



City of Cambridge

Executive Department

YI-AN HUANG
City Manager

CMA 2026-202
IN CITY COUNCIL
June 22, 2026

To the Honorable, the City Council:

Please see attached a memo from Brooke McKenna, Transportation Commissioner, Melissa Peters, Assistant City Manager for Community Development, and Megan Bayer, City Solicitor, transmitting a response to Awaiting Report 26-07 regarding restrictions to on-street resident parking eligibility.

Very truly yours,

Yi-An Huang
City Manager





To: Yi-An Huang, City Manager
From: Brooke McKenna, Transportation Commissioner
Melissa Peters, Assistant City Manager for Community Development
Megan Bayer, City Solicitor
Date: June 17, 2026
Subject: Awaiting Reports 2026-07

In response to Awaiting Report 26-07 requesting that the City Manager request legal, transportation, and planning staff to identify policy options to achieve the Policy Order's stated goals related to restricting eligibility for on-street resident parking and to communicate the impact of proposed policy choices on other stated City goals so Council can make an informed decision on how to move forward, we report the following:

How parking fits into the full range of transportation and housing options

On-street parking has always been a significant issue in Cambridge, with the level of demand and availability of parking varying from neighborhood to neighborhood. Much of Cambridge was built before cars existed and evolved without much off-street parking. Many Cambridge residents live in homes without driveways or off-street parking and rely on resident street parking. In recent years, policy and street design changes to support the City Council's climate, transportation, and housing priorities have put further pressure on street parking.

Research¹ shows that parking availability influences whether people own cars and how much they drive. Therefore, parking policy is closely connected with climate outcomes. The climate crisis is already impacting Cambridge through extreme heat and more frequent weather emergencies. The City has committed to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Transportation is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions, with 94% of transportation emissions in Cambridge coming from private on-road vehicles.² The Zero Emissions Transportation Plan (ZETP) aims to eliminate these emissions while creating a more accessible and equitable transportation system. Achieving this goal requires urgent action and an understanding of past planning inequities that shape how residents experience and adapt to changes.

There are three types of changes that will help our community reach our climate and transportation goals:

¹ *How the Built Environment Affects Car Ownership and Travel: Evidence from San Francisco Housing Lotteries*. July 2020. "We find that ... random variation in on-site parking availability greatly changes households' car ownership decisions and driving frequency, with substitution away from public transit. In contrast, we find that parking availability does not affect employment or job mobility. Overall, the evidence from our study robustly supports that local features of the built environment are important determinants of transportation behavior."

<https://escholarship.org/content/qt7tw5x9p7/qt7tw5x9p7.pdf>

² https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/files/cdd/climate/ghginventory/2019cambridgecommunitywideghginventory_summaryreport.pdf

1. shift people from driving alone to taking sustainable transportation, such as walking, biking, taking public transit, sharing a ride, and taking electric micromobility
2. shift people from driving gas vehicles to electric vehicles
3. use land in ways that allow people to be closer to life's necessities so it is easier to forgo a car trip

To successfully encourage residents to use sustainable transportation, it must become easier and more convenient for people to get around without cars. For example, bus lanes give people in buses more reliable and faster trips, and separated bike lanes make it safer and more comfortable to get around on a bicycle. Adding bus and separated bike lanes means removing some on-street parking spaces due to the limited space available. Given the limited street space in the city, some of these changes have required the removal of parking on some corridors. Despite the challenges it poses, removing parking supports improving transportation options.

How can we support our policy goals while also addressing the need for on-street parking?

Our ability to create additional parking in the City is extremely limited because there is constrained space on Cambridge streets and many competing demands for city-owned lots. So, we are primarily looking at reducing the need for parking. We also recognize that there are many reasons that people may not be able to choose sustainable modes and continue to need to drive and park in the City. If we can reduce overall demand, remaining on-street parking can be more available for people who continue to need it.

We have many approaches to making it easier and more convenient for people to get around without cars. These approaches are reflected in the Vehicle Trip Reduction Ordinance, Parking and Transportation Demand Management Ordinance, Vision Zero Policy, Complete Streets Policy, Transit Strategic Plan, Bicycle Plan, Cycling Safety Ordinance, School Wellness Policy, Climate Action Plan, Resilient Cambridge, and Zero Emissions Transportation Plan.

