

**Response to the “Central Square Restoration” Zoning Petition:
Draft Recommendations from the Cambridge Residents Alliance
November 22, 2016**

Height Limits

The petition includes no increase in building height limits in Central Square beyond the current limit of 80’ allowed with a special permit. We appreciate this fact and see it as evidence that the authors – local developers and small businesses – are listening and responding to concerns that residents have expressed for years.

We regard the current height limitation not as temporary, but as an essential element of the overall plan for Central Square. This limitation is an important factor influencing our qualified support for the petition. Residents of surrounding neighborhoods and all those who use the square will be subject to significant new pressures brought about by the increased density proposed by the petition, in the form of increased FAR (floor-area-ratio) and decreased parking, open space, and setback requirements.

We can adjust to these extra pressures – but we think they should be *in exchange for* height limits that help protect the livability, family-friendly nature, and affordability of the square. Therefore, we are concerned that: a) the Introduction to the petition does not explicitly state that height limits will be left intact and b) language in the Frequently Asked Questions accompanying the petition implies that the height limits might be temporary and should be “discussed” in the future. We hope to see this language changed as negotiations proceed.

We propose that the following provision be added to the petition: “On lots where increased FAR allowed by this petition can only be achieved by heights beyond the existing 80’ limit with a special permit, the existing height limit shall prevail.”

Density – FAR Increases

The petition proposes a significant increase in residential FAR from 3 to 4 in the Business B in the Central Square Overlay District. We will support this FAR increase as a way to promote residential development, especially when it’s focused on adding stories to existing buildings. (For years, the Cambridge Residents Alliance has pointed out that greatly increased density could be achieved within the existing height limits in Central Square.) However, on lots of mixed residential and non-residential development, we would not support any category being allowed to go beyond FAR 4.

Density – FAR Exemptions

The petition proposes the following exemptions from the calculation of allowed FAR (floor-area-ratio): **1) Balconies:** any balconies, terraces, porches, stoops, and mezzanines on any floor of a residential structure, within five feet from the front wall plane **2) Rooftop Spaces:** any open-air spaces on rooftops, such as roof gardens, terraces, and walkways **3) Ground Floor Retail:** any retail spaces of 1500 square feet or less. We will go along with these exemptions as a way to foster residential construction and promote small, local, and hopefully affordable, retail businesses.

Formula Businesses (“Chains”)

The petition proposes that the Planning Board must take into consideration a number of aesthetic features before issuing special permits for formula businesses (i.e. “chains” such as McDonalds or Target) in Central Square, primarily having to do with their façades, signs, and logos – so as to respect the historical and cultural character of the square.

While we support these goals and we also want to promote affordable retail, we think that more could be done to limit too many chains flooding into the square and changing its character. Therefore, we propose that the street frontage of formula businesses should be limited to 30% of total commercial street frontage in the overlay district or that street frontage of formula businesses be allowed to increase by 10% from what exists at the time this zoning change passes, whichever is greater. We are also open to other means of limiting formula businesses, such as capping the total number of chains, or the number of banks and phone stores. We think the issue needs further research and discussion.

Open Space

The petition would allow the Planning Board to reduce Open Space requirements for individual lots by Special Permit and to permit Open Space to be located at levels other than at grade—for example, on rooftops.

While residents want to keep as much open space as possible in our dense and rapidly developing city, we will support some version of this change in order to increase the likelihood of additional residential construction. So, we propose that Open Space that is not at grade level—and therefore is not easily accessible to the public—be credited with fulfilling one half (1/2) the requirement for Open Space in general. However, a public roof garden would count as full open space, not half, if sufficient signage announced to the public that the space was available and they were welcome. Also, we propose that zoning changes grant permission and incentives to developers to pool their open space footage and create higher quality open space, whether on their combined lots or elsewhere in Central Square. We would trade tiny, shadowed patches of grass between all buildings for fewer but larger parks, walkways, and sky views.

