



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date:	September 4, 2019
Subject:	Affordable Housing Overlay Zoning Petition
Recommendation:	The Planning Board recommends ADOPTION on a 6-3 vote in favor.

To the Honorable, the City Council,

The Planning Board held a public hearing on the Affordable Housing Overlay City Council Zoning Petition (the “Petition”) on June 25, 2019. At that hearing, the Board heard a presentation from Community Development Department (CDD) staff and testimony from the public, asked questions, and raised key points of discussion. The Board continued its hearing on July 9, 2019 to discuss the Petition further, and again heard testimony from the public.

Board members expressed varying points of view on the Petition. Some members expressed strong support for the Petition as part of a strategy to facilitate the creation of affordable housing and offset the increasing unaffordability that threatens the diversity of the City. Other members expressed concerns, mainly focused on the increased scale and density of developments compared to existing development patterns under current zoning, and the potential consequences of a permitting process that does not require special permit approval.

At the conclusion of the July 9, 2019 hearing, the Board did not vote to make a recommendation, but requested that CDD staff work with the Planning Board Chair to draft a report summarizing the comments made by Board members, to be reviewed by the Board at a future hearing prior to taking a vote. The draft report was submitted to the Board on August 27, 2019 (the “Draft Report”).

On September 3, 2019, following a review and consideration of the issues outlined in the Draft Report and discussion of the most recent changes to the Petition reflected in the zoning text dated August 29, 2019, and supplemental materials prepared by CDD, including Draft Design Guidelines, the Board closed the public hearing and proceeded to vote on whether the Board supported various elements of the Petition in its most recent form. The outcome of each vote and a summary of the Board’s discussion on each element is provided below.

The Board voted 6-3 in favor of supporting an as-of-right approval process, supplemented by an advisory review procedure and Design Guidelines. Members voting in favor cited the need to create affordable housing using all available tools, and acknowledged the concerns with the current permitting process in which affordable housing developments typically require zoning relief through the comprehensive permit process, which is subject to appeals that can

significantly affect the viability of affordable housing developments. These members expressed confidence that the non-binding review procedure and the Design Guidelines would be effective, and would enable predictable outcomes for affordable housing developers. Members voting in favor also noted that the Affordable Housing Overlay zoning would be reviewed on an ongoing basis and could be amended if the goals are not being achieved. Members voting in opposition acknowledged the need for affordable housing, but expressed concerns about relaxing zoning requirements without binding review and approval by a City board, and cautioned against prioritizing one policy interest at the expense of others.

The Board voted 7-2 in favor of supporting the dimensional limitations set forth in the most recent version of the Petition. Members voting in favor stated that the variety in building sizes allowed in some districts under the Petition would not be detrimental, and that throughout Cambridge there are buildings of various sizes and scales, many of which were built before zoning was enacted. Several Board members expressed concerns about allowing taller and denser development in existing lower-scale residential neighborhoods, though among those Board members, some stated that the dimensional limitations would impose meaningful controls and expressed optimism that the proposed Design Guidelines would produce outcomes that are appropriate to their context. Many Board members would have preferred retaining the taller heights originally proposed for mixed-use corridors and squares rather than reducing them, although some Board members preferred the restrictions in the current version of the Petition or stricter limitations in those districts.

The Board voted 6-3 in favor of supporting the parking provisions set forth in the current version of the Petition, which would not set minimum parking requirements for Affordable Housing Overlay Projects. Members voting in favor acknowledged that some residents of affordable housing developments would own cars, which would create demand for parking spaces, but also noted that the cost of building parking can be a real barrier to affordable housing development. Some members expressed support for eliminating parking requirements in general because the creation of parking will result in a greater number of cars and reduce the amount of land available for housing, open space, and other uses. Some members noted that if some affordable housing is created without parking, it could provide more options to households who need housing and do not own cars. Members voting in opposition expressed concerns about the impact that developments without parking would have on residents of the surrounding area, particularly longtime residents who rely on on-street parking and would have greater difficulty finding parking spaces.

The Board voted 8-1 in favor of supporting the proposed environmental standards set forth in the current version of the Petition, which includes provisions for permeable open space, tree protection, and sustainability. Board members were generally supportive of the environmental provisions in the latest version of the Petition, although some members expressed concerns about imposing standards for affordable housing developments that were not imposed on comparable market-rate housing projects. Board members briefly discussed the concept of “net zero ready” provisions, as had been discussed by the Ordinance Committee. Members expressed varying opinions for and against such a concept, but did not vote on a recommendation given a lack of clarity about what such provisions would entail.

The Board voted unanimously in favor of supporting the provisions for ongoing review set forth in the current version of the Petition, which would require annual reporting and a five-year progress review. The general consensus of the Board at past hearing dates has been to recommend that the City Council consider including a “sunset” or “look-back” provision to revisit the zoning at some point in the future, although the Board has considered a range of different ideas were suggested for what form such a revisitation could take. The Board is supportive of the annual reporting and five-year progress review provisions set forth in the current version of the Petition.

The Board voted 7-2 in favor of supporting the citywide applicability of an Affordable Housing Overlay. Board members expressed the importance of a citywide approach given the goal of producing affordable housing throughout the City, and cautioned against creating different standards that would allow some parts of the City to receive different treatment. Board members acknowledged and supported the approach of the current proposal to establish different standards for lower-scale residential neighborhoods and higher-scale mixed-use areas throughout the City. Some members noted that the standards may evoke different reactions in different areas based on the prevailing development patterns that exist.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Board voted 6-3 in favor of making a favorable recommendation on the Petition as a whole.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Catherine Preston Connolly". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Catherine Preston Connolly, Chair.