



---

## CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

---

**IRAM FAROOQ**  
Assistant City Manager for  
Community Development

**SANDRA CLARKE**  
Deputy Director  
Chief of Administration

**MELISSA PETERS**  
Chief of Planning Strategy

To: Yi-An Huang, City Manager  
From: Iram Farooq, Assistant City Manager for Community Development  
Date: June 20, 2024  
Subject: Awaiting Report #24-29 dated June 3, 2024 re. providing the draft Request for Information (RFI) for the 84 & 96 Bishop Allen Drive to the City Council for review and comment

---

The City is preparing to issue a Request for Information (RFI) for potential development on the City-owned properties at 84 & 96 Bishop Allen Drive. This is one of the early action items from the Central Square City Lots Study completed in February 2024. The study identified a strong preference for these parcels, that are currently municipal surface parking lots, to be transformed in the future and accommodate a combination of affordable housing and a welcoming gathering space that invites in the diverse Central Square community and can host cultural events.

Recent discussions at the City Council's Finance Committee have focused on the large range of capital projects that the City is looking to prioritize with an eye to responsible fiscal management over the coming five to ten years. The redevelopment of 84 & 96 Bishop Allen Drive is not currently included in the City's public investment plan or bond schedule. It is, therefore, prudent to explore the role that a public-private partnership could play to advance the community's desires for redevelopment of the lots in a timely manner.

We have been working with the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority (CRA) in developing the RFI and if the City decides to pursue a public-private partnership, we anticipate that the CRA would be an integral partner in the process.

The purpose of the RFI is to gauge developer interest in a public-private partnership with the City to redevelop the two lots in Central Square as a mixed-used development that includes a significant amount of affordable housing, affordable commercial space, open space, public parking, and a permanent space for arts and culture activities similar to Starlight Square.

A RFI is a process for gathering information from potential partners, and is typically used when more information is needed to inform the development of a possible future solicitation. This RFI does not commit the City to issue a solicitation; it is mainly for information and planning purposes.

The draft RFI for 84 and 96 Bishop Allen Drive describes the City's development objectives and asks specific questions of potential partners on how they would meet said objectives. It also includes questions on potential development program and approach, design of public private partnerships, and financing models among others.

The City is seeking City Council and public feedback on the draft RFI to ensure the RFI covers questions of interest to the community. The comment period will be open until July 10th and comments will inform any changes to the RFI before it is advertised.

Once we receive responses to the RFI from developers, staff will present findings from the RFI to the City Council to discuss next steps in the process.

Attached is the draft RFI for City Council's review. Please send any comments to [mpeters@cambridgema.gov](mailto:mpeters@cambridgema.gov).

# 84 & 96 Bishop Allen Drive REQUEST FOR INFORMATION



**DRAFT**



CITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE



CAMBRIDGE  
REDEVELOPMENT  
AUTHORITY

# REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

THIS IS A REQUEST FOR INFORMATION (RFI) ONLY.

This RFI is issued solely for information and planning purposes – it does not constitute an Invitation for Bid (IFB) or a Request for Proposal (RFP) or a promise to issue either in the future. Responses to this RFI shall serve solely to assist the City of Cambridge (City) in understanding the current options and or possibilities regarding the solicited information and/or to inform the development of a possible future solicitation. Respondents to this RFI are invited to respond to any or all of the questions in this document. This RFI does not obligate the City to issue or amend a solicitation or to include any of the RFI responses in any solicitation. Responding to this RFI is entirely voluntary and will in no way affect the City's consideration of any proposal submitted in response to any subsequent solicitation, nor will it serve as an advantage or disadvantage to the respondent in the course of any solicitation that may be subsequently issued or amended. Not responding to this RFI does not preclude participation in any future IFB or RFP, if any is issued.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & MILESTONES

## PROJECT SUMMARY

Central Square is the civic, commercial, and cultural heart of Cambridge, characterized by a diverse mix of uses, thriving small businesses, and unique spaces that support the local arts community. Historic buildings sit adjacent to modern towers, and a confluence of housing, employment, retail, cultural, and entertainment spaces create a dynamic public realm centered around Massachusetts Avenue. Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) sit immediately to the north and south, respectively, and Kendall Square, the “most innovative square mile on the planet”, is one subway station or a short walk away. Flanked by established neighborhoods and well-served by public transit, Central Square is a dense, walkable district with an active and diverse public realm that invites people from all walks of life to shop, live, enjoy entertainment and the arts, and find community together.

Building off years of past work, planning, and community input, the City’s Community Development Department recently completed the [Central Square City Lots Study](#) (2024) (Lots Study). This study of city-owned properties in Central Square sought to understand community needs, evaluate site constraints and opportunities, and recommend future uses. Several community goals emerged, emphasizing the need for increased and affordable housing, civic and cultural spaces, and small business support. Of the ten sites, 84 and 96 Bishop Allen Drive (the “Sites”) were identified as being the best positioned to achieve these goals. Situated at the convergence of community, arts, innovation, and learning, these sites represent a unique opportunity to develop some of the most precious real estate in greater Boston.

The City of Cambridge (“the City”), in partnership with the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority (“the CRA”), stands ready to leverage public resources including land value and access to financing to unlock the Sites’ fullest development potential and fulfill the public’s vision. In collaboration with development partners, a reimagined 84 and 96 Bishop Allen Drive (“the Sites”) will become catalysts in the continued renaissance of

Cambridge’s historic downtown center, enhancing Central Square as a signature place to live, work, shop, play, gather, and experience the unique amenities this historic neighborhood has to offer.

84 Bishop Drive is an approximately 34,000 square foot lot recently used for public parking, Starlight Square (a performance space designed and built by and for the community during the pandemic), Poppportunity (an outdoor market space), and the seasonal farmer’s market. As one of the larger City-owned lots in the study area, 84 Bishop Allen Drive offers a unique opportunity to create a permanent home for the temporary activation uses of Starlight Square and Poppportunity. The City hopes that this location can deliver a mixed-use development that includes a significant amount of affordable housing, affordable commercial space, public parking, and a combination of indoor cultural space and open space that can support performances, markets, and community gathering.

96 Bishop Allen Drive is an approximately 6,000 square foot lot used as a public parking lot. The site sits on the northwest corner of the same block as 84 Bishop Allen Drive and experiences significant shadowing. The Lots Study recommends this site be redeveloped for housing with the ground floor explored for active community use.

Given the clear community vision for both sites and their proximity to each other, the Sites offer an opportunity to be redeveloped together to maximize community benefits. The City and CRA are therefore initiating this open process to seek information from interested parties on their approach to creating and sustaining a mixed-use development on the Sites. The purpose of any resulting project will be to realize the community’s goal of bringing a mix of housing, with an emphasis on affordability, affordable ground floor commercial space, cultural and open space, and public parking to the unique, vibrant, and cherished place that is Central Square. This open process seeks information from interested parties on their approach to creating and sustaining a mixed-use development on these sites.