The City has implemented programs that: provide access to bicycles (low-income resident bike vouchers and Bluebikes); teach youth, adults, and seniors about safe walking, biking, and micromobility riding behavior (Safe Routes to School, workshops, community walks and rides, and Learn to Bike classes); provide bike public parking and bus stop amenities; prevent speeding (Traffic Calming Program and street redesign projects); and provide access to transit information, discounted MBTA passes, and shuttles (PTDM Program and real-time information screens).

The need for housing, both affordable and market rate, was consistently raised as a high priority in the Envision Cambridge process and continues to rank as a top concern among community members. In the past six years, the city has passed significant zoning reforms to incentivize 100% affordable housing through the Affordable Housing Overlay and to allow multi-family housing everywhere, including income-restricted housing, through the multi-family zoning ordinance. Zoning has also recently been updated to allow additional development along transportation and amenity rich corridors, such as Mass Ave.

Additionally, parking minimums were removed entirely from zoning requirements to further reduce barriers and costs associated with building housing. Removing parking minimums does not mean parking will not get built, but it allows developers to assess the demand for parking and only build what is necessary, which further incentivizes walking, biking, and transit use.

While all these approaches encourage residents to choose sustainable transportation, as of now there is still a high demand for on-street parking. So, another approach to dealing with the high demand and limited supply could be to place more restrictions on who is eligible to use resident parking. There are many ways to look at how we could restrict access to the Resident Parking program, and each approach has pros, cons, and potential legal pitfalls. To understand the level of community consensus for how to distribute a limited resource like on-street parking, it is advisable to do community engagement. This would provide guidance on how the City should approach this question in a way that meets goals and is supported in the community. *In this document, we lay out a few possibilities as a starting point for further conversation. Significant additional analysis and data collection will likely be required if we decide to move forward with one or more of the options.*

Current landscape

Across the city, most parking in residential areas is regulated as “Parking by Permit Only.” To park in these areas, residents must have a Resident Parking Permit. Non-residents can also park in these areas on a limited basis using a Visitor Parking Pass belonging to a resident.

Since the inception of the Resident Parking Program in the 1970s, the only limitations on who can participate in the program have related to residency requirements. Applicants must prove they live in Cambridge, register their vehicle in their name, and show that their vehicle is principally “garaged” in Cambridge according to the Registry of Motor Vehicles. In recent years, we have imposed a limit on the number of resident parking permits a single individual can have. In 2024 the limit was set at 4 permits. In the coming year, the limit will be lowered to 2 permits per individual.

One variation to the standard eligibility for the Resident Parking Program relates to Harvard University’s development of university housing. In 2003, changes to the City’s zoning regulations established three Special Districts (12, 13, and 14), allowing for the construction of new university housing pursuant to incentive provisions that allowed for greater densities than the base zoning. During the public hearing process leading up to the adoption, many residents expressed concerns about the impact of the new housing on the availability of on-street parking. As a result, a policy was established, through the City’s Traffic Regulations, that restricted the eligibility for Resident Parking Permits for residents in buildings built within the Special Districts after October 27, 2003. The policy included an exemption for residents of any affordable housing built in Special District 12. As part of this zoning process, Harvard University, in their Commitment Letter, agreed not to oppose a City policy that makes residents in these Special Districts ineligible to receive Resident Parking Permits.

Approaches to limiting access to the resident parking program

Following are some general policy approaches to restricting access to the Resident Parking program. These approaches are laid out in general terms and need significant further development. In all cases, we would look closely at how the policies would impact low-income households, persons with disabilities, and other potentially choice limited groups. It is likely that any approach would include some level of exemptions to address some of these issues.

Approach: Restrict residents in new buildings in transit-rich areas from participating in the resident parking program.

Residents of new housing built after a specific date would be ineligible for the resident parking program, creating an exclusion list of addresses where residents would not be issued resident parking permits. Any such policy would require a specific definition of what areas would be included in the restrictions as well as clear definitions of any exemptions that would be granted. Given that Cambridge is a transit rich city, any definition of this restricted area would likely include a significant portion of the City. For example, Appendix A demonstrates the area that would be included if the exclusion zone was a ½ mile around Red Line, Green Line, and Commuter Rail stations while Appendix B show the areas that would be covered by an exclusion zone of ¼ mile around MBTA bus stops.

