

Central Square Rezoning

Housing Committee Hearing

March 24, 2026



**CITY OF
CAMBRIDGE**

CDD
Community
Development



Today's Agenda

1. Recap of Process to Date

2. Initial Zoning Recommendations

3. What's Happened Since

4. Community Engagement

5. Discussion



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Project Origins

- **February 2024**

Policy Order adopted February 2024 to begin drafting zoning amendment “to allow for and encourage the continued growth, redevelopment, and evolution of Central Square”

- **May 2024**

Initial presentation to the City Council Neighborhood and Long-Term Planning Committee regarding project goals, schedule, community engagement plan, and intended outcomes.



**Cambridge City
MA**

**Policy Order
POR 2024 #15**

Order Adopted
Feb 12, 2024 5:30 PM

That the City Manager is requested to direct the Community Development Department to commence the process of drafting updated district maps and development processes, along with the zoning language and relevant ordinances to allow for and encourage the continued growth, redevelopment, and evolution of Central Square.

Information

Department:	City Clerk's Office, BA	Sponsors:	Councillor Burhan Azeem, Vice Mayor Marc C. McGovern, Mayor E. Denise Simmons, Councillor Paul F. Toner
Category:	Policy Order		

Links

 **Origin** AR-24-5 : Report on the process of drafting updated district maps and development processes, along with the zoning language and relevant ordinances to allow for and encourage the continued growth, redevelopment, and evolution of Central Square.

Attachments

Prior Planning Studies: Where we started

C2 Study (2013)



INCREASED HOUSING STOCK & DIVERSITY

e.g., affordable housing, family housing



RETAIL, CULTURAL, & NONPROFIT DIVERSITY

e.g., small businesses, arts and cultural spaces; outdoor dining



PUBLIC PLACES TO BUILD COMMUNITY

e.g., outdoor entertainment, pocket parks, programming



A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR CENTRAL SQ

e.g., green buildings, tree planting, shade structures



PEOPLE CONNECTED TO THE SQUARE

e.g., pedestrian and bicycle improvements

Central Sq City Lots Study (2023)

HOUSING

Create more housing in Central Square, Particularly affordable housing

CITY AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- Accommodate cultural programs, events, and spaces
- Create high quality community services in Central Square
- Provide opportunities for social services to expand and co-locate
- Address city office and collaboration space needs

OPEN SPACE, PARKING, INFRASTRUCTURE

- Increase parks and open spaces
- Support ongoing infrastructure improvement projects
- Meet parking needs and include transportation demand management

Central Square Rezoning Project Goals (2024)

Process

Design a community engagement process that is:



Broad, varied, and representative



Responsive, iterative, and participatory

Outcomes

Update zoning for Central Square to allow for and encourage:

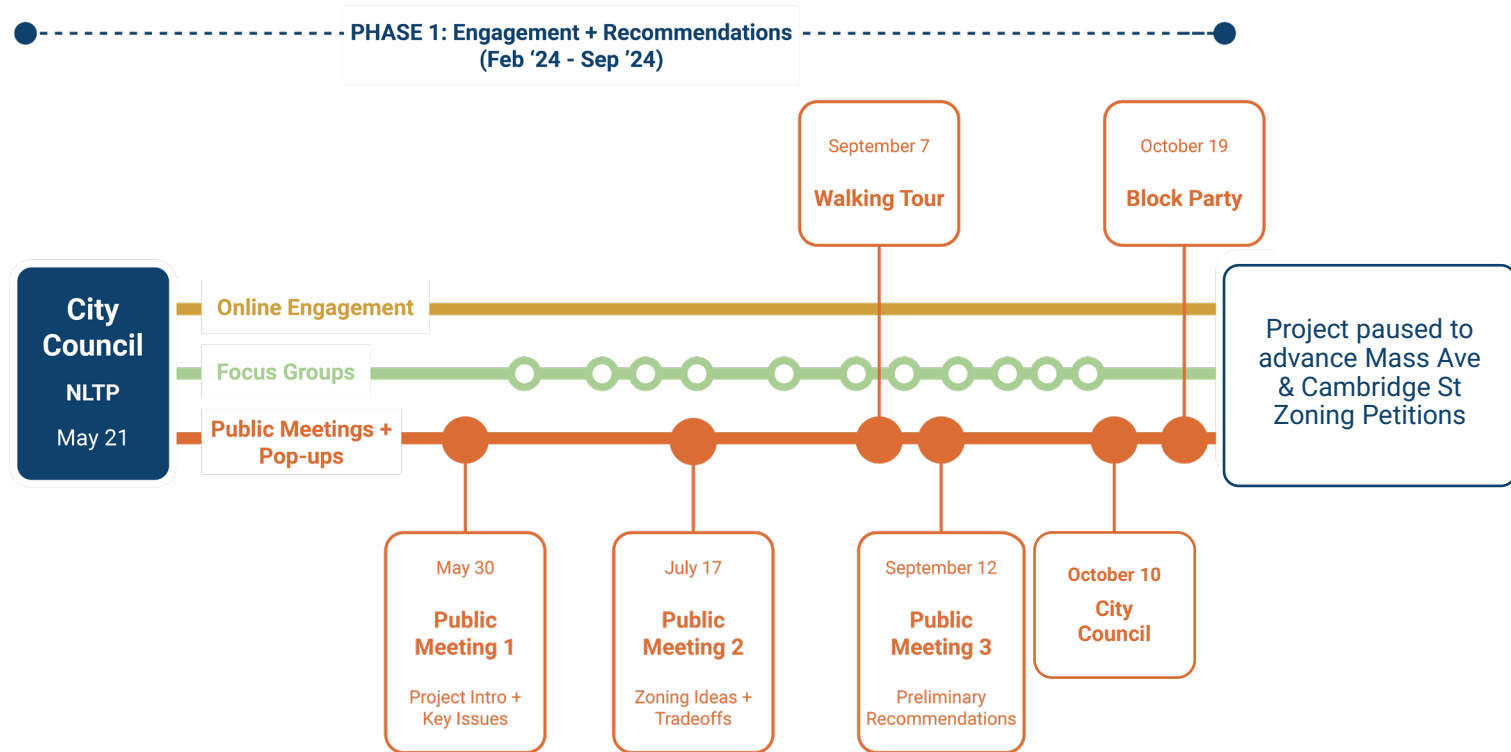


More housing
(incl. affordable)



Diverse retail, cultural and non-profit activity

Previous Project Timeline (2024)



The Previous Engagement Plan in Action: What We Achieved (2024)

3

Community Meetings



11

Focus Groups



8

Pop Ups



2

In-person Events



Info & Outreach

- Website
- Mailers
- Print & Digital Flyers
- Email Blasts
- Social Media
- Daily Update
- City Calendar
- Zoning Newsletter

CET @ CDD

Review of all materials and engagement with targeted communities

Refined Community Goals: Urban Form (2024)



Mixed views on increasing height and density. Many are comfortable with height **if for housing**, with a preference to contain **tallest development to Mass Ave.**

“Concerned about visual shadowing, and social impacts of taller buildings, especially if felt disproportionately by lower income residents

“We need more people living in the Square to support neighborhood businesses.

