition would bring the AHO development standards significantly closer to those of the base zoning. The reduction of maximum AHO height in C-1 districts from nine to six stories, new parking requirements, and the changes to setback and open space requirements, combined with the introduction of a new step-back, lot depth, and lot width requirements that would apply citywide, including within designated AHO corridors and squares, remove most of the current incentives for 100% affordability. There are currently 3 AHO projects in the pipeline located in C-1 districts that could potentially be impacted by this amendment. If passed, such projects may require redesigning, additional review, and adjustments to funding and timelines. Other proposed changes that would apply to AHO projects citywide could impact any AHO units in the pipeline without building permits.

Another large impact would be on inclusionary development. Reintroducing parking requirements would substantially impact feasibility. Requiring that abutters exceed three stories for inclusionary projects to qualify for the 6-story height allowance would severely limit opportunities for 6-story development since buildings that are 4 stories or more are less common in C-1 districts and “all abutters” would need to meet that standard. Additional limits on open space, lot depth and width, and step-back requirements compound the setback requirements in ways that would make 6-story inclusionary development even less feasible, especially on lots closer to the 5,000 sf threshold within C-1 districts. Most inclusionary housing proposals exceed 20,000 sf and would therefore become subject to special permits with risk of appeal instead of the current advisory review process. Threat of appeal would likely dissuade most if not all of these proposals from advancing. There are several inclusionary housing projects that have been through different advisory review stages that might need to significantly adjust their design, funding, and schedules.

The petition’s full components are outlined below.

Reintroducing Off-Street Parking Minimum

The City eliminated minimum off-street parking requirements for all uses in all districts in 2019. This petition proposes reinstating a parking minimum of 0.5 space per dwelling unit for developments with four

or more units in C-1 districts, including AHO projects. The petition also eliminates the existing special permit mechanism that allows income-restricted housing to reduce required parking when it threatens feasibility. Because parking spaces, required or not, when provided, must comply with location and dimensional requirements in the zoning, reintroducing a minimum parking requirement may substantially increase the number of residential projects requiring a BZA special permit or variance to satisfy both parking quantity and location constraints. This provision could create a significant barrier for both AHO and inclusionary projects that have been relying on parking flexibility to provide zero to limited parking options.

Changing Inclusionary Height Standards

The petition introduces a new provision requiring that all abutters to the property exceed three stories for an inclusionary housing project to qualify for the six-story height allowance. This criterion may be difficult to interpret and implement as clarification is needed regarding what constitutes an abutter and whether it applies to all structures on abutting lots, including accessory structures. The number of lots over 5,000 sf in C-1 districts that would meet this additional standard is not currently known, and the requirement would significantly limit the number of projects able to utilize the inclusionary height provision.

Introducing Upper-Story Step-backs, Lot Depth and Lot Width

The proposed limits of 60% of lot depth for side façades and 80% of lot width for rear façades compound setbacks and create a significant reduction in buildable mass. The requirement for a 5 ft side and rear step-back above the third story will further reduce the floor plates of upper-stories and may produce tapered building forms since the step-back is not measured from the property line but from an already reduced floor below. The combination of increased setbacks, step-backs and façade depth/width limits may preclude a viable sixth-story floor plate and substantially limit fifth-story depth and width, mainly for smaller lots. Additional clarification may be necessary on how the lot width provision would apply only to rear facades and not to front facades.

Changing Project Review Threshold

The petition proposes reducing the threshold for Project Review Special Permit for residential developments in C-1 districts from 75,000 sf to 20,000 sf of Gross Floor Area. Under existing zoning, most residential projects in C-1 are permitted through different advisory review processes and do not require a special permit. Lowering the threshold in C-1 could subject a substantial portion of ongoing and future inclusionary multifamily development to more extensive special permit review requirements.

Modifying Open Space

The petition proposes several changes to the definitions and dimensional requirements for Open Space that would be applicable citywide, including limitations on what may qualify as Publicly Beneficial or Private Open Space. Under current zoning, balconies, decks, and roof areas may qualify as Private Open Space, and Publicly Beneficial Open Space may include open-air or covered areas like loggias and arcades. Multifamily buildings often rely on these spaces above grade to provide usable open areas for residents. The petition removes balconies and decks allowances, restricting Private and Public Open Space to portions of a lot at grade. In combination with the petition's proposed setback and façade-depth/width requirements, the open space revisions could further constrain the layout of buildings, circulation areas, and exacerbate the disproportionate access to usable outdoor space for residents of multifamily buildings. For conversion from non-residential to residential use, amendments to Section 5.28.2 to require a Planning

Board special permit might complicate scenarios where conversions would otherwise be feasible as-of-right.

Council Discussions on Residential Zoning and Development

The City Council's Housing Committee and Neighborhood and Long-Term Planning Committee have been meeting to discuss the effects of the 2025 Multifamily Zoning Amendments since early in 2026. On June 8, 2026, the Council adopted a policy order requesting findings, options, and recommendations regarding potential zoning amendments. On June 25, 2026, CDD presented an overview of possible zoning changes that could be considered by Council, which will be discussed further in future meetings.

CDD's findings show that there has been substantial interest in new multifamily housing development since the Multifamily Zoning Amendments. Many new multifamily projects are advancing in neighborhoods which previously had little to no housing growth. There also continues to be a strong pipeline of all-affordable development advancing through the AHO. These early findings are consistent with the intent of the amendments, but long-term trends would take time to determine. Therefore, CDD would not recommend additional major zoning amendments until there has been more time to understand the emerging patterns of development.

The potential changes presented by CDD are intended to preserve the core elements of the 2025 amendments: enabling multifamily housing equitably throughout the city, as-of-right permitting, simple and flexible development standards, and incentives for inclusionary housing development. Potential changes mostly have to do with specific issues around site design, particularly how setbacks and open space relate to standards that need to be met in zoning and other requirements including tree protection and stormwater regulations. CDD also discussed possible approaches to concerns that have been raised about the sizes of new units and neighbor information. CDD did not suggest changes to the AHO, which would continue to allow more flexibility than base zoning.