# DESCRIPTION OF SUBJECT SITES

## NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING AND URBAN DESIGN CONTEXT

### Citywide

Cambridge's citywide comprehensive plan, *Envision Cambridge* (2019), is a roadmap to the year 2030 that sets out a course of action to promote inclusive and sustainable growth. Incorporating input from thousands of members of the public and with guidance from seven working groups, the plan sets ambitious yet achievable goals across six domains of action: Climate & Environment, Community Wellbeing, Economy, Housing, Mobility, and Urban Form. The outcomes aim to achieve the community's desire to expand housing affordability, promote economic development, improve environmental sustainability and resiliency, enhance the public realm, and create social and economic opportunities that will foster a thriving and inclusive community for future generations to enjoy. Benchmarks such as the plan's target of producing 12,500 additional housing units by 2030 underscore the critical need for continued development to meet the needs of an expanding population. *Envision Cambridge* identifies "Squares and Mixed-Use Corridors" such as Central Square as key areas for accommodating continued growth. The goal of development located within these districts should be to "fill in existing gaps in the street wall, improve the public realm, provide small retail and community spaces, expand walkability, and increase density near transit stations." Underutilized parcels in the hearts of these districts, such as the Sites hold the greatest potential for accommodating substantial growth while minimalizing displacement.

### Central Square

Planning specific to Central Square was conducted as part of the Kendall Square – Central Square Planning Study (C2K2) in 2012, resulting in both the [Central Square Final Report](#) (C2 Report) and a complimentary set of [Design Guidelines](#) (2013).

This effort built on previous planning initiatives such as The Central Square Action Plan (1986), Central Square Development Guidelines (1989), The Commission to Promote and Enhance Central Square Now! (1993), and Central Square Improvements Master Plan (1995). Created in collaboration with an advisory committee comprised of members of the public, the C2 Report identified a series of guiding principles and goals shared by the community and City for Central Square. It concluded that housing, mobility, local and small businesses, social services, and public spaces were the most pressing areas of concern and made recommendations for improving each. The C2 Report recommended further investigation of city-owned parcels as critical to achieving these goals and identified locations such as the Sites as key opportunities for redevelopment. The Design Guidelines outlined strategies for sensitively integrating new development in ways that enhance and capitalize on the unique character of Central Square. The C2 Report and all other previous planning efforts can be accessed on the City's project website.

### Municipally Owned Lots

Most recently, the City has undertaken an analysis of 10 municipally held properties within and near Central Square to better understand how they can be leveraged to further the community and City's goals. Discussed in greater detail later in this RFI, the Lots Study explored potential future scenarios for these municipal parcels, including the Sites. It concluded that these sites were best positioned for achieving the goals of creating housing including affordable housing, cultural spaces, an expanded public realm, and potentially small business or non-profit spaces.



# CENTRAL SQUARE CULTURAL DISTRICT (2012)

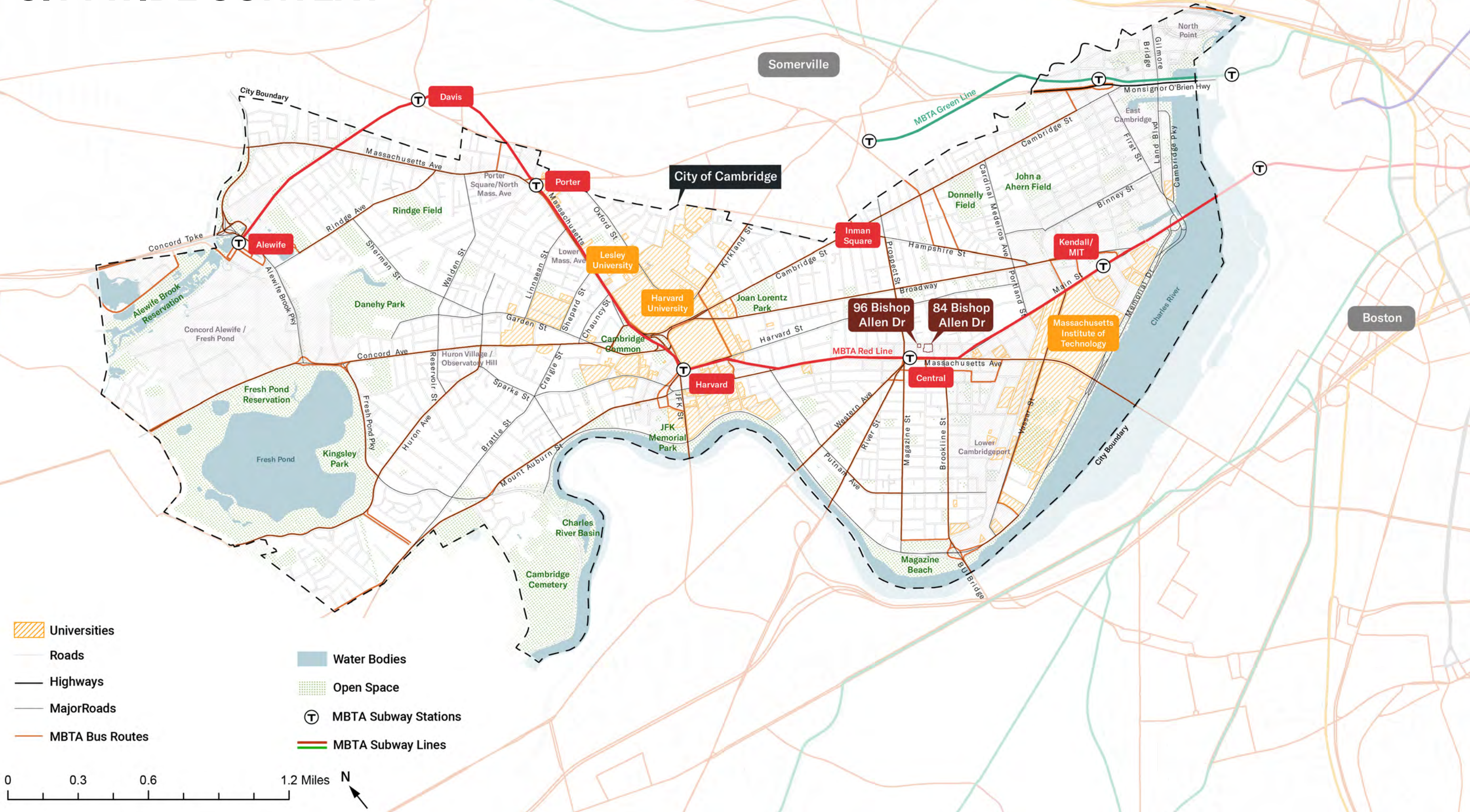
Central Square has become the cultural pulse of Cambridge - a vibrant destination for dance, theater, music, visual arts, and multicultural cuisines. More than 20 small, independently owned businesses and cultural organizations make Central Square a place with a unique blend of art, entertainment, technology, and food. This mix of uses and cultural events brings more than 500,000 visitors to Central Square annually. Because of this, in 2012 the Square was established as Cambridge's first Cultural District, a special designation by the Massachusetts Cultural Council. This program identifies districts with the purpose of attracting artists and cultural enterprises to a community, encouraging business and job development, establishing tourist destinations, preserving and reusing historic buildings, enhancing property values, and fostering local cultural development.

Governance for the Central Square Cultural District rests primarily with the City of Cambridge municipal government in partnership with the Central Square Business Improvement District (BID). Cambridge Arts serves as the lead for the City, providing general oversight for the Cultural District and acting as the primary liaison to the Mass Cultural Council and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The Central Square BID, led by its President & CEO, manages the day-to-day activity in the Cultural District. Both Cambridge Arts and the Central Square BID receive input from and are advised by a Central Square Advisory Committee appointed by the Cambridge City Manager and the Cambridge City Council.