“You can also get a lot of hosing through smaller projects (in large quantity)

“I’m personally fine with any particular height

“Don’t think that people will notice the difference between a 16 and 20 story building on Mass Ave.

Refined Community Goals: Use (2024)



Strong support for **housing, especially affordable**, keeping a space for **Starlight Square**, and encouraging the **small and local businesses** that are key to Central's identity.

“

All buildings should have ground floor retail to activate a space.

“

Central is a nightlife destination for the whole region... Beyond drinking, we need indoor recreation and human services

“

Affordable homeownership, not just rental. 100% affordable can risk some segregation. Want all levels of income access.

“

If you only looked at the zoning, how would you know this is Cambridge's Cultural District?

Refined Community Goals: Community (2024)



Strong consensus around **supporting existing community** and **maintaining affordability of housing and retail**.

“

I'm more worried about losing cultural spaces... Cantab, Middle East, Man Ray are very vulnerable in single story buildings.

“

Need to restrict biotech so that it doesn't take over Central (like Kendall)

“

Central needs socioeconomic balance; the middle class has disappeared. Let's avoid luxury housing.

“

Concern about development replacing parking on Green St Garage and additional traffic.

Consensus & Differences (2024)

Clear Consensus

- Concentrate the tallest allowable heights for housing along Massachusetts Avenue
- Transition zones are important to step down to and buffer surrounding neighborhoods
- Zoning should clearly reflect Central Square's identity as the City's downtown and cultural district
- Explore resources and highlight strategies to help residents and businesses impacted by zoning changes



Consensus & Differences (2024)



Different Perspectives

- How much height should be allowed for residential use
- How to minimize the potential impacts of taller buildings on the public realm
- What the best balance between market rate + incentive zoning vs. all-affordable should be
- How to effectively incentivize additional cultural, nonprofit, and small business spaces

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3 Areas of Focus

1 District Boundary

- What should the extent of the district be?
- How should it be drawn to reflect different areas?

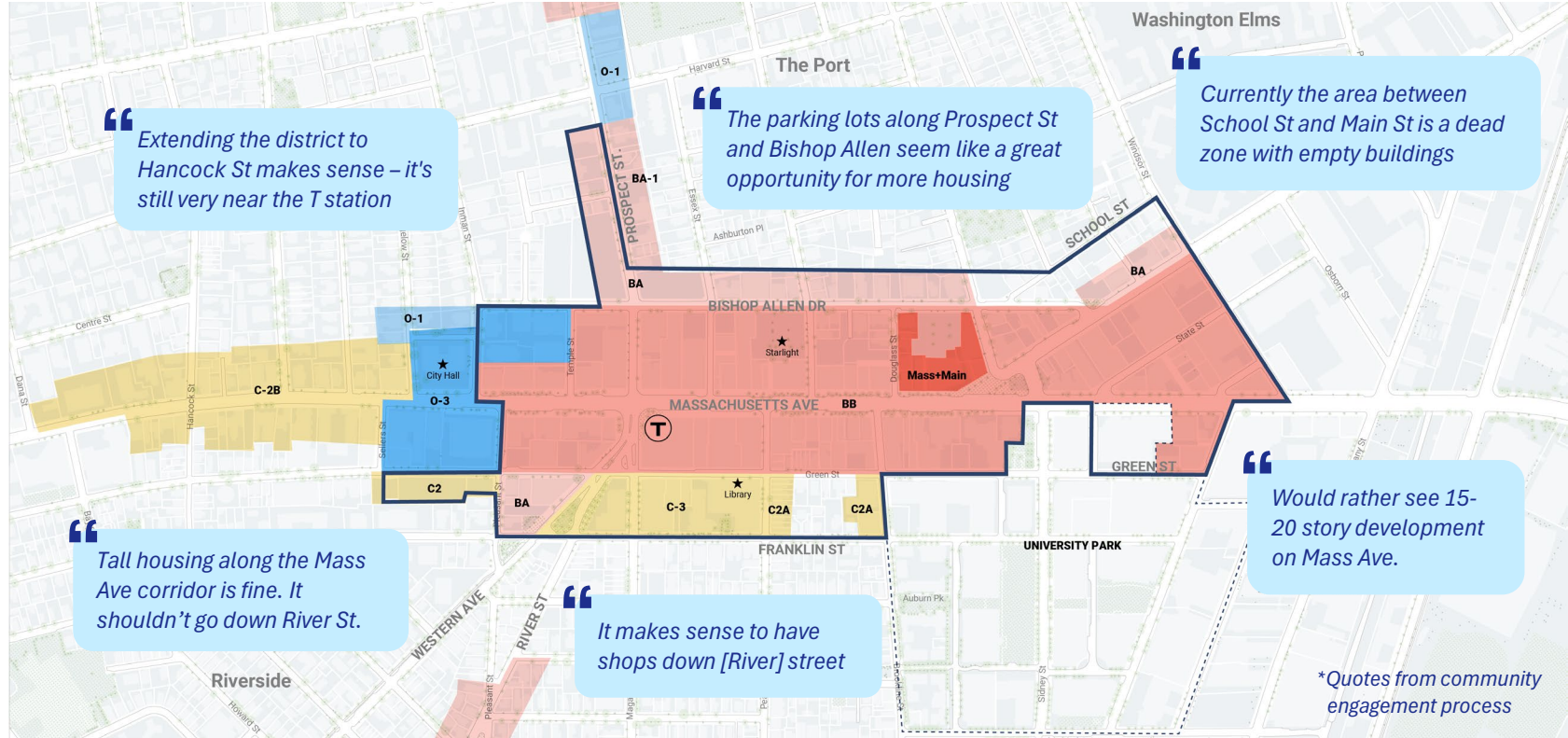
2 Urban Form

- What should the height limits be?
- How should setbacks, step-backs, and other controls be used?

