



## CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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July 10, 2019

To: Members of the Historical Commission  
From: Charles Sullivan, Executive Director  
Eric Hill, Survey Director  
Re: East Cambridge Petition for Neighborhood Conservation District Study

On June 17, 2019 CHC staff received a citizens' petition requesting the Commission to initiate the process of designating a portion of East Cambridge as a neighborhood conservation district under Ch. 2.78, Article III of the City Code. The Cambridge Election Commission verified that the petition contained ten or more names of registered voters, as required by the ordinance. CHC staff then advertised a public hearing for July 11, 2019 so the Commission could consider whether to accept the petition and initiate a study.

### Background

East Cambridge has long been identified as one of the city's oldest and most historic neighborhoods. It was the subject of the Commission's initial survey of Cambridge architecture conducted in 1964. In 1965 the Commission published *Report One: East Cambridge* of the Survey of Architectural History in Cambridge, and in 1975 it initiated a study of a potential local historic district under M.G.L. Ch. 40C. Working with a committee of East Cambridge residents, the Commission identified a study area that included properties on Winter, Gore, Otis and Thorndike Streets, connected by properties on Sciarappa Street. However, historic districts established under state law are relatively strict and the scope of their jurisdiction quite inflexible. The study committee's proposal generated stiff resistance, and the Commission abandoned the project.

A city-wide historic preservation planning effort that began in the late 1970s under the auspices of the National Register of Historic Places identified concentrations of significant buildings on Winter, Gore, Otis and Thorndike streets, and in 1983 the Winter Street, East Cambridge, and Sacred Heart districts were listed on the National Register.<sup>1</sup> In 1988 the Commission published a new book, *East Cambridge*, which expanded the 1965 publication and brought it up to date.

Development trends in the proposed study area seem to indicate a rapidly increasing level of activity. Relatively few projects involving demolition were brought to the Commission from East Cambridge until 2016, when the number began to rise.<sup>2</sup> Of the 37 demolition permit applications received from the proposed study area since 1996, 22 were less than fifty years old or were found not significant by staff. The majority of the eight significant cases heard since 2000 have occurred in the past few years: three in 2016 and two so far in 2019.

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<sup>1</sup> Listing on the National Register is primarily a planning tool and carries no restrictions on privately-funded projects.

<sup>2</sup> The City Council enacted a city-wide demolition delay ordinance in 1979. Under this measure applications to demolish buildings more than fifty years old that the staff considers significant are brought before the Historical Commission to determine whether the public interest warrants delaying the project to explore the possibilities of preservation.

