



Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District Commission

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<https://www.cambridgema.gov/historic/districtsHistoricProperties/halfcrownmarshncd>

Marie-Pierre Dillenseger, Chair; Sarah Holt, Donna Marcantonio,
Emily Oldshue, Ruth Webb, Members.

September 18, 2026

To: Members and Alternates of the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District Commission

From: Eric Hill, Survey Director, Cambridge Historical Commission

Re: Updated Decennial Review of the Half Crown-Marsh NCD

Chapter 2.78 of the Cambridge Municipal Code, as amended on October 2, 2023, requires a decennial review of each existing Neighborhood Conservation District (NCD). In 2024 Cambridge Historical Commission (CHC) staff conducted a decennial review study of the Half Crown-Marsh NCD that included a history of the district, a summary and sampling of cases reviewed between 2014-2024, a demographic and housing analysis, and guidance on possible changes to Order establishing the district.

After a series of public meetings and informational tours, the *Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District Decennial Review Report* was submitted to the Half Crown-Marsh NCD Commission, the Cambridge Historical Commission, and lastly to the City Council. The HCM NCD Commission at a September 9, 2024, public hearing unanimously voted to recommend re-approval of the existing Half Crown-Marsh NCD without modifications. The Cambridge Historical Commission, at its September 12, 2024, public hearing, confirmed the recommendation of the HCM NCD Commission and supported the continuance of the district without modification. The City Manager transmitted the report to the Cambridge City Council for their March 24, 2025, meeting. Councilor Azeem exercised his charter right on the matter, and discussion resumed on March 31.

On March 31, 2025, Councilor Azeem described the recent amendments to the Neighborhood Conservation District Ordinance, noting that they created a decennial review process for established districts. Councilor Azeem also spoke of the recent multifamily zoning changes and his interest in seeing how the Half Crown-Marsh NCD Commission would react to such proposals. After some discussion, Councilor Azeem moved that *“The City Manager be and hereby is requested to direct the appropriate City departments to initiate a study on the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District and that the findings of this study be presented to the City Council no later than the return of the Mid-Cambridge study next year.”*

Councilor Toner then moved to add, *“and its impact on the development of multi-family housing”* so that the motion reads: *“That the City Manager be and hereby is requested to direct the appropriate City departments to initiate a study on the Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District and its impact on the development of multi-family housing and that the findings of this study be presented to the City Council no later than the return of the Mid-Cambridge study next year.”* The motion was approved 9-0.

Multi-Family Housing Cases 2024-2026

No applications were received for multi-family projects in the Half Crown-Marsh district between June 2, 2024, and September 1, 2026. During this period, CHC staff were contacted twice about potential projects, but neither one went beyond preliminary discussions.

- In December 2025, a proposal for a 9-unit housing development at 150 Mt. Auburn Street, currently occupied by a one-story commercial block (1925), was brought to staff's attention. Discussions revolved around alternatives for development, ranging from clearing the site and building a new four-story structure to preserving the existing one-story base and adding three-stories of housing above. Staff agreed that the existing structure was not significant and informed the architect that they did not envision any roadblocks in terms of approval by the HCM Commission. However, the owner decided not to pursue the project.
- In January 2026, a developer inquired about the potential of demolishing the three dilapidated tenements at 189-191, 193-195 and 197-199 Mt. Auburn Street to build a larger multifamily structure. The Commission's administrator for the district advised, *"I ... do not believe that the HCM Commission would object to demolishing the buildings there, but [they] would pay special attention to the design of any replacement building(s). I am happy to chat with you further on this if there are any questions."* No further developments have materialized since the beginning of the year.

Summary of NCD Cases, 2024-2026:

The *Half Crown-Marsh Neighborhood Conservation District Decennial Review Report* of September 23, 2024, reviewed building permit activity in the district between January 1, 2014, and June 1, 2024.

In the two years since the Decennial Review report was submitted, or between June 1, 2024, and September 1, 2026, CHC staff received 118 permit applications for properties within the HCM district. Of these, 108 cases (91.5%) were reviewed and approved administratively by staff and granted Certificates of Non-Applicability (CNA). Examples include permits for interior renovations, replacing a roof, new windows or doors on facades not visible from a public way, insulation and solar panels, and replacement of garden fences in-kind.

