



# City of Cambridge

## Executive Department

**YI-AN HUANG**  
City Manager

CMA 2025 #139  
**IN CITY COUNCIL**  
June 2, 2025

COUNCILLOR TONER  
VICE MAYOR MCGOVERN  
COUNCILLOR SIDDIQUI  
COUNCILLOR WILSON

To the Honorable, the City Council:

Please find attached a memorandum regarding Awaiting Report #25-18 addressing vacant store fronts from Acting Assistant City Manager for Community Development, Melissa Peters.

Very truly yours,

Yi-An Huang  
City Manager





To: Yi-An Huang, City Manager

From: Melissa Peters, Acting Assistant City Manager for Community Development

Date: June 2, 2025

Re: Awaiting Report 25-18 dated March 17, 2025, regarding draft Ordinance to ensure that vacant store fronts and commercial properties keep their properties in safe and clean conditions.

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CDD has implemented a wide range of efforts to understand and tackle ground floor retail vacancies in Cambridge's squares and commercial corridors. Efforts include a ground floor vacancy data set (updated bi-annually since 2018), engaging property owners in tenancy and vacancy issues, supporting pop up and temporary activations, connecting entrepreneurs with vacant storefronts, developing the 2018 Vacant Storefront Best Practices Report, and adopting retail zoning changes in 2021. Through these efforts, Cambridge has established itself as a regional policy leader on this issue.

During the March 11, 2025, Economic Development and University Relations Committee, two key items were discussed – one, that the City cannot additionally tax property owners with vacant storefronts and there are limits to how the City could fine property owners for noncompliance; and two, there are a wide variety of reasons that storefronts look or remain vacant. On the latter issue, as discussed by city staff and business association leadership, storefront vacancies can be attributed to several factors: ongoing lease negotiations, former tenants retaining a lease, property owners seeking a specific type of retailer, or new tenants with signed leases currently under construction. These factors, coupled with broader macroeconomic challenges impacting both small and large businesses, are part of the daily landscape our property owners are navigating.

### **Draft Vacant Storefront Policy**

To ensure that ground floor spaces remain safe, clean, and presentable between tenants, we propose the attached Cambridge Vacant Storefront Policy. This Policy would apply to ground floor vacant commercial storefronts within the City of Cambridge.

The Policy states that ground floor vacant storefronts without a lease, or those that have otherwise been vacant, the property owner is required to:

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**Melissa Peters** | Acting Assistant City Manager for Community Development  
**Sandra Clarke** | Chief of Administration & Operations

- Put up leasing contact information in the storefront window(s) that is visible to a prospective tenant; and
- Consider putting up artwork for purposes of covering storefront window(s) that face a public way so that the window(s) is activated.

For ground floor storefronts with a lease, but undergoing renovations, the property owner shall

- Place a “coming soon” sign with information about the new tenant in accordance with the City’s Sign Ordinance, Article 7.000 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance.

In addition, all ground floor vacant storefronts, regardless of lease status, need to comply with the regulatory requirements per the Cambridge Municipal Code, the Building Code and all other applicable federal, state and local laws, rules and regulations (e.g. snow removal, trash, etc.). Any property owner that does not comply with these municipal codes will be fined according to the regulation violated.

### **Next Steps**

We are asking Council to vote to request that the City Manager issue this policy. Once issued, CDD staff will send property owners a copy of this policy via certified mail annually to the address on record until the space is leased. We will also include city program information and pop-up resources available to them and their tenants with the policy.

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**Melissa Peters** | Acting Assistant City Manager for Community Development  
**Sandra Clarke** | Chief of Administration & Operations

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[www.cambridgema.gov/CDD](http://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD)

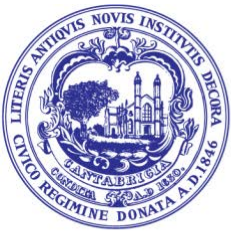
## Appendix A - Examples of Vacant Storefront Best Practices

Examples of vacant spaces not under lease:



## Examples of spaces under lease but under construction:





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### **CITY OF CAMBRIDGE**

### **VACANT STOREFRONT POLICY**

#### **I. Overview**

The City of Cambridge's ("City") is fortunate to have a robust local economy that extends to its retail, personal services, and restaurant sectors. However, even temporary storefront vacancies through normal turnover can have a negative impact on the perception of a commercial corridor's vitality and quality of the consumer shopping experience. The purpose of this Vacant Storefront Policy ("Policy") is to preserve street level activity, protect property values, maintain neighborhood integrity and accessibility, safeguard against economic property blight, and ensure the safe and sanitary maintenance of ground floor vacant properties.

#### **II. Scope**

This Policy applies to ground floor vacant storefronts within the City where the property owner has not had a lease with a tenant for at least one hundred eighty (180) consecutive days, or the ground floor storefronts have otherwise been vacant for a period of at least one hundred eighty (180) consecutive days. This Policy also applies to ground floor storefronts that have been vacant for at least one hundred eighty (180) consecutive days where the property owner has executed a lease with a tenant, but the property is undergoing renovations to accommodate the tenant's use of the property.

#### **III. Requirements**

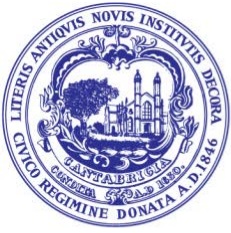
After one hundred eighty days (180) consecutive days of vacancy, the property shall do the following:

If the space is not leased and remains vacant, or is otherwise vacant but not undergoing renovations, the property owner must do one or both of the following:

Post leasing contact information in the storefront window(s) so that it is visible to a prospective tenant;

Put up artwork or similar activation for purposes of covering storefront window(s) that face a public way so that no less than ten percent (10%) of the storefront window(s) is covered, and post leasing contact information in the storefront window(s) so that it is visible to a prospective tenant.

If the ground floor space is leased, but undergoing renovations, the property owner shall:



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1. Place a “coming soon” sign with information about the new tenant. The tenant and the owner must make sure that this sign complies with the Cambridge Sign Ordinance, Article 7.000 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance<sup>1</sup>.

Please see Appendix A for pictorial examples of complying with the above requirements.

#### **IV. Safe and Sanitary Maintenance**

All commercial property owners must comply with all applicable federal, state, and local laws, rules and regulations. For vacant storefronts, the applicable laws, rules and regulations include:

- A. Cambridge Municipal Code Chapter 12.16, Section 12.16.110 – Sidewalks – Requires snow and ice removal
- B. Cambridge Municipal Code Chapter 8.24, Section 8.24.040 – Private property owners and occupants – Requires keeping premises and adjacent areas free of litter
- C. General Laws c.143, §§6-12 – Requires that structures be kept safe and secure
- D. Massachusetts Building Code, which incorporates the International Building Code – Requires that vacant structures must be secured against unauthorized entry
- E. Massachusetts Comprehensive Fire Safety Code, which incorporates the International Fire Code, Section 110 – Requires that vacant structures must be secured against unauthorized entry

Approved by: \_\_\_\_\_

Yi-An Huang

City Manager

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on sign permits and the sign regulations, visit:

<https://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/zoninganddevelopment/Signs>