Pros:

- Existing residents who already rely on street parking would continue to have access.
- New residents moving to an exclusion area would know in advance and take this into consideration in choosing where to move.

Cons:

- Restricted areas without access to off-street parking—paid or otherwise—could become less desirable to new residents.
- Property owners and developers may build more parking than they otherwise might have. This increases the cost of the housing, potentially reduces the number of housing units, and increases parking near transit, which is the location where off-street parking could and should be minimized.
- Potential residents of these newer buildings may not recognize the significance of these restrictions before they move into the building and may be unhappy once they are residents. There could also be issues if a resident’s life circumstances change after moving into a restricted building.
- New residents who are unable to choose not to drive may opt not to live in Cambridge, disproportionately impacting people whose life circumstances require cars.
- Providing different City benefits to different buildings in Cambridge could create a divide among groups of people.

Example this type of exclusion: The City of Somerville recently implemented restrictions on eligibility for Resident Parking Permits in housing built after January 15, 2020, in areas within a 10-minute walk of an MBTA Red, Orange, or Green line station. The policy includes a waiver provision for residents with disabilities, occupants of affordable dwelling units, and those facing extenuating circumstances. The policy is referenced in the City of Somerville Traffic Regulations and the Somerville Zoning.

Approach: Cap the number of resident parking permits issued each year.

This approach would institute a cap for residential parking permits in each section of the City, based on a percentage of the total number of resident parking spaces available in each area. Existing permit holders would be able to renew their permit each year. In the current program, approximately 80% of permit holders renew their permit the following year. Depending on availability, new residents would need to join a waitlist until a permit became available. This approach could also include a shift to neighborhood based parking permits, limiting the use of resident parking permits to the area close to a resident’s home, similar to the way that the Visitor Permits currently work. This would focus the utility of permits on residential use.

Pros

- Existing residents who already rely on on-street parking would likely continue to have access.
- Reducing the number of permits to align with the available supply would mean that residents will have an easier time finding residential permit parking.
- People moving to Cambridge will have an incentive to not to bring a car with them.

Cons

- This would constitute a significant change in how the program operates, and it is possible that renewal rates that we see now could be significantly different, resulting in longer wait times for new residents.
- We need to complete significant data collection and analysis to determine how many resident parking permits to make available under this new approach. So right now, it is hard to estimate the impact of this change.
- Potential new residents who do not have access to off-street parking and need to drive may opt not to move to Cambridge, disproportionately impacting people whose life circumstances require cars.

Approach: Limit the number of resident parking permits to one permit per individual.

Pros:

- This approach would prioritize making the resident parking program available to all residents while limiting the number of vehicles a single individual can park on the public right of way to one vehicle per resident.
- Could result in overall fewer multi-car households.

Cons

- Residents with more than one vehicle would need to find alternative parking options. Off-street parking, whether paid or free, is more available in some areas of the City than others.
- Residents would have less flexibility in how they register their cars, which could have financial impacts on the costs of car insurance.

Legal Considerations

In addition to evaluating the policy and operational considerations, we have reviewed the legal considerations. The question is whether the City Council may restrict residents of future residential/mixed-use developments from obtaining on-street parking permits. In Cnty. Bd. of Arlington Cnty., Va. v. Richards, the Supreme Court reviewed a county ordinance that sought to “stem the flow of traffic from commercial and industrial districts into adjoining residential neighborhoods.” 434 U.S. 5, 5 (1977). The county’s ordinance did this by issuing free parking permits to residents and making certain areas permit parking only. This resulted in excluding non-resident commuters from certain residential zones. In other words, the ordinance created different groups of drivers based on, among other things, residency status. The Supreme Court held that creating these classes did not violate the Equal Protection Clause where doing

so was directly related to the county's goals to reduce traffic and pollution, improve safety, make parking convenient for residents, and "the distinction drawn by an ordinance like Arlington's rationally promote[d] the regulation's objectives." 434 U.S. at 7.