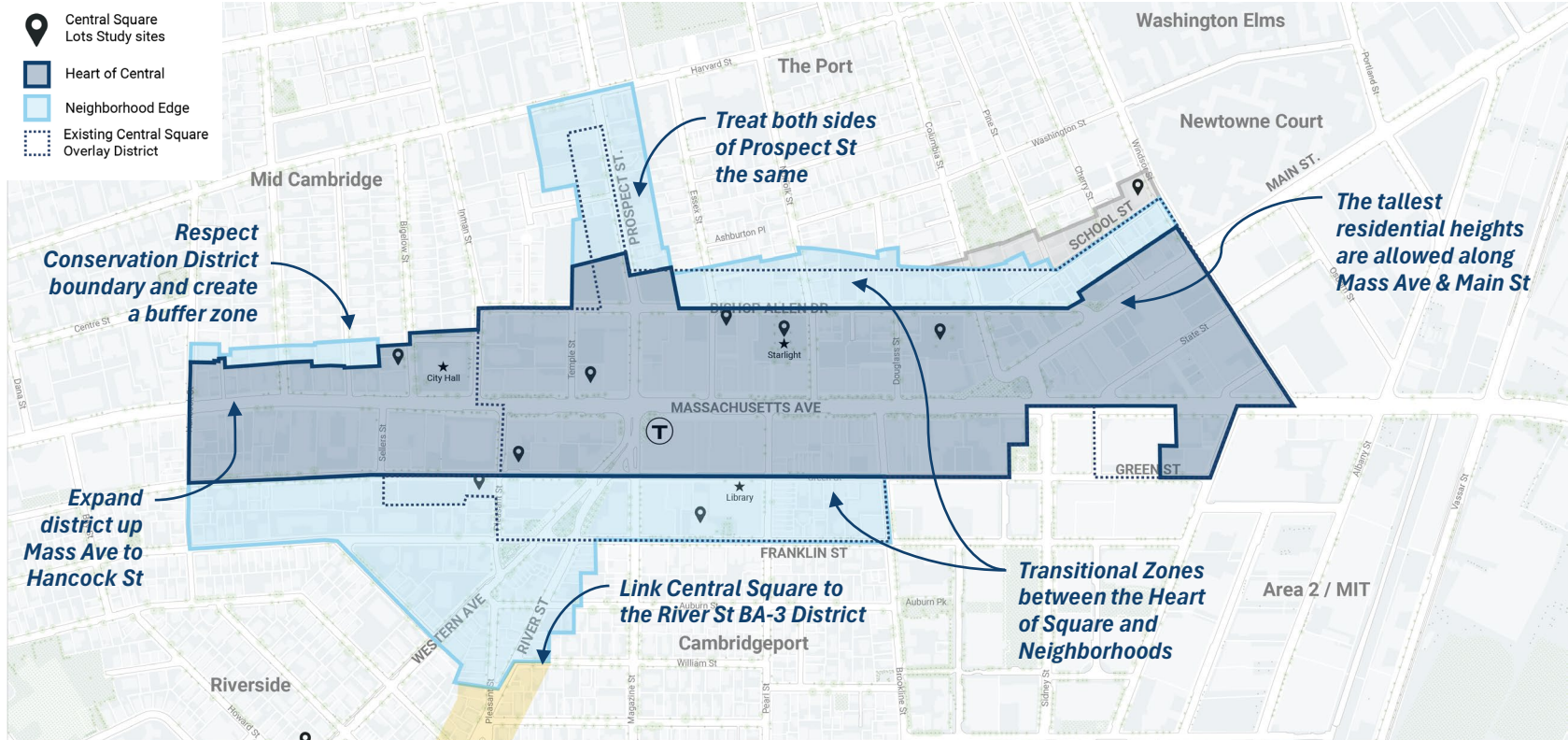
3 Incentivized Uses

- What uses should be incentivized?
- What should those incentives be?

District Boundary: Existing Zoning



District Boundary: Proposed Extents (Oct 2024)



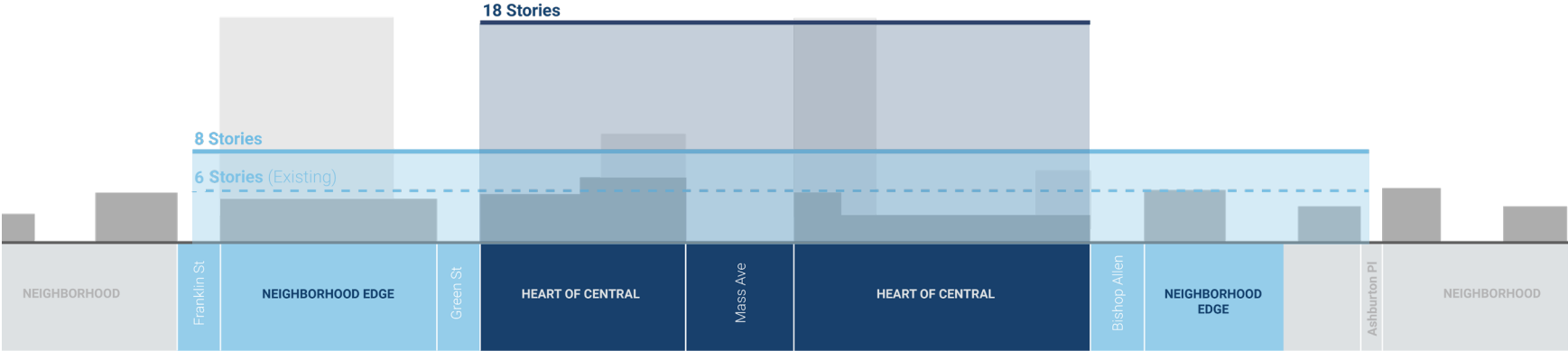
Urban Form: Proposed Height Limits (Oct 2024)

“ Central should be one of the densest neighborhoods in Cambridge

“ Density doesn’t always mean height

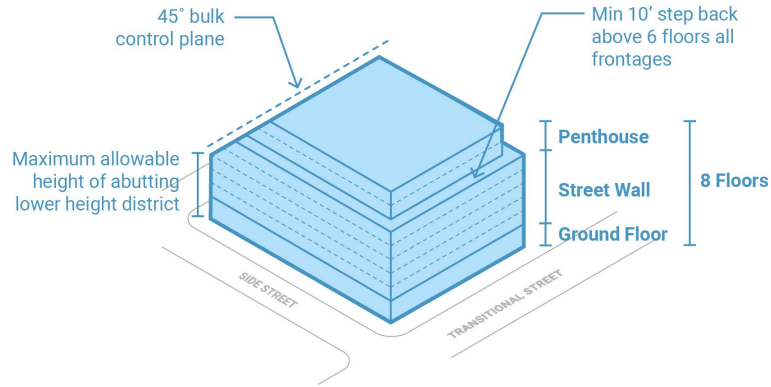
“ I’m fine with any height as long as it’s housing

