



# City of Cambridge

## Executive Department

**YI-AN HUANG**  
City Manager

CMA 2025 #52  
**IN CITY COUNCIL**  
March 17, 2025

To the Honorable, the City Council:

Please find attached response from Melissa Peters, Acting Assistant City Manager for Community Development, and Megan Bayer, City Solicitor, regarding permissible height increases under the Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO) in the Zoning Ordinance.

Very truly yours,

Yi-An Huang  
City Manager





---

## CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

---

**MELISSA PETERS**  
*Acting Assistant City  
Manager for Community  
Development*

**SANDRA CLARKE**  
*Chief of Admin/Operations*

To: Yi-An Huang, City Manager  
From: Melissa Peters, Acting Assistant City Manager for Community  
Development  
Megan Bayer, City Solicitor  
Date: March 6, 2025  
Subject: Response to Policy Order POR 2025 #16 dated February 10, 2025  
regarding permissible height increases under the Affordable Housing  
Overlay (AHO) in the Zoning Ordinance

---

The recent citywide multifamily zoning amendments, which increased the allowable heights for residential uses, also amended the allowable heights under the Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO). In Residence C-1 districts, the AHO now allows building heights up to nine stories above grade for buildings that meet the AHO's requirements and standards for 100% affordable housing.

Councillors expressed concern that an existing provision of the AHO (Section 11.207.5.2.1, Paragraph e.), adopted in 2023, would allow increases of up to 3 additional stories if certain conditions are met, including no increase in the allowable floor area and preservation of existing open space on the lot. However, the City Solicitor advised that amending that provision might be a change to the fundamental character of the multifamily zoning petitions because it was not originally advertised. Therefore, City Council asked for a draft amendment that could be advanced as a new petition.

Attached to this response is a set of proposed amendments to the AHO, as recently amended through the multifamily zoning amendment, which would make the additional height allowance not applicable in Residence C-1 districts, except in AHO Corridors and Squares where it would continue to apply.

If the City Council wants to consider this amendment, it could be adopted as a City Council Zoning Petition and referred to the Planning Board and Ordinance Committee for hearing and report.

Staff have also suggested edits that make no substantive change, but help to clean up the zoning text and reduce potential confusion by removing references to provisions that were deleted in the multifamily zoning amendment, such as the Townhouse and Multifamily Special Permit procedures and limitations on residential FAR and minimum lot area per dwelling unit. These additional edits could be included or not included in a petition.

**Petition: To amend certain subsections of the Affordable Housing Overlay, Section 11.207 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance, with the intent of limiting allowable height increases in Residence C-1 districts, removing references to provisions in the base zoning that are no longer applicable, and clarifying references to departments responsible for enforcement.**

---

Amend Subsection 11.207.4 to read as follows:

**11.207.4** Use

- (a) In all zoning districts, an AHO Project may contain single-family, two-family, townhouse, or multifamily dwellings as-of-right. ~~Townhouse and Multifamily Special Permit procedures shall not apply.~~
- (b) An AHO Project may contain active non-residential uses on the ground floor as they may be permitted as-of-right in the base zoning district or the overlay district(s) that are applicable to a lot, which for the purpose of this Section shall be limited to Institutional Uses listed in Section 4.33, Office Uses listed in Section 4.34 Paragraphs a. through e., and Retail and Consumer Service uses listed in Section 4.35 that provide services to the general public.

---

Amend Subsections 11.207.5.2.1, 11.207.5.2.2, and 11.207.5.2.3 to read as follows:

**11.207.5.2.1** Building Height and Stories Above Grade. For an AHO Project, the standards set forth below shall apply in place of any building height limitations set forth in the District Development Standards.

