



To: Yi-An Huang, City Manager

From: Melissa Peters, Assistant City Manager for Community Development
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Date: April 22, 2026

Re: **Cambridge Street and Massachusetts Avenue: Active Use Zoning Petitions**

Background

On December 22, 2025 and January 26, 2026, the City Council adopted two zoning amendments creating new zoning districts for Massachusetts Avenue and Cambridge Street, respectively. The new zoning for both corridors encourages street activity by requiring active ground floor uses in new residential developments that exceed a certain height. On Mass. Ave., active uses are required to enable residential heights above 4 stories for several blocks south of Porter Square, and above 8 stories everywhere else. On Cambridge Street, active uses are required to enable residential heights above 6 stories only in Lechmere and the Webster/Windsor area. Residential heights above 6 stories are not allowed on the rest of Cambridge Street.

During the hearing process for both amendments, the Council expressed a desire for stronger active use mandates than were initially proposed. However, some changes could not be made by amending those petitions but required new petitions and a new hearing process. Before adopting the amended zoning, the City Council adopted Policy Order 2025-164 on December 8, 2025, instructing City staff to prepare subsequent zoning petitions to strengthen active use requirements on both corridors.

The Ordinance Committee of the City Council held two hearings on March 11, 2026 and April 6, 2026 to discuss different ways to implement stronger active use requirements. The following sections of this memo and the attached zoning petitions respond to Policy Orders 2026-72, 2026-73, and 2026-74, which emerged from those Ordinance Committee hearings.

Overall Approach

The proposed zoning petitions maintain the general approach of requiring active uses in new developments that exceed a certain height, which will result in active ground floors as a part of major redevelopment but allows for flexibility in cases where active uses are not feasible or preferred, such as smaller-scale preservation projects and development on unusual lots. Where active uses are required, those uses must also meet certain minimum floor area and location

standards. Specifically, active uses must occupy at least 60% of the interior floor area within 50 feet of the primary street (Mass. Ave. or Cambridge Street).

The proposed zoning includes some additional changes and clarifications to allow for flexibility where active uses may not be a priority:

1. Active uses are not required on lots that do not abut a primary street.

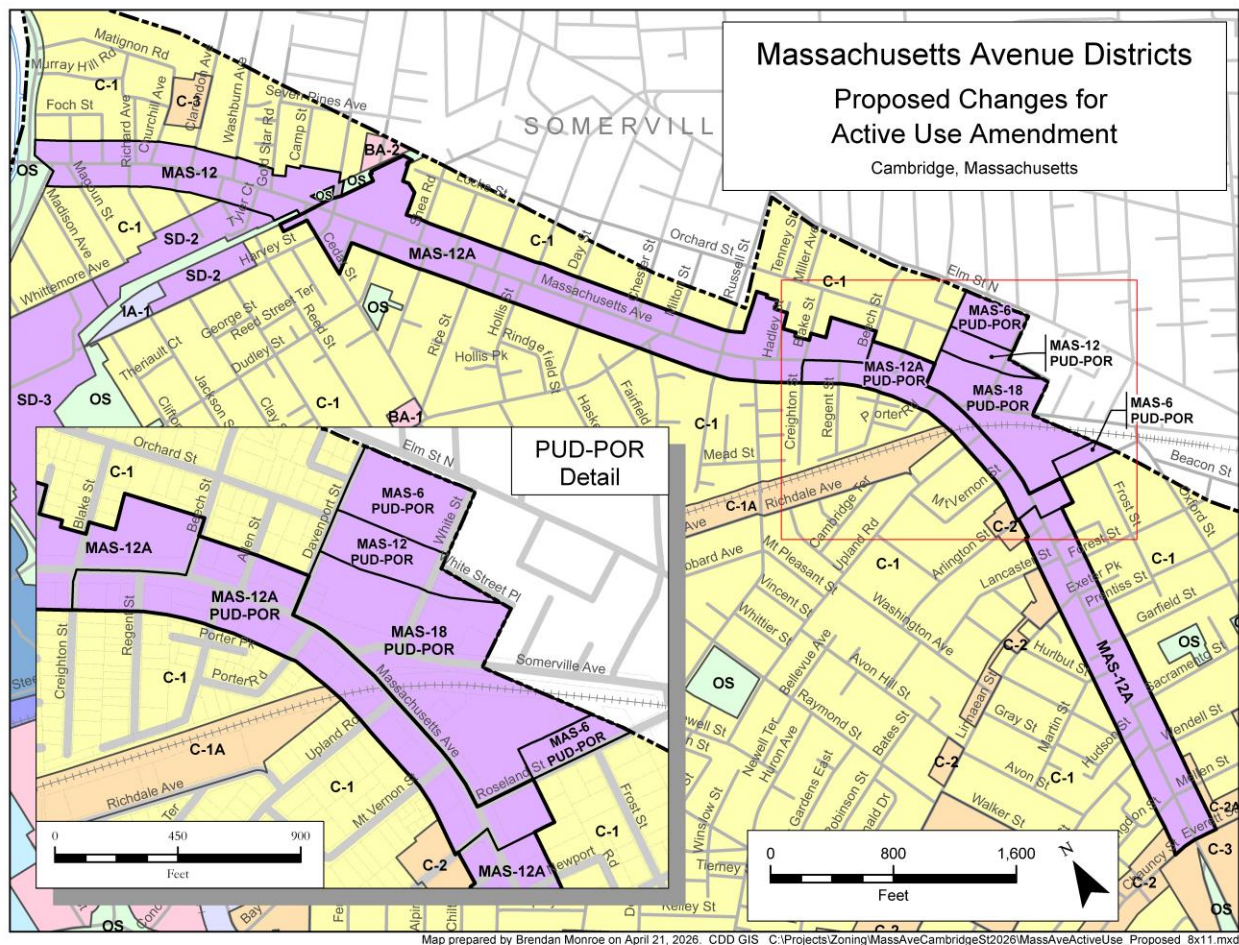
The active use requirements are intended to reinforce the existing mixed-use character of the main streets in each district. Therefore, it is not appropriate for the same requirements to apply to lots within the districts that do not abut a main street. The proposed petitions include clarifying edits confirming that developments on lots that do not abut a primary street can be built to the heights allowed in that district without providing active ground floor uses.