“ We need to come to terms with higher density to mitigate our housing dilemma

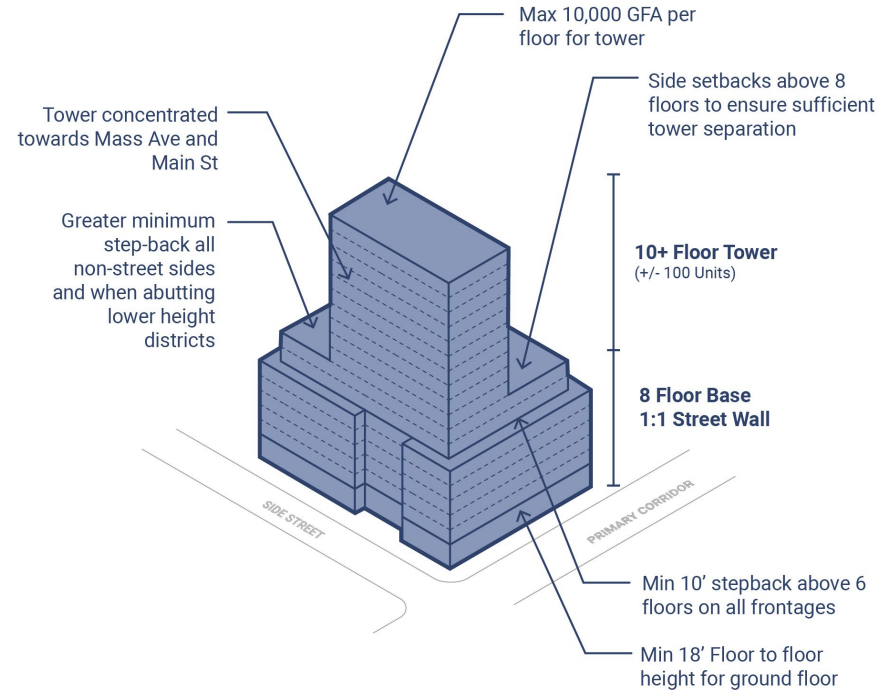


Recommended Allowable Heights

Urban Form: Proposed Dimensional Standards (Oct 2024)



Neighborhood Edges



Heart of Central Square

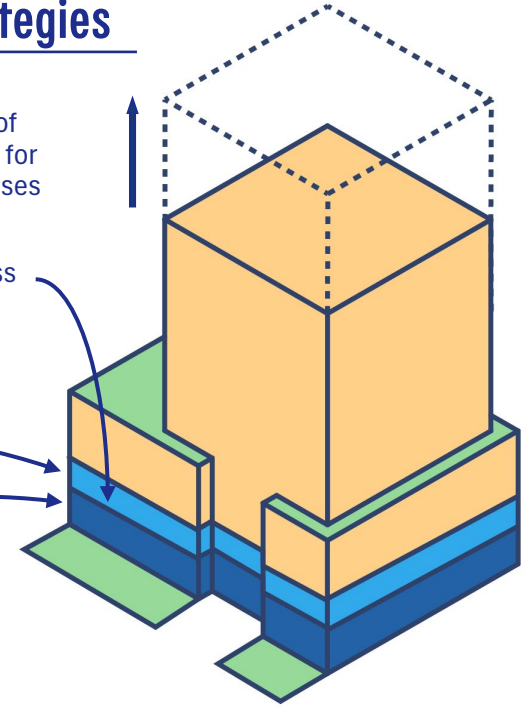
Incentivized Uses: Arts & Cultural Spaces (Oct 2024)

To create more of these uses, we can allow them through zoning and incentivize the uses the community has prioritized seeing.



Potential Strategies

- Increased number of stories as incentive for providing specific uses
- Active uses can be excluded from Gross Floor Area
- Include buffer floor between cultural & residential
- Allow active cultural uses on ground floors



Incentivized Uses: Responding to Context (Oct 2024)

Heart of Central

- **Allow** all cultural uses as of right
- **Require** active uses on the ground floor of larger projects
- **Incentivize** cultural uses through development bonuses

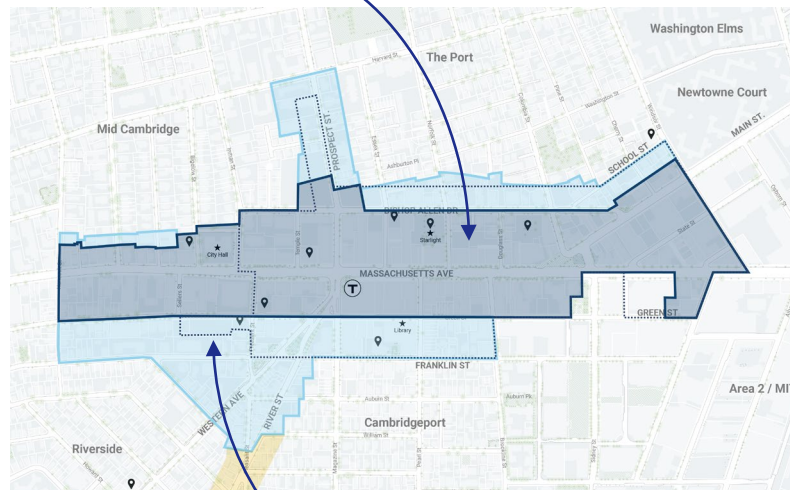
Neighborhood Edge

- **Allow** all cultural uses as of right except for more impactful uses
- **Incentivize** cultural uses through development bonuses