- (a) Where the District Dimensional Standards set forth a maximum residential building height of less than seventy-five (75) feet, an AHO Project shall contain no more than nine (9) Stories Above Grade and shall have a maximum height of one hundred (100) feet, as measured from existing Grade.
- (b) The height of an AHO Project on an AHO Corridor Lot may be increased from the height limits in Paragraph (a) above, not to exceed twelve (12) Stories Above Grade and a building height of one hundred and forty (140) feet.
- (c) Where the District Dimensional Standards set forth a maximum residential building height of seventy-five (75) feet or more, an AHO Project shall contain no more than thirteen (13) Stories Above Grade and shall have a maximum height of one hundred and fifty (150) feet, as measured from existing Grade.
- (d) The height of an AHO Project within an AHO Square District may be increased from the height limits in Paragraphs (a) through (c) above, not to exceed fifteen (15) Stories Above Grade and a building height of one hundred and seventy (170) feet.
- (e) An AHO Project may exceed the allowable height limitations of the previous paragraphs of this Section, not to exceed three additional stories and thirty-five feet (35') of additional building height, under the following circumstances:
  - (i) ~~The Residential Density limitations set forth in Section 11.207.5.2.2 will be met, or, if the AHO Project is not subject to an FAR restriction in Section 11.207.5.2.2, then~~ the total gross floor area on the AHO Lot will not exceed 70% of the total lot area multiplied by the maximum number of stories otherwise permitted under the previous paragraphs of this Section; and
  - (ii) pre-existing, contiguous Green Area Open Space on the AHO Lot will be preserved or expanded, consisting of at least 5% or more of the total area of the AHO Lot; and
  - (iii) the AHO Project will exceed the minimum required open space as set forth in Section 11.207.5.2.4 of this Article; and
  - (iv) the AHO Project is not located in a Residence C-1 district, unless it is also on an AHO Corridor Lot or within an AHO Square.

- (f) If the height of an existing building on the AHO Lot, or on an abutting lot, exceeds the height limits in the previous paragraphs of this Section 11.207.5.2.1, then the height of the AHO Project may be increased, not to exceed the building height and Stories Above Grade of the existing building.
- (g) Where an AHO Project has different applicable Building Height and Stories Above Grade limitations as specified in the preceding paragraphs of this Section 11.207.5.2.1, the most permissive height limitations shall control.
- (h) The Height Exceptions set forth in Section 5.23 of this Zoning Ordinance shall apply when determining the building height of an AHO Project.

**11.207.5.2.2** Residential Density. There shall be no maximum FAR or minimum lot area per dwelling unit for an AHO Project.

- ~~(a) Where the District Dimensional Standards establish a maximum floor area ratio (FAR) of less than 1.00, an AHO Project shall not exceed an FAR of 2.00. Otherwise, there shall be no maximum FAR for an AHO Project.~~
- ~~(b) There shall be no maximum FAR for an AHO Project within an AHO Square or AHO Corridor.~~
- ~~(c) There shall be no minimum lot area per dwelling unit for an AHO Project.~~

---

Amend Subsection 11.207.5.3 to read as follows:

**11.207.5.3** Standards for Existing Buildings.

A building that is in existence as of the effective date of this Ordinance and does not conform to the standards set forth in Section 11.207.5.2 above may be altered, reconstructed, extended, relocated, and/or enlarged for use as an AHO Project as-of-right in accordance with the standards set forth below. Except as otherwise stated, the required dimensional characteristics of the building and site shall be those existing at the time of the conversion to an AHO Project if they do not conform to the standards of Section 11.207.5.2. The following modifications shall be permitted as-of-right, notwithstanding the limitations set forth in Article 8.000 of this Zoning Ordinance:

- (a) Construction occurring entirely within an existing structure, including the addition of Gross Floor Area within the interior of the existing building envelope ~~that may violate or further violate FAR limitations set forth in Section 11.207.5.2~~, and including any increase to the number of dwelling units within the existing building, provided that the resulting number of Stories Above Grade is not more than the greater of the existing number of Stories Above Grade or the existing height of the building divided by 10 feet.
- (b) The relocation, enlargement, or addition of windows, doors, skylights, or similar openings to the exterior of a building.
- (c) The addition of insulation to the exterior of an existing exterior wall to improve energy efficiency, provided that the resulting exterior plane of the wall shall either conform to the yard setback standards set forth in Section 11.207.5.2 above or shall not intrude more than eight (8) inches further into the existing yard setback and provided that the lot shall either conform to the open space standards set forth in Section 11.207.5.2 or shall not decrease the existing open space by more than 5% or 100 square feet, whichever is greater.
- (d) The installation of exterior features necessary for the existing structure to be adapted to meet accessibility standards for persons with disabilities, including but not limited to walkways, ramps, lifts, or elevators, which may violate or further violate of the dimensional requirements set forth in Section 11.207.5.2.
- (e) The repair, reconstruction, or replacement of any preexisting nonconforming portions of a building including but not limited to porches, decks, balconies, bay windows and building additions, provided

that the repair, reconstruction or replacement does not exceed the original in footprint, volume, or area.

- (f) Any other alterations, additions, extensions, or enlargements to the existing building that are not further in violation of the dimensional requirements set forth in Section 11.207.5.2 above.

---

Amend Subsection 11.207.10 to read as follows:

**11.207.10** Enforcement of Affordable Housing Overlay.

The Community Development and Housing Departments shall certify in writing to the Superintendent of Buildings that all applicable provisions of this Section have been met before issuance of any building permit for any AHO Project, and shall further certify in writing to the Superintendent of Buildings that all documents have been filed and all actions taken necessary to fulfill the requirements of this Section before the issuance of any certificate of occupancy for any such project.

**Petition: To amend certain subsections of the Affordable Housing Overlay, Section 11.207 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance, with the intent of limiting allowable height increases in Residence C-1 districts, removing references to provisions in the base zoning that are no longer applicable, and clarifying references to departments responsible for enforcement.**

---

Amend Subsection 11.207.4 to read as follows:

**11.207.4** Use

- (a) In all zoning districts, an AHO Project may contain single-family, two-family, townhouse, or multifamily dwellings as-of-right.
- (b) An AHO Project may contain active non-residential uses on the ground floor as they may be permitted as-of-right in the base zoning district or the overlay district(s) that are applicable to a lot, which for the purpose of this Section shall be limited to Institutional Uses listed in Section 4.33, Office Uses listed in Section 4.34 Paragraphs a. through e., and Retail and Consumer Service uses listed in Section 4.35 that provide services to the general public.

---

Amend Subsections 11.207.5.2.1, 11.207.5.2.2, and 11.207.5.2.3 to read as follows:

**11.207.5.2.1** Building Height and Stories Above Grade. For an AHO Project, the standards set forth below shall apply in place of any building height limitations set forth in the District Development Standards.

- (a) Where the District Dimensional Standards set forth a maximum residential building height of less than seventy-five (75) feet, an AHO Project shall contain no more than nine (9) Stories Above Grade and shall have a maximum height of one hundred (100) feet, as measured from existing Grade.
- (b) The height of an AHO Project on an AHO Corridor Lot may be increased from the height limits in Paragraph (a) above, not to exceed twelve (12) Stories Above Grade and a building height of one hundred and forty (140) feet.
- (c) Where the District Dimensional Standards set forth a maximum residential building height of seventy-five (75) feet or more, an AHO Project shall contain no more than thirteen (13) Stories Above Grade and shall have a maximum height of one hundred and fifty (150) feet, as measured from existing Grade.
- (d) The height of an AHO Project within an AHO Square District may be increased from the height limits in Paragraphs (a) through (c) above, not to exceed fifteen (15) Stories Above Grade and a building height of one hundred and seventy (170) feet.
- (e) An AHO Project may exceed the allowable height limitations of the previous paragraphs of this Section, not to exceed three additional stories and thirty-five feet (35') of additional building height, under the following circumstances:
  - (i) The total gross floor area on the AHO Lot will not exceed 70% of the total lot area multiplied by the maximum number of stories otherwise permitted under the previous paragraphs of this Section; and
  - (ii) pre-existing, contiguous Green Area Open Space on the AHO Lot will be preserved or expanded, consisting of at least 5% or more of the total area of the AHO Lot; and
  - (iii) the AHO Project will exceed the minimum required open space as set forth in Section 11.207.5.2.4 of this Article; and
  - (iv) the AHO Project is not located in a Residence C-1 district, unless it is also on an AHO Corridor Lot or within an AHO Square.