As the Sites fall within the Cultural District, the City views the inclusion of robust arts and cultural elements as critical components of any successful redevelopment project.



# CITYWIDE CONTEXT



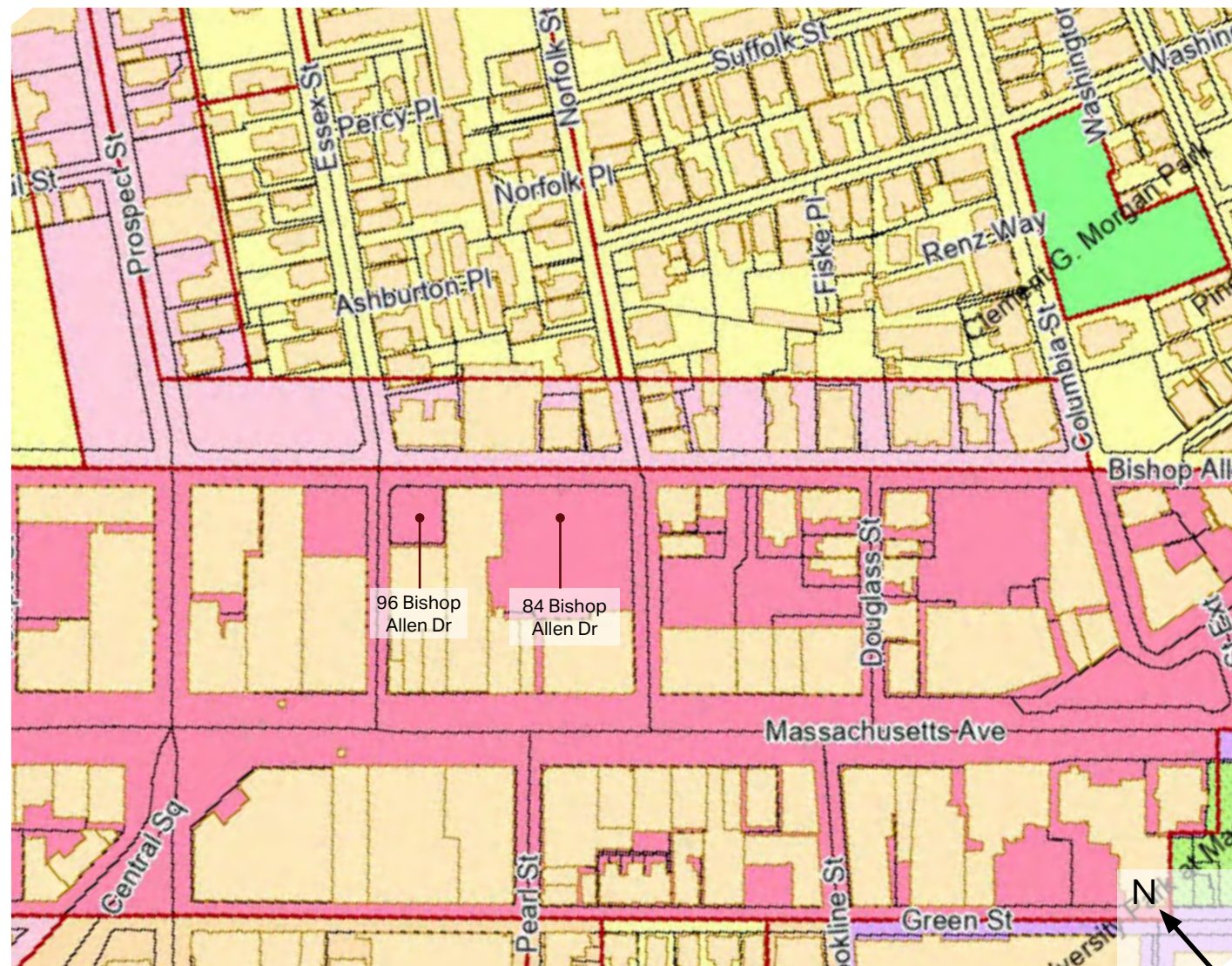


# ZONING AND SUSTAINABILITY CONTEXT

The City is currently leading a process to [update zoning for Central Square](#) to allow for and encourage the continued growth, redevelopment, and evolution of the district. Guided by community goals identified in prior planning efforts, the zoning

recommendations will focus on increasing housing, creating public spaces to build community, and supporting our diverse retail, cultural, and non-profit community. This process is intended to run concurrently with this RFI, with the information provided by respondents helping to inform the final recommendations. The resulting updated zoning will form the regulatory basis for any future Request for Proposals (RFP). The following is an overview of the existing zoning context, which while likely to change, provides a basis for the Questions to Respondents towards the end of the document.

## Zoning Base Map (Cambridge CityViewer)



Source: City of Cambridge

- Business B (BB)
- Business A (BA)
- Residence C-1
- RFI Sites

## Dimensional Standards

The site is zoned Business B (BB) and is within the Central Square Overlay District (CSOD). The CSOD modifies specific use and dimensional elements of the base zoning. The following table provides an overview of the applicable requirements for the site:

ZONING REQUIREMENT	
<b>DISTRICTS</b>	Business B (BB) / Central Square Overlay
<b>ALLOWED USES</b>	Most types of residential dwellings; most institutional uses; offices and laboratories; most retail uses
<b>MAX. BUILDING HEIGHT</b>	55'; 80' allowed by Planning Board Special Permit subject to specific bulk control plane restrictions
<b>MAX. FAR/GFA</b>	4.00 for non-residential uses and residential uses combined by special permit (non-residential uses may not exceed 2.75 FAR).
<b>REQUIRED SETBACKS</b>	No minimum for non-residential; residential "formula-based" setbacks (see 5.24.4 and 5.31 of the Zoning Ordinance) can be waived by special permit
<b>REQUIRED OPEN SPACE</b>	Min. 10% of lot area private open space for residential use, can be waived by special permit
<b>REQUIRED VEHICULAR PARKING</b>	No minimum for all uses

## Incentive & Inclusionary Zoning (Section 11.200)

Incentive zoning requires developers of certain types of non-residential development in excess of 30,000 square feet (see definition of "Incentive Project" in Article 2.000 of the Zoning Ordinance) to make a financial contribution to the City's Affordable Housing Trust, based on a per-square-foot calculation that is adjusted annually based on the annual Consumer Price Index (CPI). New development constitutes both new construction, additions and substantial rehabilitations to existing buildings, and changes of use. Incentive projects that are less than 60,000 square feet in total Gross Floor Area (GFA) can exempt the first 30,000 square feet from the calculation.

Inclusionary zoning requires that new development of residential uses that creates at least ten (10) new dwelling units or at least 10,000 square feet of residential Gross Floor Area set aside at least 20% of the Dwelling Unit Net Floor Area within a project for permanent affordable housing. In exchange for this set aside, the GFA and number of allowable dwelling units may increase by 30% on the lot.

[Section 11.202](#) and [Section 11.203](#) provides additional information about these requirements.