This creates a busier ground floor within the Heart of Central Square

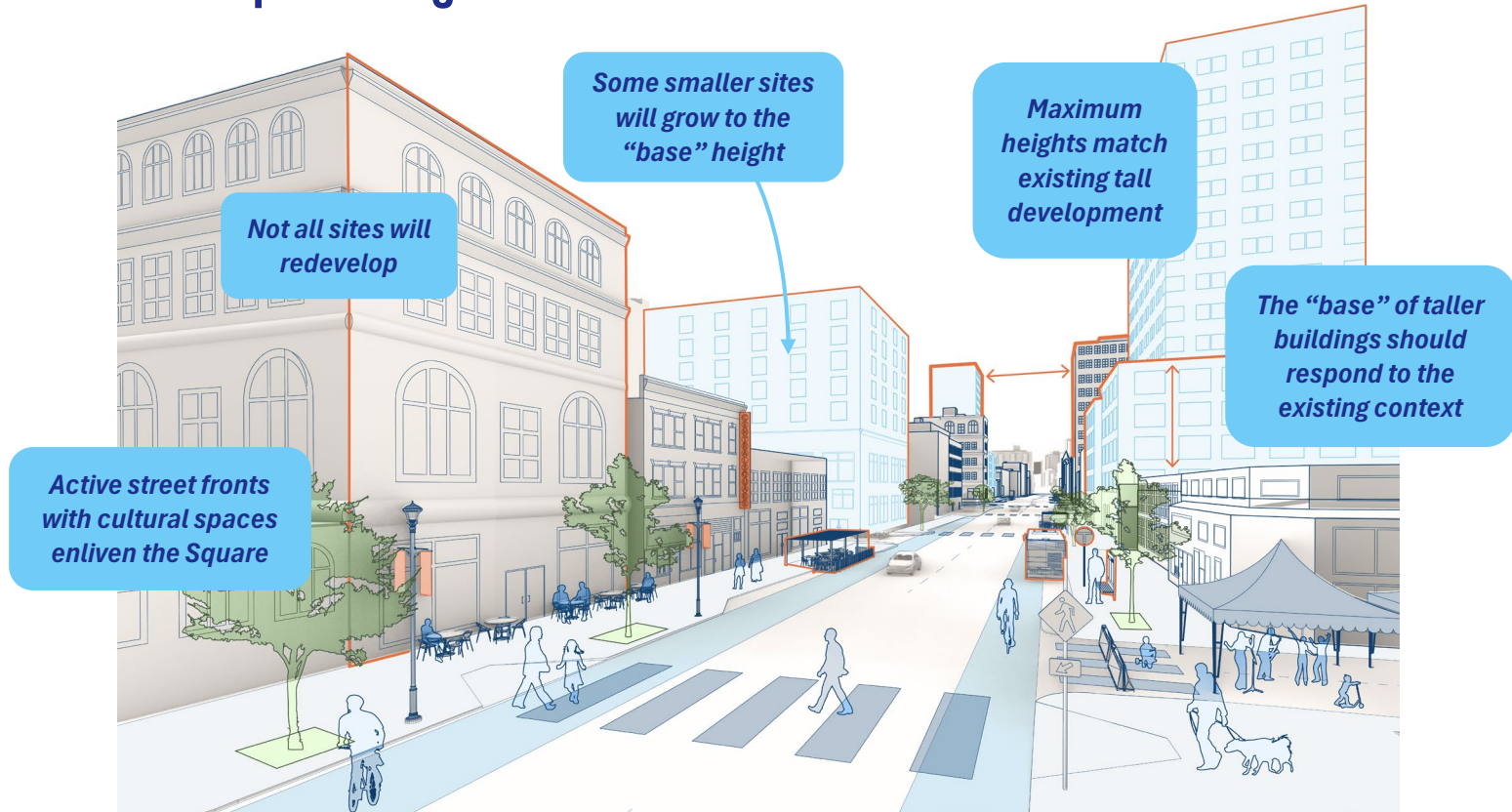
“

It would [be unfortunate] to have someone put a loud night club in a transition zone, right next to residential housing



Impactful uses (such as music venues, nightclubs, and theaters) would need to go through special permit and review

What Central Square might look like! (Oct 2024)



Follow Up Discussion (April 2025)

Residential Height Limits along Massachusetts Ave

The Neighborhood and Long-term Planning Committee asked for potential residential unit counts for 12-story and 18-story scenarios in the Heart of Central Square.

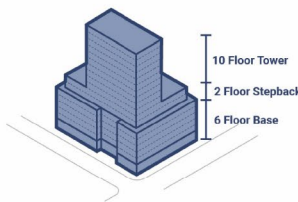
Since the results were similar, the question becomes what building form best reflects the community's priorities.

Units and square footage represent a 2040 build out, assuming standard growth (30% of total)



Heart of Central Square

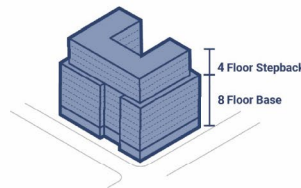
18 Story Option



Housing Base Units [18 Floors]	1,060 units
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Total New Units [18 Floors]	1,775 units
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12 Story Option



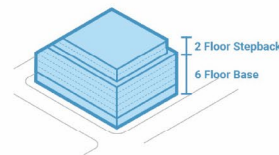
Housing Base Units [12 Floors]	1,000 units
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Total New Units [12 Floors]	1,715 units
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Neighborhood Edge

8 Story Edge



Housing Units [8 Floors]	715 units
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Follow Up Discussion (April 2025)

Residential Height Limits along Massachusetts Ave

18 Story Option:

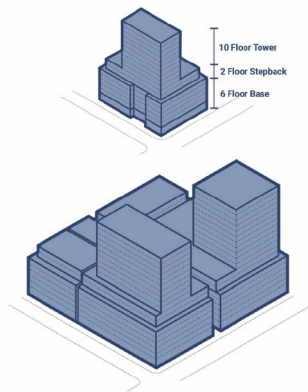
- A lower “base” height with a few taller “towers”, or

12 Story Option:

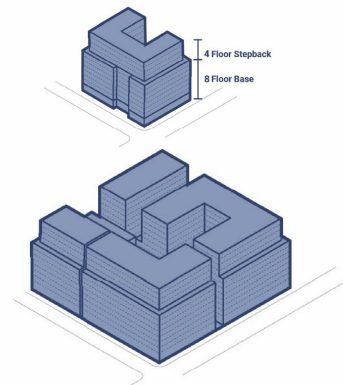
- A consistent height in between the proposed “base” and “tower” heights