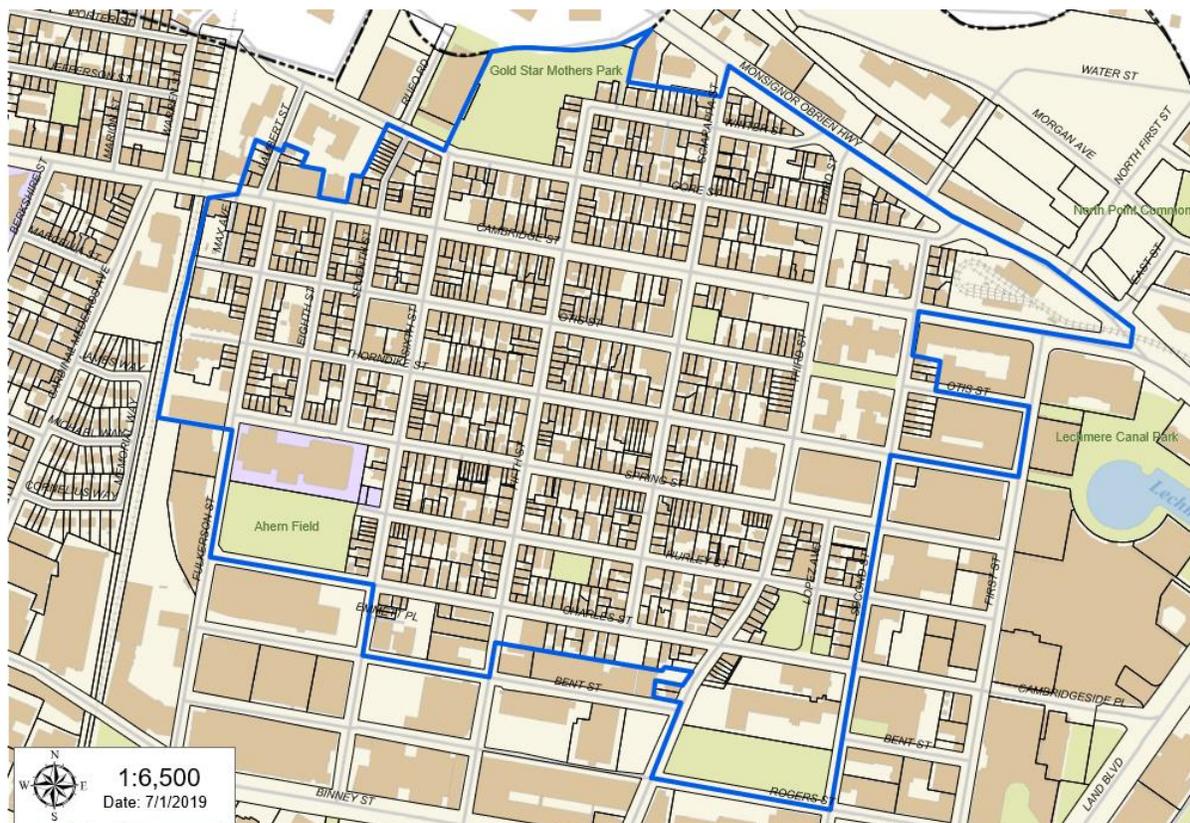
While the volume of demolition permit applications in East Cambridge has been very low overall, the trend is distinctly increasing. Information on trends in property values and building permit applications is not readily available, but anecdotal evidence and direct observation indicates a steadily rising level of activity in recent years. Recent projects in the neighborhood have been of a larger scale than the original houses in the area, raising concerns with some property owners over the height and footprint of renovated or newly constructed houses. Some residents are concerned with the rapid redevelopment and quick renovations done by outside investors.

Concerned East Cambridge residents contacted CHC staff in the fall of 2018 about the possibility of establishing a neighborhood conservation district. In December 2018 CHC staff made an informational presentation to the East Cambridge Planning Team, the designated community organization representing the area, explaining the preservation tools available to the community. After this, residents asked CHC staff to meet with a working group to explore options to conserve neighborhood character. Staff and the working group have met regularly since February to discuss the possible boundaries and jurisdiction of a neighborhood conservation district. The working group presented to the East Cambridge Planning Team on June 12, 2019 and received a vote of support to move forward with the petition.

### Boundaries

The petitioned area includes an area roughly bounded by the former Boston & Albany railroad tracks, the Somerville line, Monsignor O'Brien Highway, Second Street, Rogers Street, and Bent Street. The area includes 893 parcels with roughly 1,300 owners.

The parcels in the proposed study area are located within the following zoning districts: C-1, C-2B, BA, BB, I-1A, and Open Space, with the highest concentration being C-1 Residential zoning. The boundary includes three large open spaces, Gold Star Mothers Park, Ahern Field, and Rogers Street Park, along with other smaller parks and playgrounds.



Proposed East Cambridge Conservation District Boundary by petitioners.

## Conservation District Criteria and Study Procedures

Conservation Districts are enacted by a simple majority of the City Council upon recommendation of the Historical Commission.

The Historical Commission commences a conservation district designation study process by its own initiative or by voting to accept a petition of ten registered voters. The Commission may decline to accept petitions that are not timely or appropriate or do not meet the criteria for conservation district designation.

The criteria provided in the ordinance outlines eligible neighborhoods as:

any area within the City containing places and structures which it determines are of importance to the architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City, and which considered together cause such area to constitute a distinctive neighborhood or to have a distinctive character in terms of its exterior features (2.78.180.A)

The purpose of establishing Neighborhood Conservation Districts is described in the ordinance, which was enacted to,

preserve, conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the City and to improve the quality of its environment through identification, conservation and maintenance of neighborhoods, sites and structures which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City; to resist and restrain environmental influences adverse to this purpose; to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge and appreciation of such neighborhoods, areas, or structures; and by furthering these purposes to promote the public welfare by making the city a more desirable place in which to live and work. (2.78.140)

Once the Commission accepts a petition or decides on its own to initiate a neighborhood conservation district study it immediately assumes jurisdiction over issuance of building permits in the proposed area for up to one year. The City Manager is requested to appoint a study committee consisting of four neighborhood property owners and residents and three members of the Historical Commission. The study committee, working with CHC staff assistance, assumes responsibility for refining the boundaries and developing the goals, guidelines, and jurisdiction of the proposed conservation district. Study committee members are considered special municipal employees and all meetings of the committee are subject to the open meeting law. The Historical Commission will hold a public hearing at the conclusion of the study process to consider the committee's recommendations and to formulate its own recommendation to the City Council.