## 100% Affordable Housing Overlay Zoning (Section 11.207)

The 100% Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO) is a voluntary, city-wide overlay zone which gives additional height and density to 100% deed-restricted affordable housing development, as well as an as-of-right permitting pathway. This site is located within an AHO Square District, which permits buildings up to fifteen (15) stories and 170' in height, with no FAR restriction and no required setbacks.

AHO Developments are required to meet the design-based requirements in the Zoning Ordinance and undergo two advisory design review consultations at the Planning Board before applying for a building permit. Before the Planning Board consultations, at least two pre-application community engagement meetings must be held in order to get feedback from neighbors and stakeholders on the proposed design. Projects that meet the AHO standards do not require a special permit.

More information is available at <https://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/housing/housingdevelopment/aho>.

## Article 22 – Sustainable Design & Development Standards

### Green Building Requirements

New construction or substantial rehabilitation of an existing building totaling 25,000 square feet or more is subject to the City's Green Building Requirements. These standards require, among other elements, that applicable projects are designed to meet a minimum LEED "Gold" level, Passive House, or Enterprise Green Communities standard. Certification from a rating agency is not required, but the developer must provide certification from a qualified professional that the design standards are being met. As part of the City's development review process, a Green Building Project must submit documentation for review and approval prior to the issuance of a special permit, building permit, and certificate of occupancy.

### Green Roofs Requirements

New buildings or structures of at least 25,000 square feet (excluding affordable housing development) must devote at least 80% of their roof area to a Green Roof, Biosolar Green Roof, or Solar Energy System, aside from specific exempted areas. For non-residential development, the requirement must be met with Green Roof Area or Biosolar Green Roof Area (not with Solar Energy Systems alone). The Planning Board may grant a special permit to reduce the applicable area, but any offset must be compensated by a unit price contribution to the City's Affordable Housing Trust.

### Green Factor and Flood Resilience Standards

New development is subject to the City's flood resilience standards, which require buildings to be protected based on the City's 2070 future flood projections. New development must also meet the City's Green Factor standard, which is a performance-based site design standard intended to mitigate heat island effects.

Both of these standards require review for compliance prior to the issuance of a special permit or building permit.

Additional information on these standards is available in [Section 22.80](#) and [22.90](#) of the Zoning Ordinance and at <https://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/zoninganddevelopment/sustainabledevelopment/climate resilience zoning>.

## Project Review Process

Development of at least 50,000 square feet typically requires the issuance of a Project Review special permit by the Planning Board, which requires that development undergo a public hearing process and approval by the Planning Board prior to proceeding to a building permit. A Transportation Impact Study (TIS) must be conducted and certified by the Traffic, Parking, and Transportation Department if it meets a threshold in Section 19.23 (which is 50,000 square feet of Gross Floor Area for most uses). The Planning Board's review is based on overall conformance to the City's Urban Design Objectives (Section 19.30) and mitigation of adverse transportation impacts.

Development between 25,000 square feet and 50,000 square feet typically requires conformance to the City's Building & Site Plan requirements in Section 19.50 of the Zoning Ordinance. These requirements include standards for height and setbacks, location of uses, historic resources, landscaping, pedestrian environment, parking, mechanical equipment, and open space. If a project meets all of the standards, then the proposal can be administratively reviewed prior to the issuance of a building permit; otherwise, the Planning Board may issue a Project Review Special Permit to approve the project on finding that it is overall consistent with the Citywide Urban Design Objectives (a TIS is not required in this case). More information can be found in [Section 19.50](#) of the Zoning Ordinance.

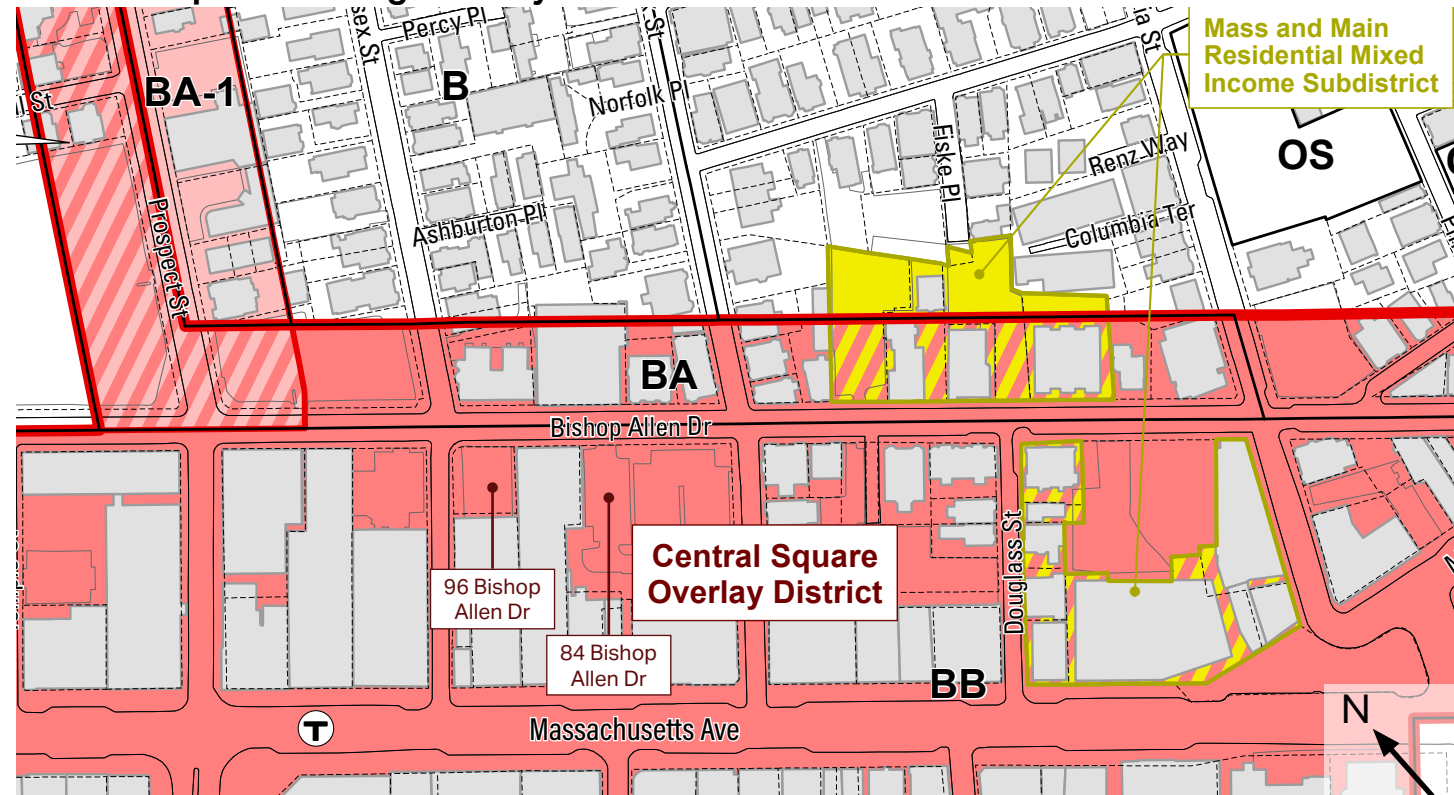
Projects in the Central Square Overlay District are subject to the advisory development review procedures in Section 19.40. Projects of at least 2,000 square feet in Gross Floor Area (new construction or enlargement) that are not subject to the review procedures above go through a Large Project Review conducted by the Central Square Advisory Committee. Some smaller projects require advisory review by City staff.