Ten of the 118 (8.5%) of the applications received after June 2024 were reviewed by the Half Crown-Marsh NCD Commission at a public hearing. Eight projects were granted a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA), and one project was granted a Certificate of Hardship (COH). One project was denied but was ultimately approved with a revised proposal.

Of the eight projects that were approved, six included replacement windows, including two blanket approvals of replacement windows at the large condominium buildings at 983-986 and 987-989 Memorial Drive. The blanket approvals expedite the permitting process for owners who propose approved replacement windows. One COA was granted for a redesigned porch at 29 Ash Street and another for a tall perimeter fence at 10 Hilliard Place.

The one Certificate of Hardship (COH) was granted for the wholesale replacement of windows at the Gibson Terrace building at 28-36 Gibson Street. The management company proposed replacing all the original windows with vinyl windows without grids. After a public hearing and architect's committee meeting, an amended proposal was approved with applied grids on the windows. This project was granted a Certificate of Hardship due to cost considerations and because the windows had already been purchased by the company.

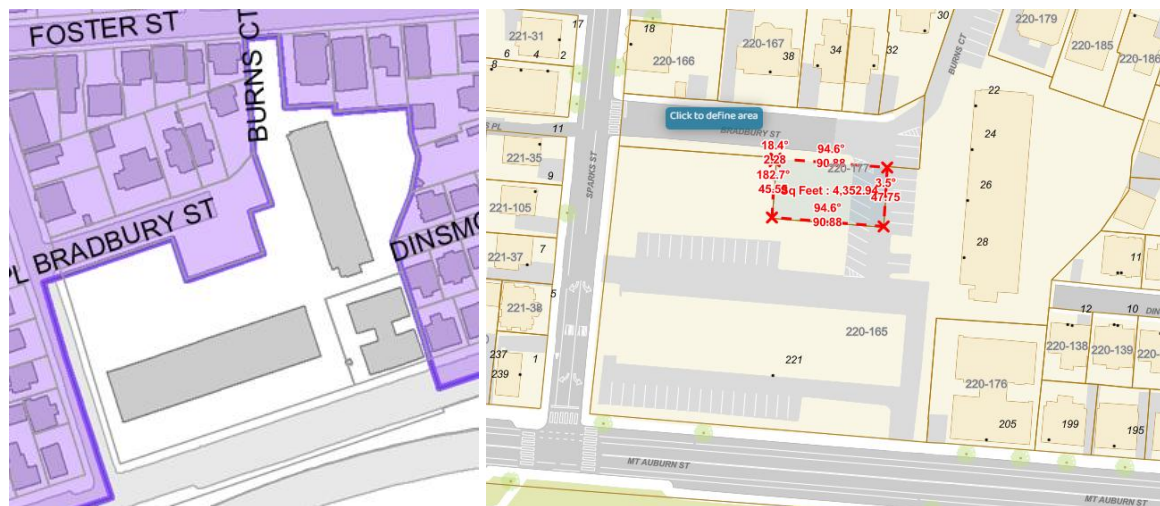
The one denied case in the NCD was a violation where a condominium owner at 156-158 Mt. Auburn Street removed a prominent fence and began construction on a new retaining wall with tall fence above. The HCM Commission denied the proposal for a cinderblock retaining wall, and the fence was rebuilt to what was there before.

Updated Staff Recommendation:

While the Half Crown-Marsh NCD Commission has not had the opportunity to review any multi-family housing projects since the city-wide zoning changes in 2025, Historical Commission staff have provided positive feedback for two projects on prominent sites along Mt. Auburn Street. The small size of most lots in the Half Crown and Marsh neighborhoods, the existing density and lot coverage, and the high price of land in this location make many sites less desirable for redevelopment.

With one exception, CHC staff concurs with the 2024 recommendations for renewal of the district. Staff recommend that the district boundaries should be revised to exclude an area containing about 4,350 square feet south of Bradbury Street that is owned by the City of Cambridge. This tract extends into the larger Riverview site, and CHC staff believe that it should be removed from the HCM district, so the entire site falls outside of the HCM boundaries.

The proposed revised HCM District boundary is shown below:



Present HCN NCD boundary

Area proposed to be excluded

A public hearing will be scheduled to discuss a review and possible revision of the Commission's 2024 recommendation that the district be renewed. The Commission's recommendation will be submitted to the Cambridge Historical Commission and then to the City Council along with a report on the Mid Cambridge NCD Commission.

Attachment