### Relationship to Criteria

East Cambridge in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was a landscape of upland and salt marsh, surrounded by vast mud flats at low tide, almost entirely isolated from the rest of town. The dividing lines changed over the decades as the tides swept in and out, eroding some areas and building up others. Much of the area was rich in oysters and likely provided foraging ground for Native Americans.

The area saw little change until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when Andrew Craigie petitioned the General Court for permission to build a bridge from Lechmere's Point to Boston, opening East Cambridge

up to development. With the bridge under construction, Craigie put his 300-acre holdings on the market, divided into sixty shares. The investors formed the Lechmere Point Corporation, which laid out lots in a grid pattern (likely influenced by the Mount Vernon Proprietors in Beacon Hill) for development.

Craigie and the Lechmere Point Corporation later offered an outright gift of \$24,000 and land along Cambridge Street to Middlesex County to incentivize their relocation from Harvard Square. Housing, shops and religious buildings were constructed, followed shortly by large industries.

The railroad, the canals off the Charles River, and the roadways connecting East Cambridge to outside populations led to massive industrial growth on the perimeter of the neighborhood. Major industries from meatpacking to glassworks to soap manufacturing created a demand for laborers, many arriving from outside the United States, who built and rented residences within walking distance. Cambridge became the second largest industrial town in the state, second only to Boston by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Successive waves of Germans, Scots, Irish, Italians, Portuguese, Brazilians, and Haitians made East Cambridge a cultural melting pot.

As with many industrial and urban areas after World War II, East Cambridge suffered from suburbanization and consolidation of industries which forced long-time residents to follow work to the outer ring towns and cities. Many former industrial plants were demolished or adaptively reused for new technology and bio-medical companies located near MIT. Large-scale recent developments including Cambridge Crossing, Cambridgeside Galleria, and Kendall Square have caused land values to skyrocket, leading to many new residents and redevelopment of former workers cottages into luxury condominiums.

The residential architecture of East Cambridge is nearly all expressed in unpretentious vernacular versions of the Federal, Greek Revival, and Bracketed-Italianate styles. Almost all residential construction ended by 1875, and there are only single examples of the Queen Anne and Colonial Revival styles in the neighborhood. Cambridge Street, the main commercial corridor, features a blend of historic homes converted to commercial use and multi-story masonry commercial structures. Some infill development has diminished the historical integrity of the street, but most structures have seen modest alterations which in no way diminish their significance.

Civic and religious buildings in East Cambridge tend to be elaborate and architecturally significant. Major landmarks from the early years of East Cambridge's development are the 1827 Federal-style church at 101 Third Street, built as a Congregational church and based on an Asher Benjamin design, and the Charles Bulfinch-designed Middlesex County Courthouse, which has been surrounded by a complex of sympathetically-designed buildings. Some modern infill such as the Middlesex County Courthouse and Jail on Thorndike Street is clearly non-contributing to the architectural qualities of the district.

### Staff Recommendations

The Commission should evaluate the petition for its appropriateness in terms of the significance of the proposed district, the urgency and relevance of the conditions the petitioners seek to address, the relevance of the proposed remedies, and the suitability of the proposed boundaries.

- The staff believes that the proposed East Cambridge district may be suitable for study on the grounds that it is a geographically and architecturally coherent neighborhood with strong associations with the broad cultural, economic, and social history of the city. The proposed district contains many individually significant structures that stand in a remarkably consistent context of vernacular buildings.