### Conclusion

The zoning information provided above is just a summary of some of the applicable zoning requirements to these parcels. Additional zoning requirements may apply based on the details of the proposed development, such as the City's incentive zoning, inclusionary requirements, green building requirements, and others.

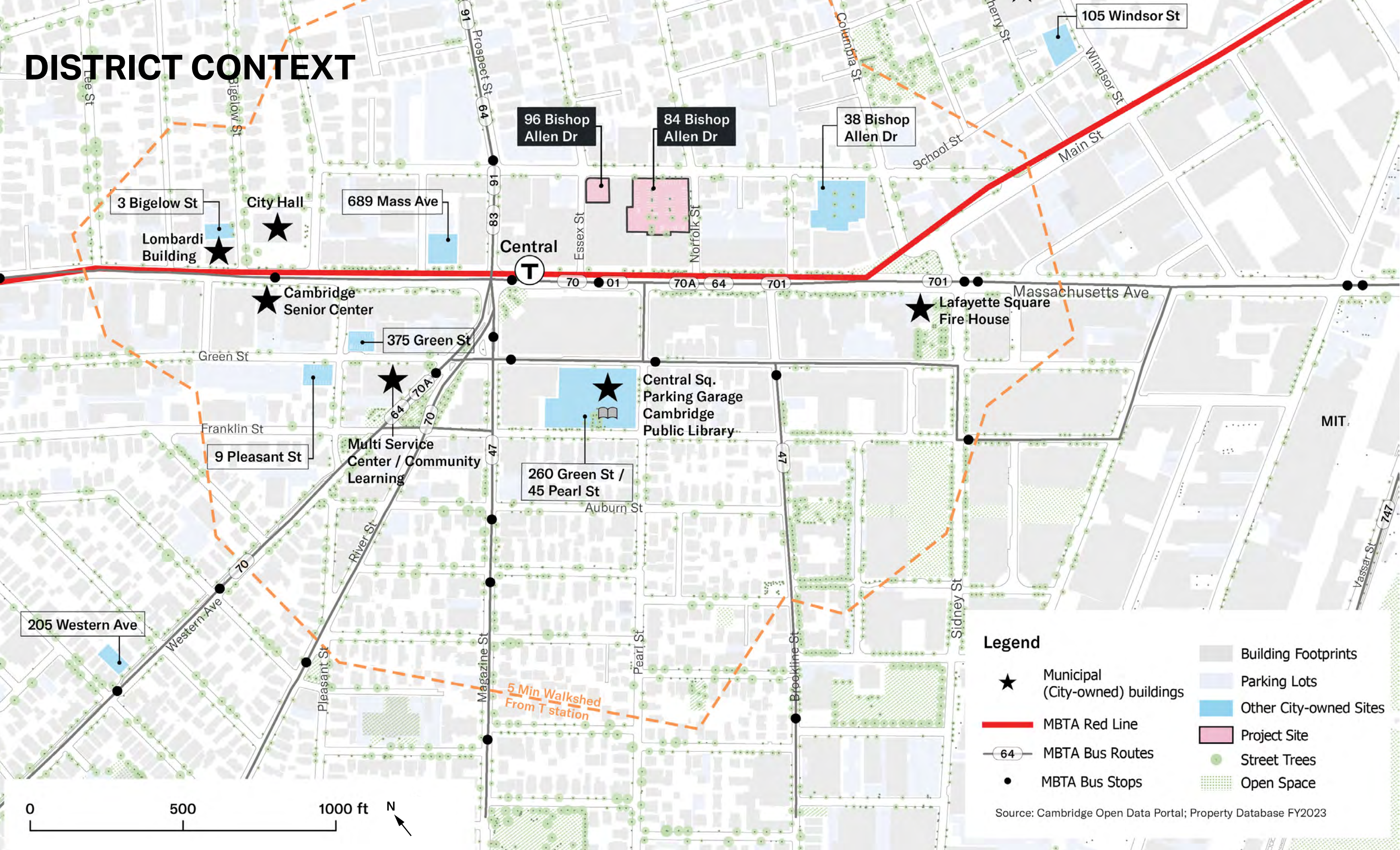
See the Appendix or <https://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/zoninganddevelopment/Zoning> for more information.

## Central Square Zoning Overlay District Zoom-in



Source: City of Cambridge

# DISTRICT CONTEXT



## Legend

- ★ Municipal (City-owned) buildings
- MBTA Red Line
- 64 MBTA Bus Routes
- MBTA Bus Stops
- Building Footprints
- Parking Lots
- Other City-owned Sites
- Project Site
- Street Trees
- Open Space

Source: Cambridge Open Data Portal; Property Database FY2023





# ACCESS AND PUBLIC TRANSIT

Central Square is a major urban center in the City and is easily accessible by multiple modes of transportation. Situated along the Massachusetts Avenue commercial corridor at the center of four dense, walkable residential neighborhoods, it acts as a multimodal hub for the surrounding communities. The Sites are located within the heart of this transit-rich district and can therefore support more density with less reliance on substantial parking accommodations. Future development should leverage existing mobility networks paired with innovative strategies to encourage residents, patrons, visitors, and community members to use zero-carbon transportation to access the Sites.

## Walking Access

Massachusetts Avenue through Central Square has generous sidewalks that support a multitude of uses and contribute to a vibrant public realm. Situated at the heart of this pedestrian-friendly mixed-use district, the Sites score 99 out of 100 per [Walkscore.com](https://www.walkscore.com/), classifying them as a "Walker's Paradise". 84 Bishop Allen Drive is directly connected to this rich pedestrian zone by Graffiti Alley, a local cultural and artistic landscape. This 100' long ever-changing outdoor art gallery is created by members of the public and is one of the few legal places where graffiti art is permitted in the City. Future development should capitalize on this unique link and gateway to the site.

## Bicycle Access

Bishop Allen Drive and Essex Street do not currently have dedicated bicycle infrastructure. Norfolk Street has one block of a contraflow bicycle lane, between Harvard Street and Broadway, which is part of a marked Wayfinding Route that supports people traveling from Central Square to Inman Square. Both Essex Street and Norfolk Street are identified as "Bicycle Priority Streets" in the [2020 Cambridge Bicycle Plan](#). Massachusetts Avenue currently has bicycle facilities in both directions along most of its length between Memorial Drive and Alewife Brook Parkway; the type of bicycle

facility varies along its length (some conventional bicycle lanes, some separated bicycle lanes, an off-road path at Flagstaff Park in Harvard Square and some shared lane markings in the northern portion). Fully separated bike lanes will be constructed as part of a larger reconstruction of Massachusetts Avenue in Central Square. Nearby Western Avenue has a separated bike lane (aka a cycle track) linking the Square to the Charles River, and River Street will soon have a complementary version. The Cambridge [Bicycle Parking Guide](#) provides standards for both short and long-term bike parking requirements, specifying both the quantity and governing dimensional standards.

