



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date: December 27, 2024

Subject: Citywide Multifamily Housing Zoning Petitions

Recommendation: The Planning Board provides the following report with comments and no recommendation.

To the Honorable, the City Council,

On November 12, November 19, and December 17, 2024, the Planning Board (the “Board”) held a public hearing on two zoning petitions (the “Petitions”) by the City Council. These Petitions are intended to comprehensively reform zoning regulations for multifamily housing throughout the city, and therefore were heard and discussed together as a single proposal.

Description of Petitions

The first Petition would amend the Zoning Map and Articles 2.000, 3.000, 4.000, 5.000, 6.000, 7.000, 8.000, 10.000, 11.000, 13.000, 14.000, 16.000, 17.000, 20.000, and 21.000 of the Zoning Ordinance with the intent of: (1) removing zoning districts that are intended to permit single-family or two-family but not multifamily residences; (2) permitting multifamily and townhouse residences as-of-right in all zoning districts except Open Space and removing special requirements applicable to multifamily and townhouse residences; (3) removing dimensional requirements including minimum lot width and area and minimum lot area per dwelling unit, removing floor area ratio (FAR) limitations for residences, reducing minimum yard requirements for residences, and increasing height limitations for residences to permit at least six stories above grade in all districts except Open Space to allow for additional housing units beyond what is permitted under current zoning; (4) removing remaining references to minimum parking requirements; and (5) revising other parts of the Zoning Ordinance for internal consistency.

The second petition would amend the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance in Articles 5.000, 11.000, 15.000, 17.000, 19.000, and 20.000 with the intent of: (1) revising open space standards to provide greater flexibility by allowing all types of open space to contribute to meeting requirements; (2) revising certain standards of the Affordable Housing Overlay so they are not more restrictive than comparable standards for residences in base zoning; (3) making project review special permit requirements applicable in all zoning districts and applicable to residential development of 75,000 square feet or more; (4) updating advisory development review procedures and introducing a new Planning Board Advisory Consultation for some larger development not subject to a special permit, similar to what is currently required in the Affordable Housing Overlay; and (5) revising other parts of the Zoning Ordinance for internal consistency.

Hearing Process

On November 12, 2024, the Board heard a presentation from staff in the City's Community Development Department (CDD) and testimony from the public. The Board then continued the hearing to November 19, 2024 to begin deliberations. After discussion, the Board continued the hearing again to December 17, 2024, to have more time to review the information provided along with information that had been provided to the Ordinance Committee. Staff from the Housing Department and the City Solicitor joined CDD staff to participate in these discussions.

After more questions and deliberations on December 17, 2024, the Board voted to transmit a report to the City Council that conveys the shared opinions of Board members and describes aspects of the Petition on which Board members were not in full agreement, with no positive or negative recommendation.

Report and Comments

Overall, Board members were strongly supportive of the Petitions' goals of encouraging housing growth across the city, with a particular focus on affordable housing created through inclusionary housing and other programs, and removing exclusionary barriers in zoning that prevent multifamily housing in different parts of the city.

Board members all voiced support for the following aspects of the Petitions:

- Allowing multifamily housing across all zoning districts, particularly by deleting zoning districts that are restricted to single-family or two-family dwellings and rezoning residential neighborhoods uniformly to Residence C-1.
- Removing minimum lot size limitations and minimum lot area per dwelling unit limitations, which restrict greater numbers of housing units and make the majority of existing sites in residential neighborhoods non-conforming.
- Removing floor area ratio (FAR) limitations for housing, and incorporating height limitations based on a total number of stories above grade.

Some Board members also voiced support for proposed changes in the Petitions that would facilitate mixed-use development. Beyond what is proposed in the Petitions, several Board members emphasized the importance of also addressing the zoning for squares and corridors that may be suited to greater residential height and density. Several Board members also asked for regular updates on housing production and related issues to be made to the Planning Board and City Council.

Board members did not reach agreement or raised general concerns regarding several aspects of the Petitions as summarized below:

- Height. Some Board members expressed support for the proposed 6-story height limit in residential neighborhoods, but most Board members expressed concerns that

development at that scale would contrast with the prevailing urban form in those areas. Many Board members expressed a preference for a 4-story height limit with potential increases up to 6 stories to incentivize inclusionary housing. Some Board members felt this approach helped to balance between the Envision Cambridge goals of providing more affordable housing and maintaining neighborhood urban form. Board members who were supportive of a 6-story height limit noted that housing at different scales exists throughout Cambridge and did not believe that it had a negative effect. Board members suggested other limitations might be considered to limit the potential impacts of 6-story development in residential neighborhoods, such as minimum lot sizes, step-backs or bulk control planes to limit impacts on sunlight and shadows, or special permit requirements for increased height. Board members also generally agreed that if there is increased height it should only be for multifamily development and not for larger single-family or two-family houses.

- **Setbacks.** Board members generally agreed that some side yard setbacks were preferable for new housing development in residential neighborhoods to provide for necessary site design features, such as access/egress and trash storage, and limit impacts on abutting lots. Some members opined that building code standards along with open space requirements would result in adequate setbacks, but most Board members agreed that a modest, uniform side setback required in zoning would be beneficial in residential zoning districts (but not necessarily in mixed-use corridors and squares). Board members suggested some different minimum setback distances, generally around 5 feet, but left details to be considered by Council and staff. Most Board members also agreed that rear yards were beneficial but had differing views about whether a minimum setback distance should be required or if open space requirements should be relied upon to produce backyard space.
- **Open Space.** Though Board members did not suggest specific changes to the proposed open space requirements, some Board members did express general concerns about the potential for reduced open space and tree canopy that may result from additional housing development in residential neighborhoods. Those members pointed out the tension between the planning goals of growing the housing stock and growing the tree canopy, and suggested that the City should study what future tree loss may occur on residential lots and ways to mitigate such potential loss.
- **Development Review.** Board members agreed that special permit requirements are a complicated issue. Some Board members voiced support for requiring special permits for a wider range of development than currently proposed, either at a lower size threshold or as a condition of additional building height. Those Board members cited concerns about site-specific impacts of larger development, such as shadows and local utilities, as well as concerns about worsening public sentiment against new housing development. On the other hand, some Board members believed that the risk of special permit appeal is a real concern that could lead to threats of litigation that would counteract the Petitions' goal of equitable housing opportunities across all neighborhoods. Overall, Board members shared the view that special permits may be necessary for some housing development but

should not be required for all housing development, and agreed that it is difficult to weigh the benefits and drawbacks. Some Board members also cited the advisory review process established under the Affordable Housing Overlay as an effective alternative, but it was not clear whether it would be as effective for developments that were not also seeking funding support from the City.

- Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO). Board members agreed in principle that the Zoning Ordinance should continue to incentivize all-affordable housing development. Some members expressed concerns about whether the proposed change would impact the benefit provided by the AHO and suggested further analysis of the effect it might have on future affordable housing development. However, some Board members also voiced concerns about allowing affordable housing development up to 13 stories in residential neighborhoods and suggested that a height limit of up to 9 stories would be preferable under the AHO.

The Planning Board voted 6-0 in favor of transmitting the above report.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,



Mary Flynn, Chair.