- Staff has observed that threats to the architectural integrity of this urban environment seem to be more frequent. At the same time, many if not still a majority of owner-occupants have modest means and sometimes more pressing concerns than historic preservation. Regulatory measures should be limited to major construction issues that threaten the conservation of the neighborhood as a whole. Whenever possible, residents should be supported in their aspirations for unfettered homeownership.
- The proposed boundary, once advertised, may not be enlarged; it can only be reduced by the Commission before accepting the petition, or by later recommendation of the Study Committee. The boundaries deserve close consideration. In general, the boundary encloses the core residential neighborhood, leaving out areas undergoing development on the north, east, and south. Some aspects of the proposed perimeter should be noted:
  - Lechmere Station. This area will be transferred by the MBTA to the developer of Cambridge Crossing (formerly North Point). Future private development will be subject to district review.
  - One First Condominiums. Excluded because of recent development and unlikely to see inappropriate alterations.
  - Registry of Deeds and First District Court. Public buildings not subject to local jurisdiction, but any future private development would be subject to review.
  - Former Irving & Casson-A.H. Davenport factory, a contributing building in the East Cambridge National Register District.
  - Middlesex County Courthouse and Jail. Currently in private ownership, granted a special permit for redevelopment. Intensely controversial project, with an enabling measure pending before the City Council.
  - Rogers Street Park. Now simply a lawn, with landscape plans currently under development. Municipal projects are subject to NCD jurisdiction.
  - Ahern Field and Kennedy-Longfellow School. Future uncertain.
  - Pavilion Condominium excluded, except for Cambridge Street frontage.
  - Cambridge Street commercial properties in their entirety.

The staff recommends that the Commission hear testimony from the petitioners and property owners within the proposed study area before voting on initiation of a landmark designation study for the property.

#### Interim Jurisdiction

If the Commission initiates a landmark designation study for the area, staff recommends that the following objectives and principles be adopted to guide its interim jurisdiction:

*The following objectives and principles are to be applied in considering applications for certificates of appropriateness or hardship. The Commission shall endeavor to:*

1. *Conserve the historic architectural character of the neighborhood, including the modest character that typifies the mid to late 19th-century workers' and suburban housing of the neighborhood and the overall simplicity of its traditional wood-frame vernacular architecture, as well as the early 20th century apartment houses where they exist.*
2. *Conserve the historic development patterns of the neighborhood, including its dense network of short, through-block streets, courts, back streets, and ways.*

3. *Conserve views through yards and between houses to maintain the pattern of visual layering that characterizes streetscapes in the neighborhood while respecting the residential privacy of individual properties.*
4. *Allow for architectural diversity and individualized alterations while respecting the traditional small scale of the housing stock.*
5. *Encourage the planting of trees and greenery to enhance the landscape amenities of the neighborhood.*
6. *Encourage low fences to define the street edge while protecting views of houses and through yards, while permitting flexibility to minimize the adverse visual effect of trash containers, air compressors, transformers and other fixtures whose location may not otherwise be practically screened from public view.*
7. *Consider traffic impacts of proposed development as they may affect traditional street patterns and pedestrian activity.*
8. *Discourage the construction of parking lots as a principal use.*<sup>3</sup>

Interior renovations, work not visible from a public way, and paint colors are not subject to review in neighborhood conservation districts. As permitted by Ch. 2.78.090, the staff recommends that the Commission adopt the following additional exclusions from review during the term of its interim jurisdiction:

- The application of exterior wall material in a manner that does not require the removal or enclosure of any cornice, fascia, soffit, bay, porch, hood, window or door casing, or any other protruding decorative element.
- Alternations to the exterior of existing structures that do not increase or diminish the size and location of windows and doors, cause the removal of any bay, porch, hood, window or door casing or any other protruding decorative element, or alter the appearance of a roof.
- Signs, temporary structures, lawn statuary, or recreational equipment
- Terraces, walks, driveways, sidewalks and similar structures substantially at grade level
- Storm doors and windows, screens, window air conditioners, lighting fixtures, antennae, trelliswork and similar appurtenances
- Restoration of historic features consistent with building history.
- New walls and fences 4' or less in front of a building, or 6' or less behind for front wall plane.

The Commission's interim review should also accommodate the distinct commercial character of Cambridge Street. The Commission's treatment of properties in the Business A zoning district along Cambridge and Third streets should reflect the goals and guidelines of the Harvard Square Conservation District, which among other things support the commercial vitality of the area, exempt signs that conform to zoning, and exempt storefront alterations that preserve or restore significant original features of the structure.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from the goals of the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District.