## Public Transit

The Sites are well served by public transit. Central Station on the MBTA's Red Line is steps away and provides quick access to Harvard University and MIT, Kendall Square, Alewife, Downtown Boston, South Station and the Commuter Rail, Dorchester, and the South Shore. In the near term, the MBTA [will refurbish existing elevators and install two new elevators to improve station accessibility](#) for people with disabilities. The new elevators will be on Massachusetts Avenue at and opposite Essex Street and will improve how people travel from street level to platform level to access the Red Line. At the same time, the MBTA will refurbish and make minor repairs to the platforms and passenger areas in the station.

Additionally, the Square is a bus hub served by the MBTA's [1](#), [47](#), [64](#), [70](#), [83](#), and [91](#) bus routes and private shuttles like the Longwood Collective's M2. These routes connect to Back Bay, Fenway, South End, Boston Medical Center, Roxbury, Longwood Medical Area, Allston, Brighton, Watertown, Somerville, and Charlestown. The MBTA plans to increase bus service to this neighborhood by implementing the [Bus Network Redesign](#). This will result in new frequent service to Longwood Medical Area, Northeastern University, Ruggles, Union Square in Somerville, Watertown, and Waltham. The MBTA's vision for these routes is to have a bus at least every 15 minutes from 5 a.m. to 1 a.m. all week long and at least every 7 minutes during rush hours. At same time, the City and [the MBTA](#) will evaluate and potentially design and construct dedicated bus lanes, transit signal priority, and other street design improvements to ensure buses remain reliable and accessible to all.

## Vehicle Access

The Sites are bounded by streets that vary in character and function. 96 Bishop Allen Drive has frontage along Essex Street, a one-way commercial side street with parallel parking on one side, and Bishop Allen Drive, a two-way street with parallel parking on both sides that provides a transition between the Square and the adjacent Port neighborhood. The entrance to the existing parking on the site is via Bishop Allen Drive. 84 Bishop Allen Drive also has two frontages- along Bishop Allen Drive as well as Norfolk Street, a one-way street with parallel parking on one side. The existing parking lot on the site has access via both Bishop Allen Drive and Norfolk Street. Future vehicle access for the site is likely to remain from Bishop Allen Drive. As of [fall 2022](#), Cambridge requires no minimum number of parking spaces for new development.

## Norfolk Street

The City is studying the possibility of transforming Norfolk Street between Massachusetts Avenue and Bishop Allen Drive into a permanent "Play Street", a pedestrianized open space that promotes play for all ages, provides additional space for gathering and socializing, supports the cultural community, and expands the public realm. The potential process, design, and timing of this intervention have not yet been determined, however if the project does move forward, doing so in a coordinated fashion with the redevelopment of 84 Bishop Allen Drive may yield efficiencies and a more holistically designed public space.



# DEMOGRAPHIC AND REAL ESTATE MARKET CONTEXT

## Demographics

Cambridge celebrates its community diversity. The 2020 U. S. Census found that 57% of Cambridge residents are White, 11% are Black, 19% are Asian or Pacific Islander, 3% classified themselves as a member of Some Other Race, and 9% identify with two or more races. 9% of the City's population identifies as Hispanic. Fewer than 50% of Cambridge residents under eighteen identify as White alone. Within neighborhoods adjacent to Central Square, a higher percentage of residents are Asian or Pacific Islander (21%) and Black (16%) than in the City as whole, while a smaller percentage are White (54%), identify as Some Other Race (3%), or identify as two or more races (5%). 7% of the Central Square population identifies as Hispanic.

("Demographics and Statistics." City of Cambridge, 2020, <https://www.cambridgema.gov/cdd>)

(Market Profile: Central Square, 2021, [https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/EconDev/Districts/Central/ed\\_MProfileCentralSquare2021.pdf](https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/EconDev/Districts/Central/ed_MProfileCentralSquare2021.pdf))



## Multifamily Housing

Cambridge is one of the most competitive multifamily residential markets in the Greater Boston region. The median rent in Cambridge is \$2,913, which is 34.5% higher than the median rent in the region overall of \$2,913 of \$2,166. The median monthly asking rent for a market rate one-bedroom apartment is \$2,645, \$3,204 for a two-bedroom unit, and \$4,100 for a three-bedroom unit. Multifamily has experienced modest increases in rents over the last year in Cambridge. Cambridge has witnessed a 2.5% increase in rents in the first quarter of 2024, which represents a deceleration compared to the 4.7% growth rate observed during the first quarter of 2023. Annual rental rate growth across the region is currently 1.7%, exceeding the annual rate of rent growth of 0.1% specifically within Cambridge.

(Myers, Jeff. 223Q4 Multifamily Market Report. 2023.Colliers) (Cambridge, MA Rental Market Trends. <https://www.apartmentlist.com/rent-report/ma/cambridge>)

## Retail and Ground Floor Commercial Spaces

The overall retail vacancy rate in Boston and Cambridge stands at just 2.6 percent, which is close to the previous historical low of 2.4 percent achieved in the third quarter of 2017. However, leasing activity has slowed down over the past year, with positive net absorption of 355,000 square feet in 2023 compared to an annual average of approximately 670,000 square feet over the previous three years.

Central Square remains a popular dining, entertainment, and shopping destination for local residents, workers, and visitors. It has the highest population density among all districts in Cambridge (31,377 persons per square mile) and second busiest subway station in the City (16,525 daily passengers). Despite the district's large set of offerings (nearly 120 businesses), a retail leakage and surplus analysis suggests there is opportunity for additional retail in a number of categories including clothing and accessories, building materials, garden equipment and supplies, sporting goods, hobby, books, and music.

Beyond Central Square, retail leakage exists at the citywide level in the categories of general merchandise stores, grocery stores, building

materials, garden equipment & supply, furniture & home furnishings, and specialty food stores. In Cambridge, a retail surplus is found in the categories of food services and drinking places, clothing and accessories stores, and health and personal care stores. This reinforces our assessment that Cambridge is a regional eating and drinking destination and holds its own as a destination for comparison shopping. It should be noted that demand assumptions outlined here reflect only residential spending from those living within the City.

("Market Profile: Central Square." City of Cambridge, 2021, [https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/EconDev/Districts/Central/ed\\_MProfileCentralSquare2021.pdf](https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/EconDev/Districts/Central/ed_MProfileCentralSquare2021.pdf))

("Pace of Growth Slows Throughout Boston Retail Market", 2023, <https://rebusinessonline.com/pace-of-growth-slows-throughout-boston-retail-market/>)

## Office and Lab

The community goals, as defined in both the C2 Study and City Lots Study, clearly emphasize the strong desire for housing, cultural, retail, and civic uses in Central Square, and it is assumed any developments on the Sites will focus on incorporating those preferred programs. However, the Sites' close proximity to Kendall Square merits an overview of Cambridge's Office and Lab market as context to one of the City's primary economic drivers and sources of employment.

In contrast to the trends observed in the multifamily and retail sectors, there has been a notable increase in office vacancies in Boston, Cambridge, and the surrounding communities. The Greater Boston region has experienced four consecutive quarters of negative net absorption, leading to over five million square feet of vacant space. Furthermore, the market has witnessed a significant uptick in sublease space, with more than 3.5 million square feet added in the past year, marking the highest sublease total in nearly two decades. In 2023, Cambridge maintained a lower vacancy office availability rate when compared to Boston and suburban markets. Despite a slowdown in office-using job growth in the region, the regional rate of office-using job growth still surpasses the national average. Driven by the strong performance of financial activities and professional and business services firms, the 1.4% growth rate in high-paying professional service sectors in the Boston metro





area year-over-year as of November was almost five times higher than the national average.