- (f) If the height of an existing building on the AHO Lot, or on an abutting lot, exceeds the height limits in the previous paragraphs of this Section 11.207.5.2.1, then the height of the AHO Project may be increased, not to exceed the building height and Stories Above Grade of the existing building.
- (g) Where an AHO Project has different applicable Building Height and Stories Above Grade limitations as specified in the preceding paragraphs of this Section 11.207.5.2.1, the most permissive height limitations shall control.
- (h) The Height Exceptions set forth in Section 5.23 of this Zoning Ordinance shall apply when determining the building height of an AHO Project.

**11.207.5.2.2 Residential Density.** There shall be no maximum FAR or minimum lot area per dwelling unit for an AHO Project.

---

Amend Subsection 11.207.5.3 to read as follows:

**11.207.5.3 Standards for Existing Buildings.**

A building that is in existence as of the effective date of this Ordinance and does not conform to the standards set forth in Section 11.207.5.2 above may be altered, reconstructed, extended, relocated, and/or enlarged for use as an AHO Project as-of-right in accordance with the standards set forth below. Except as otherwise stated, the required dimensional characteristics of the building and site shall be those existing at the time of the conversion to an AHO Project if they do not conform to the standards of Section 11.207.5.2. The following modifications shall be permitted as-of-right, notwithstanding the limitations set forth in Article 8.000 of this Zoning Ordinance:

- (a) Construction occurring entirely within an existing structure, including the addition of Gross Floor Area within the interior of the existing building envelope, and including any increase to the number of dwelling units within the existing building, provided that the resulting number of Stories Above Grade is not more than the greater of the existing number of Stories Above Grade or the existing height of the building divided by 10 feet.
- (b) The relocation, enlargement, or addition of windows, doors, skylights, or similar openings to the exterior of a building.
- (c) The addition of insulation to the exterior of an existing exterior wall to improve energy efficiency, provided that the resulting exterior plane of the wall shall either conform to the yard setback standards set forth in Section 11.207.5.2 above or shall not intrude more than eight (8) inches further into the existing yard setback and provided that the lot shall either conform to the open space standards set forth in Section 11.207.5.2 or shall not decrease the existing open space by more than 5% or 100 square feet, whichever is greater.
- (d) The installation of exterior features necessary for the existing structure to be adapted to meet accessibility standards for persons with disabilities, including but not limited to walkways, ramps, lifts, or elevators, which may violate or further violate of the dimensional requirements set forth in Section 11.207.5.2.
- (e) The repair, reconstruction, or replacement of any preexisting nonconforming portions of a building including but not limited to porches, decks, balconies, bay windows and building additions, provided that the repair, reconstruction or replacement does not exceed the original in footprint, volume, or area.
- (f) Any other alterations, additions, extensions, or enlargements to the existing building that are not further in violation of the dimensional requirements set forth in Section 11.207.5.2 above.

---

Amend Subsection 11.207.10 to read as follows:

**11.207.10** Enforcement of Affordable Housing Overlay.

The Community Development and Housing Departments shall certify in writing to the Superintendent of Buildings that all applicable provisions of this Section have been met before issuance of any building permit for any AHO Project, and shall further certify in writing to the Superintendent of Buildings that all documents have been filed and all actions taken necessary to fulfill the requirements of this Section before the issuance of any certificate of occupancy for any such project.