Setbacks

The petition proposes that the Planning Board be allowed to waive existing setback requirements (of a building from the lot line) except where the yard abuts a lot that is outside the Overlay District. (The waiver would still apply to the part of a yard that abuts a public way.) Again, we are willing to accept this waiver of setback requirements to help increase residential development.

Parking

The petition proposes to significantly reduce, or in many cases eliminate, the amount of parking spaces that developers must provide. For example, developers of the following categories would need to provide the following lesser amounts of parking:

--for housing: one half (1/2) space per unit instead of the currently required one (1) space per unit;

--for hotel or motel uses: one quarter (1/4) space per sleeping room instead of the current one half (1/2) space per sleeping room;
--for office uses: one (1) space per 500 square feet instead of the current requirement;
--for tech office uses: one (1) space per 800 square feet instead of the current requirement.

In addition, the petition proposes that developers could choose to meet the parking requirements not by providing the above described spaces, but instead by making a cash contribution to a Central Square Improvement Fund that could be used for public parking, cultural events, park improvements, or improvements to pedestrian and bicycle facilities.

We strongly support efforts to reduce the use of cars and to promote pedestrian, bicycle, and public transportation. We understand that increased density, within reason, near public transportation is an important step toward combating climate change. We also recognize that many of the new residents brought into the square by increased housing and commercial density—as well as many visitors and shoppers—will own cars, and those cars will need to be parked somewhere. If parking is not provided, most often they will end up on nearby, already overcrowded, residential streets.

Our members have expressed a range of views about the parking changes proposed, but we have not yet arrived at a collective position on this issue. Some feel the current parking requirements should stand, because parking is extremely tight in Central Square and surrounding neighborhoods. Others think the city should allow the decreased parking for residential development but not for hotel, office or tech office development. Others feel the city should allow all developers to build less parking, in exchange for requiring them to pay 1/3 or 1/2 of the savings for every foregone parking space into a city fund that would be used to improve pedestrian, bicycle, and public transportation infrastructure in and around Central Square. We will continue to research and debate the issue until we have a firm recommendation.

Affordable Housing

The Cambridge Residents Alliance believes that any plan for Central Square must have at its heart a vision of how to increase *affordable* housing in this city. This is different from just increasing housing of any price. Many of the current discussions about housing and development in Cambridge are missing this point. As the well-respected Lincoln Land Institute described in a recent report:

“It might stand to reason that development of housing— any kind of housing—would lead to lower housing prices. ***In most urban areas, however, the opposite occurs.*** Construction of new residential real estate impacts the price or rent of existing homes in two different ways simultaneously. As the basic notion of supply and demand suggests, the addition of new units in a given market will inevitably put some downward pressure on the cost of existing units. ***But the larger effect tends to be upward pressure on housing costs*** because new homes are primarily built for higher-income residents. *[emphases added]* ... Modest price increases in a region can translate into very acute increases in specific neighborhoods. For example, new luxury housing may cause

dramatic upswings in the price of residential real estate in formerly distressed central neighborhoods, but the lower costs resulting from increased supply may be apparent only at the suburban fringe of the region.”

http://www.lincolnst.edu/pubs/3583_Inclusionary-Housing

Thus, the construction of residential towers filled mostly with market-rate or luxury apartments – even given some percentage set-aside for affordable units under the Inclusionary Zoning formula – will drive land and housing prices *up* in the nearby neighborhoods and will continue to displace long-time, working-class residents. Residents will be pushed to outer suburban areas and will have to travel much further—at greater time and expense for those who can least afford it—for the jobs and resources offered by the new urban environment. Most Central Square area residents know many people among their families and friends who have been subject to this kind of displacement. While the new Inclusionary Zoning policies now under discussion by the City Council will help mitigate displacement, they will not fundamentally change the dynamic.

We need to change not just the *amount* of housing built in Central Square, but the *ratio* of affordable to luxury housing. So, we have proposed for several years that the City of Cambridge maintain ownership of all public lots in Central Square (such as the parking lots along Bishop Allen Drive) and build 100% affordable housing on these lots – utilizing creative funding mechanisms and partnerships to do so. Any support we offer to the current Central Square Restoration Petition is within the context of this larger vision.