While the Greater Boston region remains the preeminent life sciences real estate market in the United States by a host of metrics, similar to office, the sector has experienced a slow-down over the past year. Lab space in Cambridge has maintained a lower vacancy rate of 9.9% when compared to the Boston submarket of 11.1% and the overall regional market of 11.7%. This level of availability in Cambridge, Boston, and the suburbs exceeds historical averages, with over five million square feet of space on the market compared to just 300,000 square feet two years ago. The current combination of low demand and extensive construction of unleased space in the metropolitan area is expected to result in a continued increase in vacancies. Although many companies are proceeding with caution, there is still demand for leasing. Sublease space now accounts for approximately 40% of all available space, nearly double the historical average. Positive net absorption and pre-leasing in recently completed buildings have led to an 11% increase in occupied inventory over four consecutive quarters. Over the past decade, the Greater Boston region has seen significant growth, adding over 62,000 life science jobs to local payrolls, representing a 76.4% cumulative increase that surpasses job growth in office-using employment.

(Myers, Jeff. 23Q3 Boston Life Sciences Market Report. 2023. Colliers)

(Myers, Jeff. 223Q4 Boston Office Market Report. 2023. Colliers)



# Central Square City Lots Study

# CENTRAL SQUARE CITY LOTS STUDY

The Lots Study evaluated 10 municipally-owned parking lots and buildings in Central Square for their potential to realize community goals and enhance civic operations. This work built on years of past planning and community input in Central Square which specifically identified the City-owned lots as key opportunities to meet broader community needs.

## Engagement Process

The project team undertook a multi-pronged engagement effort to ensure a diverse and representative audience was reached. The team was intentional about structuring engagement and outreach, placing an emphasis on smaller gatherings and focus groups to incorporate voices that are frequently excluded. Traditional large evening community meetings were combined with multiple innovative events held throughout the community to meet residents and stakeholders where they were.

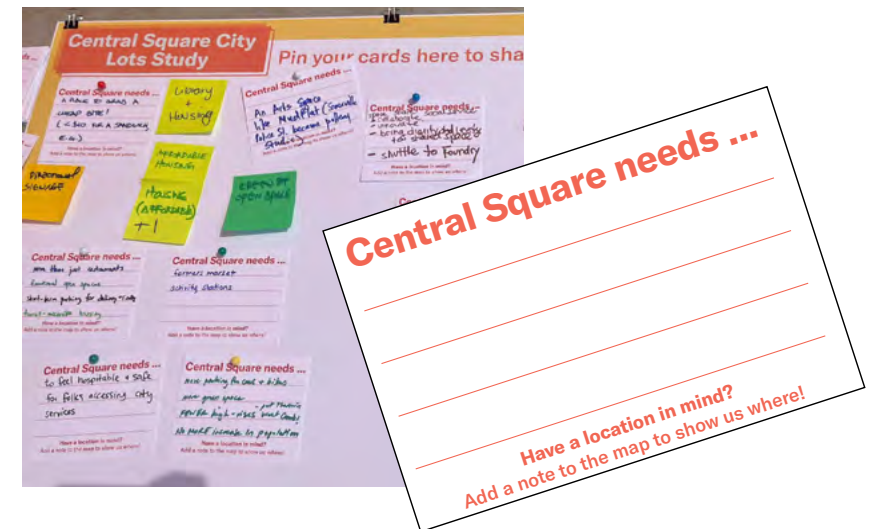
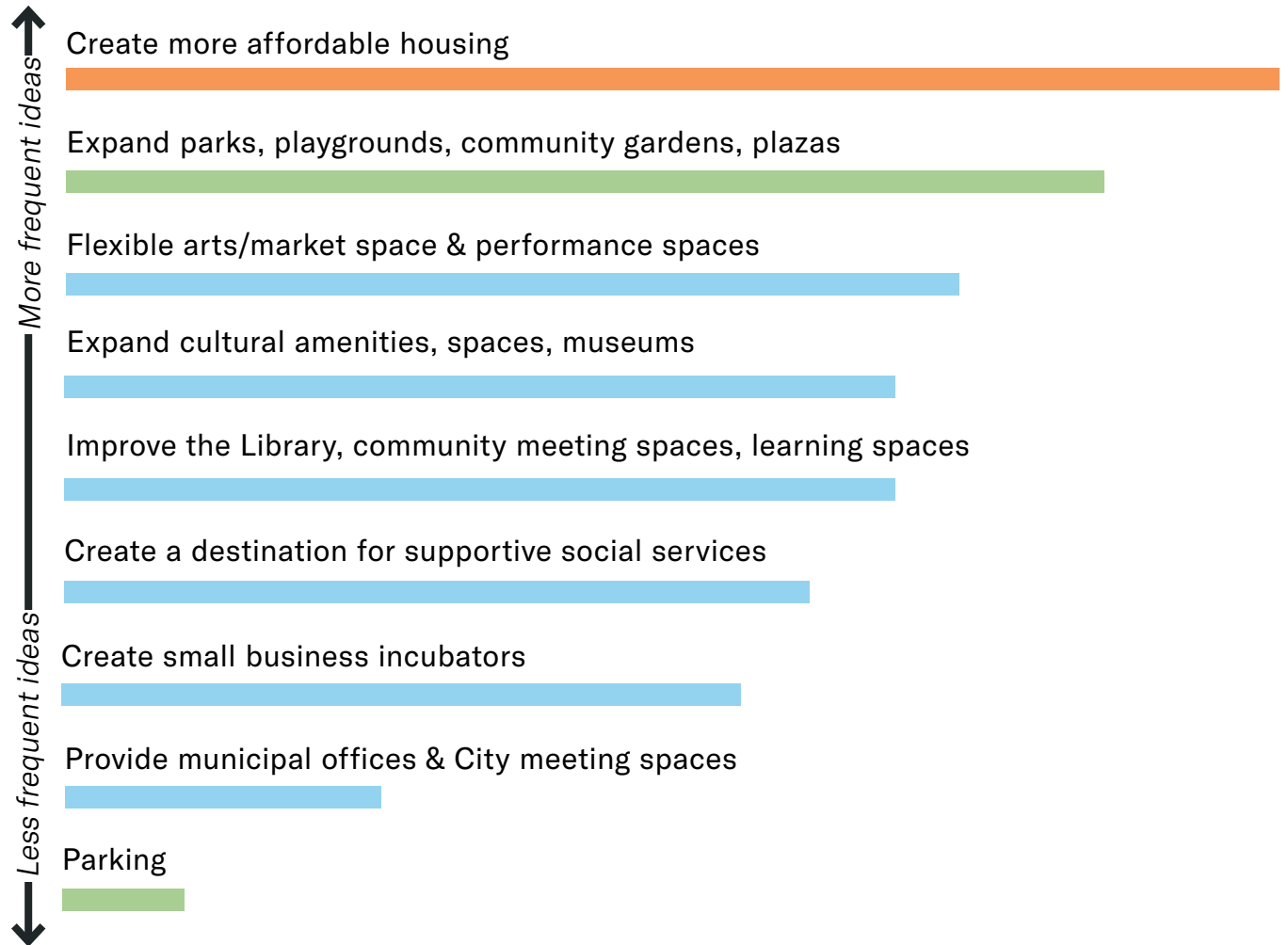
Additionally, interviews conducted with a wide range of city staff provided the planning team with intimate knowledge of the City's operational needs and critical insights into the assets and challenges facing Central Square. An Interdepartmental Working Group reviewed the resulting recommendations, providing feedback and distilling the information to a set of core issues.