Heart of Central Square

18 Story Option



12 Story Option



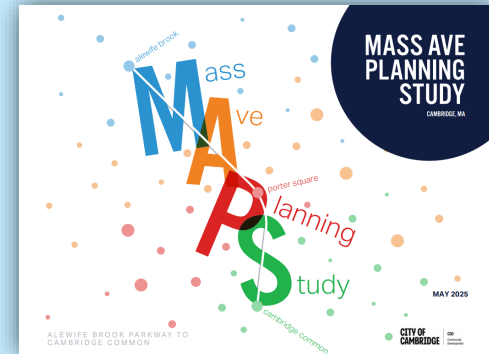
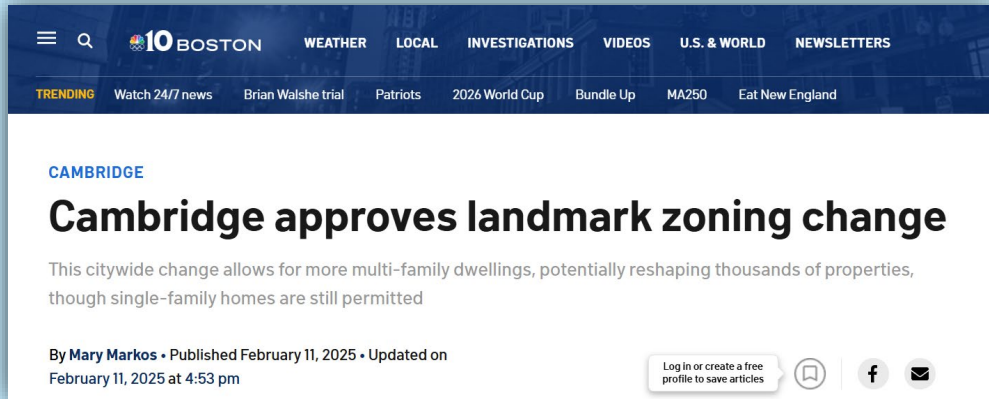
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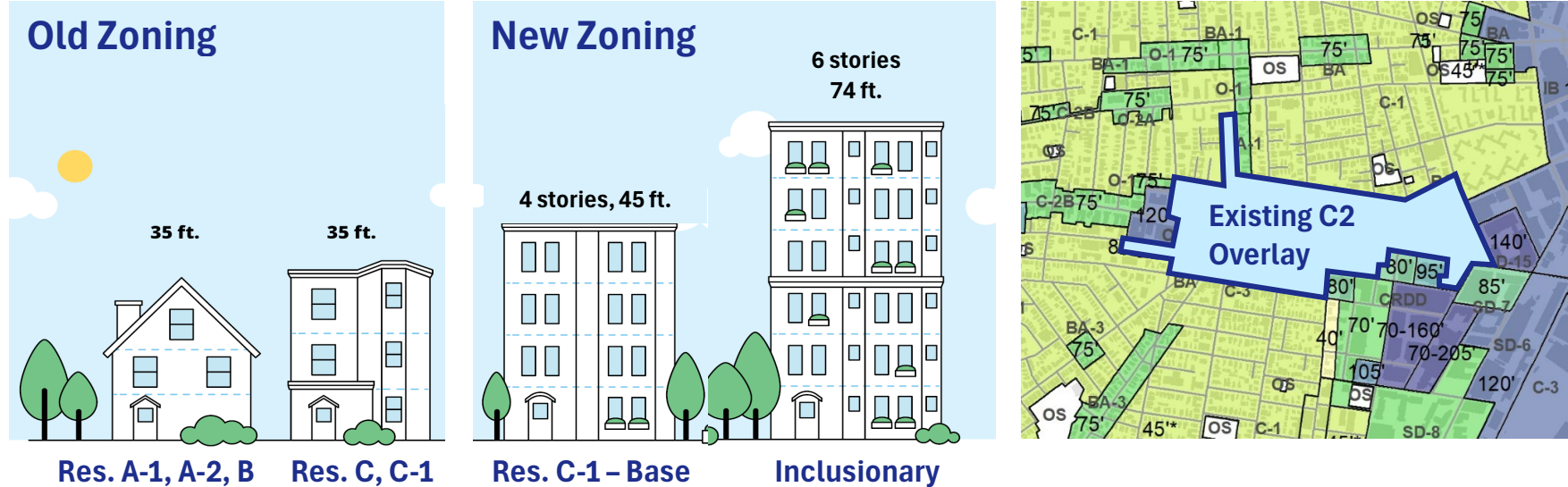
Big Changes Have Occurred:

1. Multifamily Zoning
2. Massachusetts Avenue Zoning (per MAPS)
3. Cambridge Street Zoning (per Our Cambridge Street)



Multifamily Zoning (Feb 2025)

- **Res. C-1, Base:** 4 stories, 45'; reduced side and rear yard setbacks (formerly 35-45')
- **Res. C-1, Inclusionary:** 6 stories, 74'



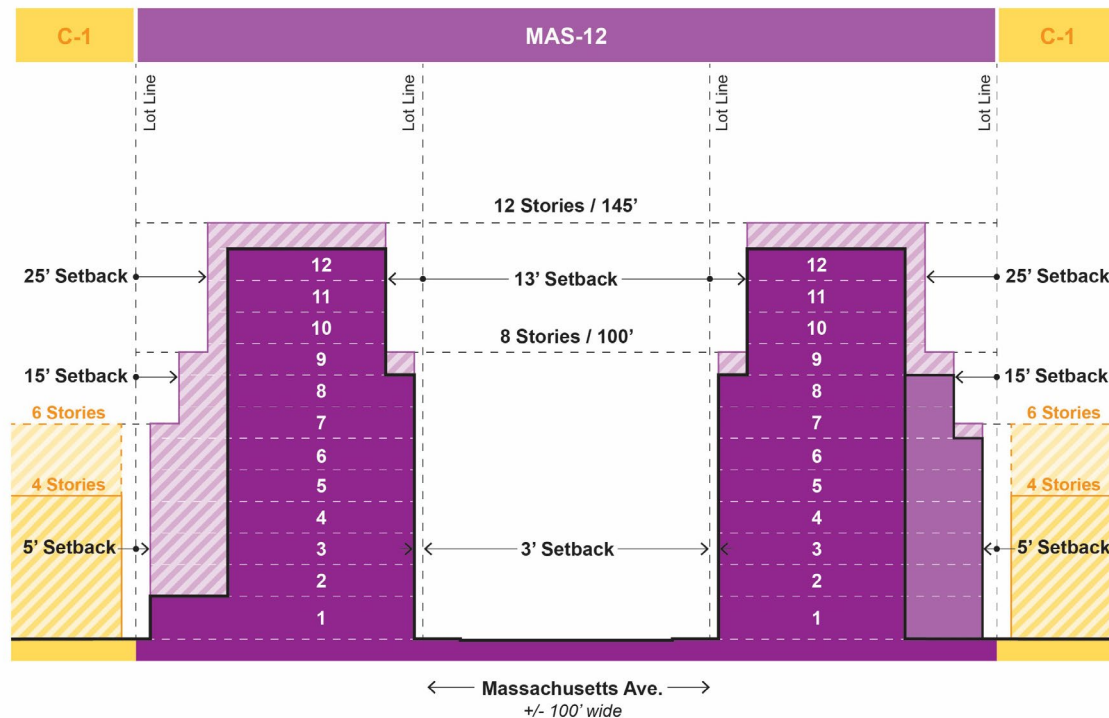
Massachusetts Ave & Cambridge St Zoning (Dec 2025 - Present)

Massachusetts Avenue

- **Corridor:** 12 stories w/ upper-level setback above 8 stories
- **Porter Square:** 18 stories
- **Ground Floor Active Uses:**
Required for buildings:
 - +4 stories south of Porter
 - +8 stories north of Porter

Cambridge Street

- **Corridor:** 6 stories
- **Lechmere Sq:** 10 stories
- **Webster/Windsor:** 12 stories
- **Ground Floor Active Uses:**
Required for buildings:
 - +6 stories in Webster/Windsor
 - +6 stories in Lechmere



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What is the purpose of this additional engagement?