2. Allow modifications to active use requirements by Planning Board special permit.

Under the current Mass. Ave. and Cambridge Street zoning, the Planning Board may allow other non-residential uses to be considered active uses by special permit if the Board finds the use will positively contribute to an active streetscape. The proposed petitions establish a new Planning Board special permit to allow minor changes in the amount and/or location of required active uses. The purpose of these special permits is not to grant an exemption from the active use requirements, but to give the Planning Board the opportunity to consider alternatives given the unique characteristics of a site or project. The proposed zoning text includes specific special permit criteria to ensure modifications to this standard are the exception, not the norm.

Massachusetts Avenue

The proposed Mass. Ave. zoning petition strengthens active use requirements on the corridor by amending the Zoning Map to expand the MAS-12A district, in which active uses are required in buildings that exceed 4 stories. This district is currently mapped south of Porter Square, and the petition would increase the MAS-12A district to span the entire length of the corridor from Cambridge Common to Linear Park. The section north of Linear Park would remain in the MAS-12 district, which requires active uses above 8 stories. The proposed zoning petition also requires active uses above 4 stories in the MAS-18 district in Porter Square.



Cambridge Street

The proposed Cambridge Street zoning petition would change the rules to require active uses in developments exceeding 3 stories in all CAM districts. As noted above, the active use requirements would only apply to lots abutting a primary street. In the Cambridge Street districts, primary streets include Cambridge Street, North First Street, Hampshire Street, Monsignor O'Brien Highway, and Prospect Street.

In considering stronger active use mandates, City staff carefully reviewed each section of the district to determine where map changes or other approaches may be appropriate given the overall planning goals for the corridor. The following map changes were discussed and approved by the Ordinance Committee at its April 6 meeting.

1. Monsignor O'Brien Highway.

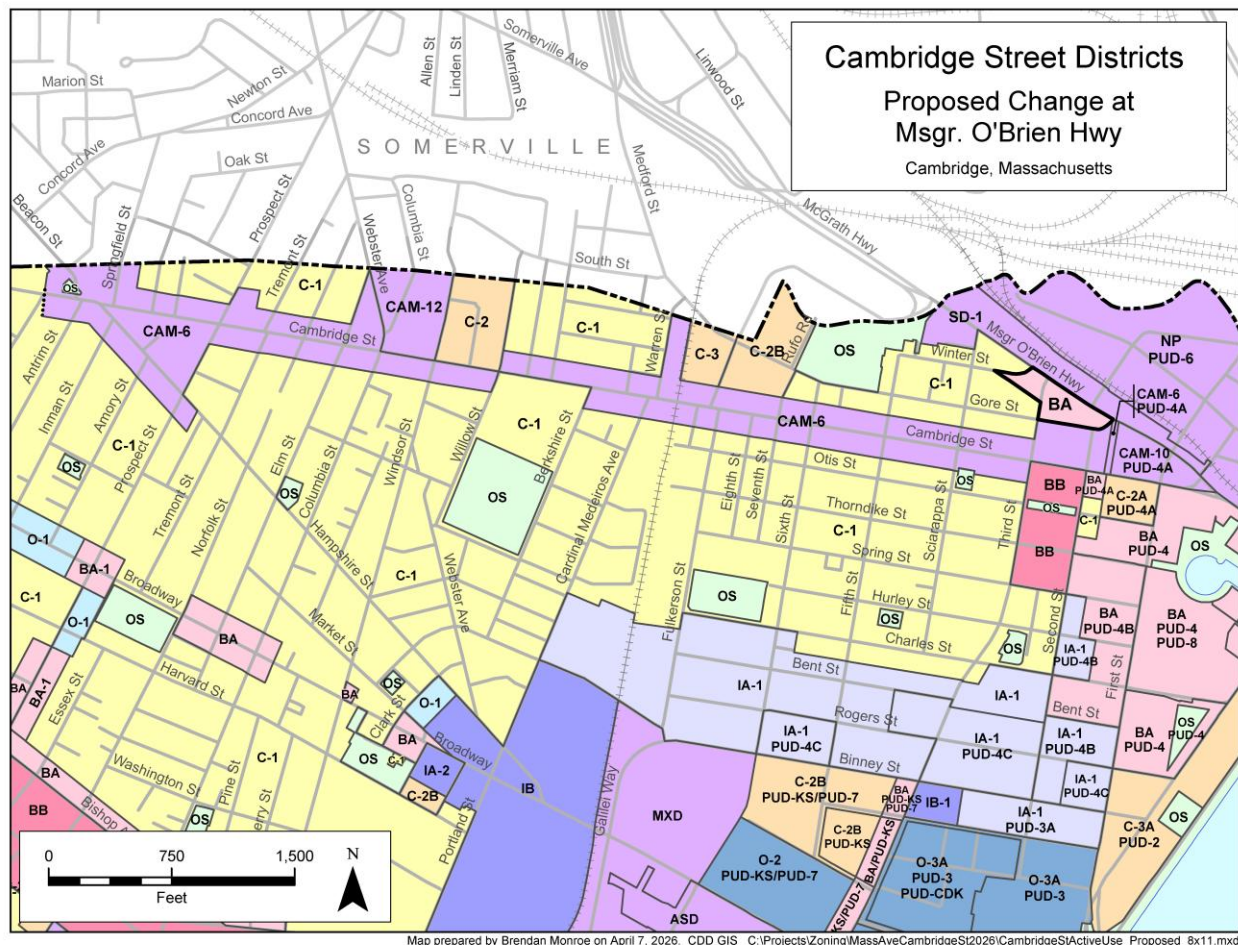
The proposed petition would rezone a section of the district on Monsignor O'Brien Highway from CAM-6 to Business A. City staff determined the strengthened active use requirements