Similarly, Massachusetts's Supreme Judicial Court (SJC) has held that Cambridge's Traffic Regulations may create classes of parking permits so long as the classes rationally further a legitimate State purpose. See Com. v. Petralia, 372 Mass. 452, 453 (1977) ("We conclude that the classification made by the regulation bears a rational relation to proper legislative objectives."). In general, "the reduction of traffic congestion and air pollution and the encouragement of the use of public transportation are legitimate State purposes." Id., 372 Mass. at 456 (1977). Accordingly, if the City of Cambridge were to restrict parking permits for future residential/mixed-use developments such an ordinance would likely be lawful so long as the express aims of the ordinance are clearly stated in the law. Here the stated goals of easing parking pressure, lessening traffic congestion and pollution, and encouraging use of public transportation and non-motorized transportation arguably bear a rational relation to restricting residents of future residential/mixed-use developments from obtaining on-street parking permits. Therefore, the contemplated restriction could arguably survive constitutional scrutiny.

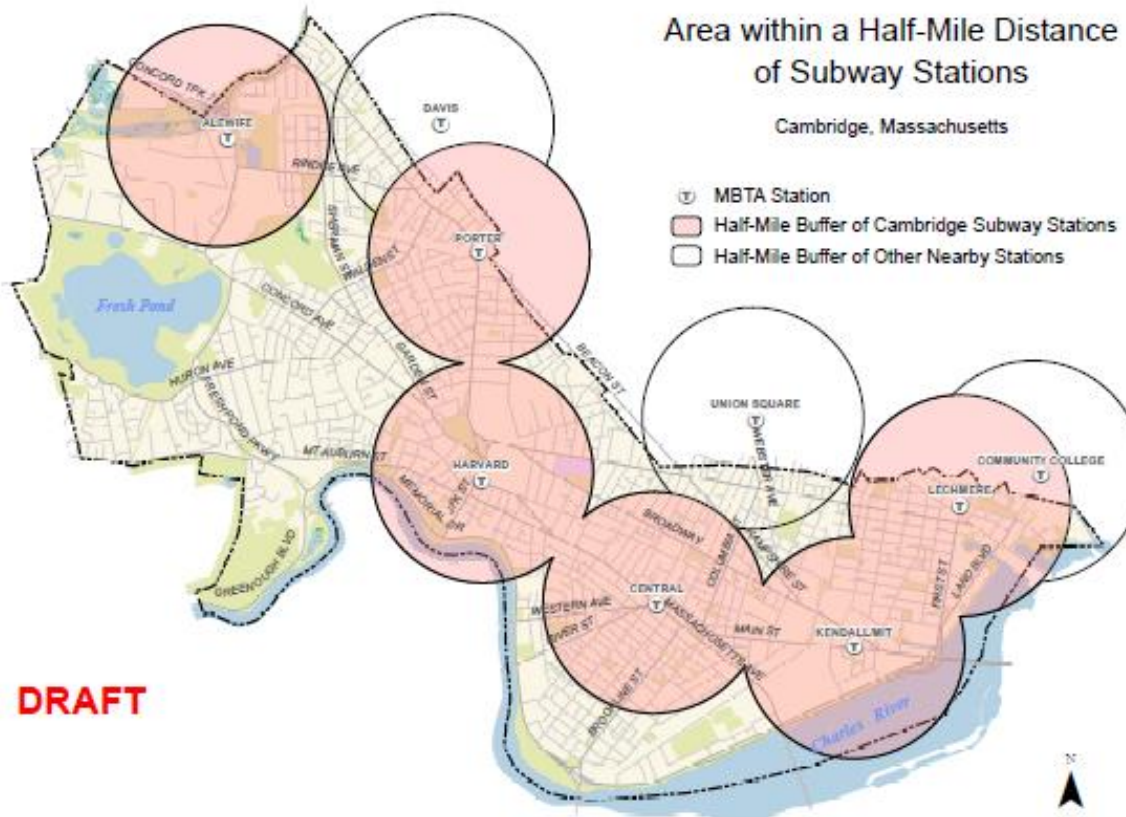
Operational Considerations

Once an approach is chosen, we would need to develop an operational strategy that looks at how the restrictions can be implemented from a technology perspective as well as how any exemptions are administered.

Next Steps

As a next step, we recommend further discussion at a meeting of the Transportation and Public Utilities Committee. At that time, we can further explore these and any additional approaches as well as how to best incorporate public feedback into this process to help achieve community consensus.

Appendix A



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Appendix B