1 Opportunity for Additional Input

- Provide opportunities for additional groups, stakeholders, and perspectives to be added to the prior engagement.
- Check back in with previous partners who engaged in the process.

2 Community Benefits & Uses

- Establish how the zoning can protect, enhance, and grow cultural, entertainment, and active uses in the district.
- Determine the community benefits that additional growth should provide.

3 Resolving Urban Form

- Identify an approach to building form that balances housing and community uses with potential impacts on the public realm.
- Consider incorporating additional zoning recommendations from recent related processes.

What forms could this additional engagement take?

1 Community Meetings

- Refresh the community on the prior process and outcomes.
- Explain additional engagement, its purpose, and its relationship to the Central Square Rezoning.
- Summarize feedback and provide information on next steps.

2 Listening Sessions

- Provide opportunities for smaller discussions in familiar, informal settings that are responsive to the community.
- Proactively reach out to additional groups beyond the prior engagement.

3 Online Survey

- Create opportunities for ongoing feedback and participation outside of meetings.
- Confirm alignment with prior findings and recommendations.

What are some cautions?

1 Avoid duplicating prior work

The community and stakeholders generously donated their time and feedback during the prior engagement.

We need to be clear about what the purpose and focus of this effort is, and ensure it is additive, not duplicative.

2 Don't revisit areas of agreement

This effort is meant to be focused and strategic, building off the prior engagement work.

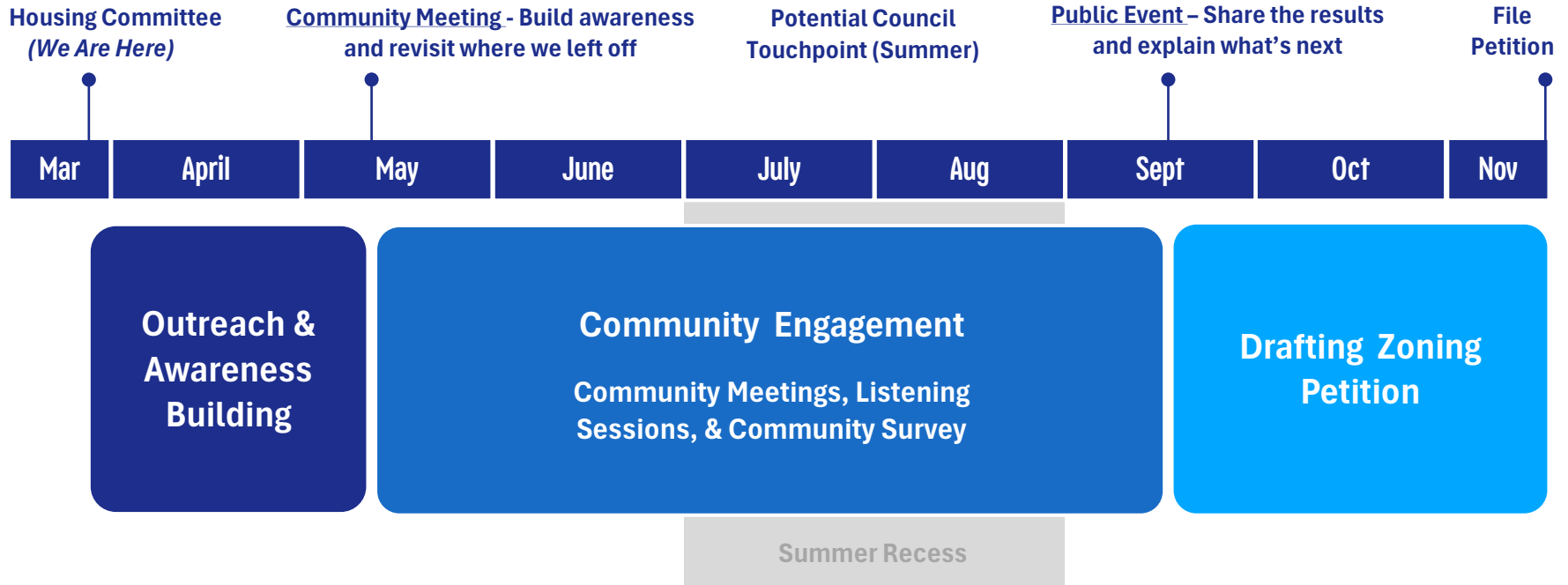
Topics that previously had broad consensus should be assumed to be resolved.

3 Zoning can't solve everything

Zoning is an important tool, but it is not the only tool, nor is it always the correct one.

The best rezoning efforts are paired with complementary programs that work in tandem to achieve the desired outcomes.

Potential Schedule



Questions for Council

1 Is this the right approach?

Does the proposed engagement effectively address the Council's priorities and expectations for this effort?

2 Is the timing reasonable?

Does the timeline balance providing opportunities for (re)engaging stakeholders with the desire to advance towards a zoning petition?

3 Is anything Missing?

What are we missing?
What additional ideas could make this process and outcomes even more successful?

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Appendix

1. Prior Community Engagement Details



Focus Groups

11 Focus Group Meetings

- **06/05/2024** | Central Square Advisory Committee
- **06/27/2024** | Cambridgeport Neighborhood Association
- **07/09/2024** | Manning Apartments Tenant Assoc. (CHA)
- **07/09/2024** | Community Learning Center
- **08/14/2024** | Nightlife
- **09/05/2024** | Community Engagement Team (CET)
- **09/09/2024** | Arts + Culture
- **09/09/2024** | Property Owners (with BID)
- **09/13/2024** | Washington Elms + Newtowne Court (CHA)
- **09/13/2024** | Nonprofits
- **09/30/2024** | Central Square BID Board

Value of this tool

- Builds awareness with **key stakeholders**
- Ability to host **focused conversations** in a smaller setting
- Organized around **critical topics** and/or constituencies
- More **nuanced and directed feedback** around zoning

Examples of what was heard

- Need to **support existing residents and organizations** by growing opportunities, not through replacement
- Prioritize **bringing people to the Square**, both through housing and supporting arts/culture/nightlife/retail
- General support for increased density and height, but only for housing and a focus on **increasing affordability**

How the process adapted

- Dates extended into fall to account for challenges of meeting during summer

Pop-ups

8 Pop-ups at Cambridge Community Events

- 06/11/2024 | Community Learning Center
- 06/15/2024 | River Arts Festival
- 06/15/2024 | Hoops and Health
- 06/28/2024 | Citywide Dance Party
- 07/08/2024 | HRI Neighbor to Neighbor Cook Out
- 08/24/2024 | Port Pride Day
- 10/07/2024 | Washington Elms/Newtowne Court Block Party
- 10/09/2024 | Dance Party at the Cube