and design standards of the Cambridge Street districts seem less coherent given the existing character of the highway. The Business A zoning district also allows up to 6 stories of residential development, and non-residential uses and density limits remain largely the same. The proposed district would also incorporate a section of the Residence C-1 district at the intersection of Third Street and Gore Street to include the existing retail use.

2. Warren Street.

City staff identified the Warren Street spur as a possible area to remove from the Cambridge Street districts for the same reasons as those above. However, after discussing with the Ordinance Committee at the meeting on April 6, the Council voted to keep Warren Street within the CAM-6 district. Since Warren Street is not considered a primary street, the active use requirements would not apply to a lot that does not directly abut Cambridge Street. Residential uses on Warren Street with no frontage on Cambridge Street would be allowed up to 6 stories without active uses, similar to the Residence C-1 district on the opposite side of the street. However, all non-residential uses that are allowed in the Cambridge Street districts would still be allowed on Warren Street. Although Warren Street has some history of commercial use, most retail activity has ceased. It may be helpful to allow commercial use on Warren Street in the future, but staff believe that Cambridge Street should be prioritized for future active use. Additional requirements could inhibit opportunities for residential redevelopment.

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Formula Businesses

In addition to reviewing these active use mandates, the Ordinance Committee discussed and voted to request zoning text that would require a special permit for formula businesses on Cambridge Street. In Article 2.000 of the Zoning Ordinance, a formula business is defined as:

An individual Retail or Consumer Service establishment that is required by virtue of a contract, franchise agreement, ownership or other similar legal obligation to conform or substantially conform to a set of common design and operating features that serve to identify the establishment as one of a group of establishments for business, marketing and public relations purposes. Specifically, an establishment shall be considered a Formula Business if it shares at least two (2) of the following three (3) characteristics with ten (10) or more other establishments in Massachusetts or within twenty (20) or more other establishments.

1. *Trademark, service mark or logo, defined as a word, phrase, symbol, or design or combination thereof that identifies and distinguishes the source of the goods or services from others;*
2. *Standardized building architecture including but not limited to façade design and signage;*
3. *Standardized color scheme used throughout the exterior of the establishment, including color associated with signs and logos.*

Because zoning cannot directly regulate ownership structures or business practices, this definition primarily centers on exterior architecture, design, and signage of formula businesses.

The attached Cambridge Street zoning petition includes similar zoning language to the Central Square Overlay District to establish a formula business special permit. The intent is to allow the Planning Board an opportunity to review and comment on the façade design and signage of the proposed formula business, and to place conditions on the special permit to ensure the design of the use is compatible with the unique, historic character of the area. The Planning Board has approved several formula business special permit requests in Central Square, with some positive changes to proposed façades and signage.

As discussed at the Ordinance Committee, the formula business special permit has not been shown to be an effective tool to limit chain businesses or provide support for small, local businesses. Formula businesses are typically able to obtain a special permit and are willing to work with the Planning Board to make any necessary design changes. Nevertheless, most healthy commercial districts in Cambridge tend to have a mix of formula and non-formula businesses with the majority of storefront businesses being local or independent.