Value of the tool

- Meeting people where they are
- Interact with individuals who are not aware of the project
- Capitalizing on the energy and attendance of other events

What was learned

- Greater comfort with height but **only if it provides housing**
- Central needs to be a **“one-stop-shop”** again
- General support for **growing the Overlay Boundary**

Walking Tour



Saturday, September 7, 2024

- Held in partnership with the Cambridge Historical Com.
- Roughly 1-mile loop between City Hall and Windsor St
- +/- 45 Attendees

Value of this tool

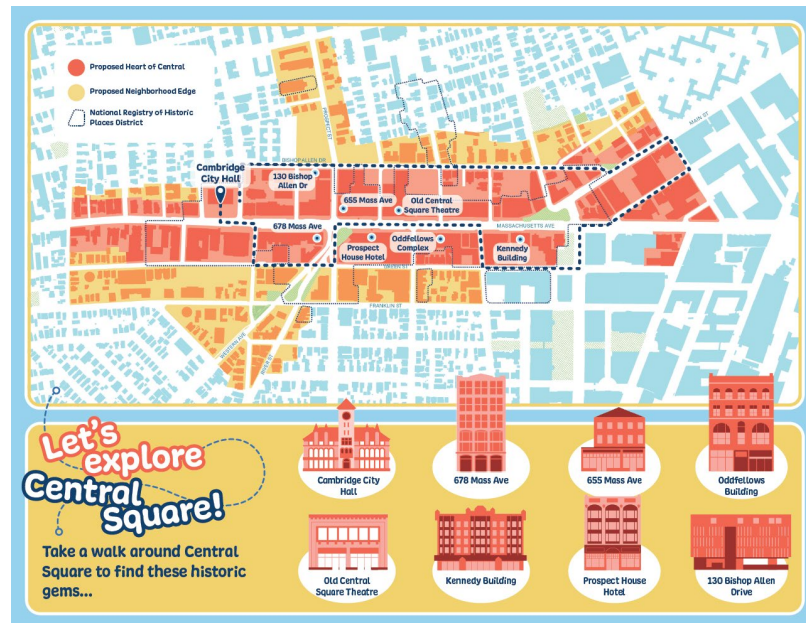
- Connecting with residents in the space
- Learning from **real-world examples**
- Understanding **Central Square's physical evolution**
- Reaching a **wider audience** with different interests

What was heard

- Seeing precedents in-person **aided understanding**
- Surprise over the reduction in height of some historic buildings
- General agreement that **Market Central is a positive addition**
- Concern over **preservation of historic buildings**

How the process adapted

- Date postponed from summer to early fall at resident's suggestions to allow for greater attendance



Block Party

Saturday, October 19th, 2024

We concluded the community engagement phase with a Block Party on Saturday, October 19th from 1-5pm on Norfolk Street. There was art, activities, dancing, and more that brought people together in an active and engaging way.

The purpose of this event was to:

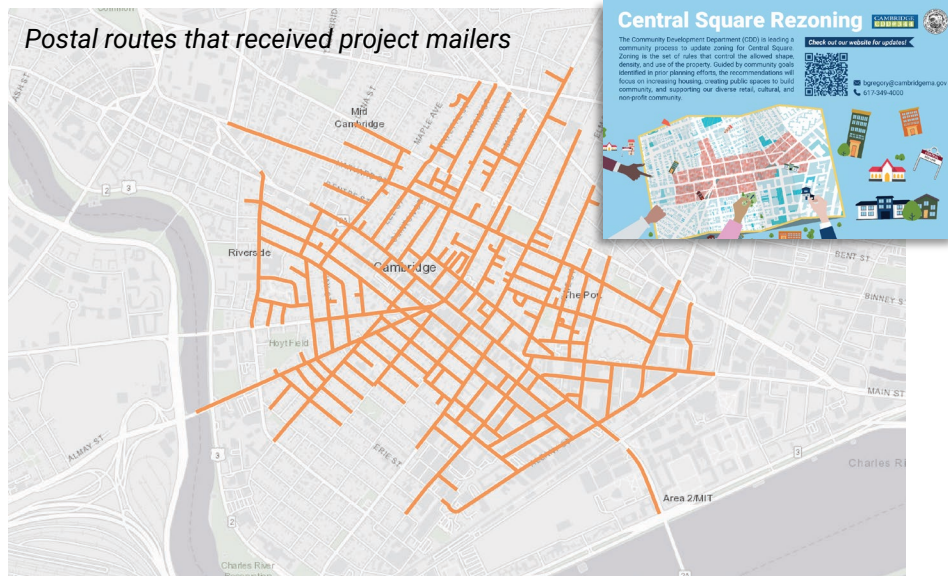
- Share the Final Recommendations for updates to Central Square's zoning,
- Thank the Community for their involvement in the project,
- Raise awareness around other City-led projects in and around Central Square, and
- Come together and celebrate everything that makes Central Square great!



Communications

Strategies to Expand Outreach

- **Physical Mailers**
 - Postcards sent to **10,591 residents and businesses** in and around Central Square with all future community meeting dates
- **Printer Flyers**
 - Posted on community/municipal boards in Central Sq. and handed out to **50+ businesses**
- **Digital Flyers**
 - Leveraged partner networks such as neighborhood associations, some w/ 1,600 ppl.
- **Social Media Posts** | 5 rounds, 20 posts, 5,925 views
 - Instagram • Threads
 - Facebook • X/Twitter
- **City Daily Update** | for 3 days prior to each event
- **City & CDD Calendars** | posted 2-3 weeks in advance
- **Email Blasts** | 1-2 wks. prior to events, 75-80% open rate
- **Direct Correspondence** | 44 unique residents
- **Zoning Newsletter** | mthly to 850 ppl, 76% open rate
- **Project Website** | 2nd most viewed CDD project page



Value of these tools

- Leverage **physical & digital** outreach tools to maximize awareness and remind people of meetings
- Direct **physical notification** of businesses and residents
- Accommodate a wide **range of communication styles** to increase feedback and input
- Ability to learn about the project at **different paces**
- Opportunities for more **in-depth communication**

Communications

Community Engagement Team Outreach

- Focused on reaching underserved, underheard, and historically excluded community members
- Team members represent 6 linguistic communities and American-born Black community
- **Printed Flyering**
- **Social Media Posts**
 - Facebook
- **Facilitated Focus Group**
 - 13 participants
- **WeChat**
 - 390 community members
- **What's App**
 - 270 community members
- **Texts**
 - 15 community members