The resulting plan was structured around the big-picture issues voiced by the community while incorporating the insights provided by city staff. The engagement represented a comprehensive spectrum of insights, reflections, concerns, and aspirations of everyone involved in the planning process.



# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT HIGHLIGHTS

Certain topics or themes came up particularly often during conversations with the community.



### Interdepartmental Working Group

A working group of interdepartmental City staff met monthly over the course of the seven-month project to share feedback and provide guidance on the planning process and recommendations. These insights grounded and informed the recommendations.

### Staff Interviews

Interviews were done with staff representing different City offices or departments. These provided opportunities to review site conditions and identify opportunities, planning objectives, and City needs which helped set expectations and form the approach.

### Community Meetings, Pop-up Events, and Focus Groups

The project team held three large community meetings throughout the course of the process, both in-person and virtual. The in-person meeting was structured as an open house to allow participants to speak with the planning team and explore the project at their own pace. The virtual meetings were also participatory, hosting small topic-based group conversations after a primary presentation. Over 250 people attended three large community meetings.

Pop-up events were organized at the Central Square Farmer's Market, Central Square Library, and Starlight Square events to meet people where they are. Engagement booths provided project information and gathered early feedback from the public. These invited people into the conversation by creating a low-pressure environment to learn about the project and planning team.

Lastly, the team led focus groups to learn about unique needs, challenges, and opportunities involved with transforming these sites. These groups provided opportunities for the planning team to reach community members that don't typically engage with traditional methods of outreach, especially historically marginalized groups. More nuanced and informed planning recommendations resulted from the myriad perspectives, which included:

- **Immigrant Community Focus group**
- **Seniors Focus Group**
- **Youth Focus Group**
- **Small Business Focus Group**
- **Arts & Cultural Organizations Focus Group**
- **Unhoused Community Focus Group**

### City Council Roundtable

Prior to drafting recommendations, the planning team met with the City Council in November 2023 to discuss preliminary ideas about the Central Square municipal lots and their potential futures. A variety of options for uses, density, height, and program were presented along with early ideas about sequencing of redevelopment.

### Project Awareness

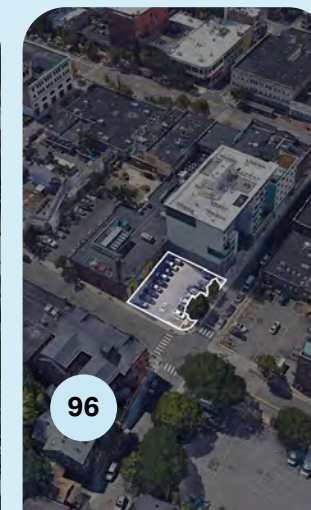
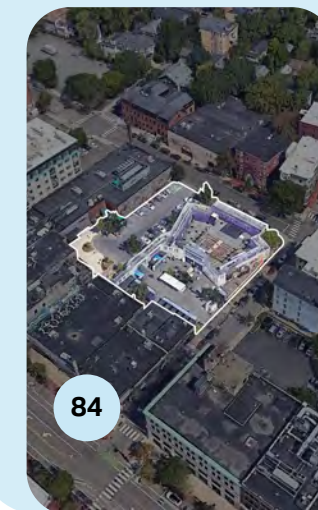
To advertise the project, its progress, and any related community events or public meetings, the team employed a variety of methods both digital and analog. Prior to public events, the team posted flyers throughout Central Square, city buildings, and primary gathering spots. Email blasts were sent to lists of over 1,200 people, and social media posts were distributed to 4,000 followers. Project information and updates were included in CDD news items and the City Manager's Daily Update. Lastly, the team collaborated with community partners such as neighborhood organizations, social service providers, business organizations, and non-profits to help spread the work throughout their networks.

### Project Goals

After receiving feedback from members of the community and City staff, the responses were synthesized into nine (9) study goals:

- Create more housing in Central Square, particularly affordable housing.
- Accommodate cultural programs, events, and spaces.
- Create high quality community services in Central Square.
- Provide opportunities for social services to expand and co-locate.
- Address city office and collaboration space needs.
- Increase parks and open spaces.
- Support ongoing infrastructure improvement projects.
- Meet parking needs & include transportation demand management.
- Plan for future opportunities to connect adjacent private lots.

The creation of more housing, particularly affordable housing, was identified as the top priority. There was an emphasis on creating spaces for cultural uses and programs, community spaces, social services, and City office space in new or renovated buildings. Lastly, the community stressed the need for new open spaces and made clear that parking needs should be considered as development occurs.



### Highlights and Key Recommendations

Highlights and Key Recommendations

Community and City goals informed how municipal property could support progress in three major areas:

- Increasing housing and amenities that contribute to civic life.
- Expanding community and city services.
- Maintaining flexibility for the future to continue to meet infrastructure, open space, and parking needs across Central Square.

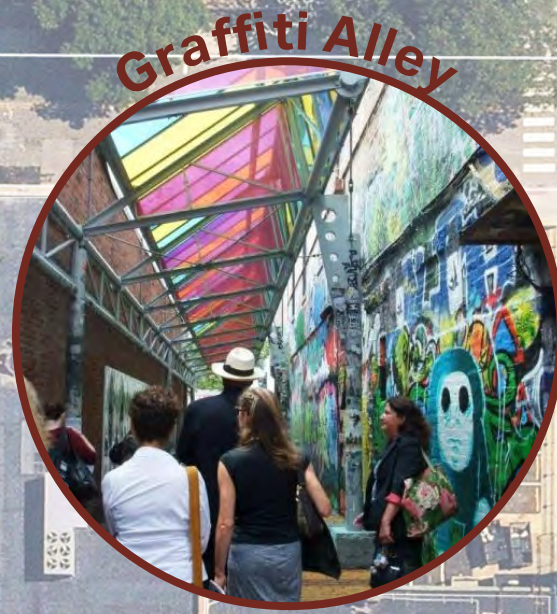
The recommended uses for individual sites often combine multiple goals and span across themes. Accelerating the production of housing, and in particular affordable housing, scored highly since the properties are city-owned, have optimal proximity to transit, and are situated in a walkable, mixed-used neighborhood.

### Recommendations for 84 and 96 Bishop Allen Drive (Lots 4 and 5)

The Sites are currently surface parking lots, with Starlight Square having previously occupied the majority of 84 Bishop Allen Drive. Starlight functioned as a community performance and gathering space designed by and for the community, and specifically the BIPOC community, in the Port neighborhood. The venue hosted events, concerts, a small business incubator program, and a variety of other publicly accessible events. Starlight has been a cherished public space, and the City intends to retain similar uses and programming on site in a permanent venue. In combination with new public open space and the existing Graffiti Alley, this permanent venue will support outdoor performances and year-round community use. Both Sites were identified as ideal locations for high-density housing with a strong emphasis on affordability.



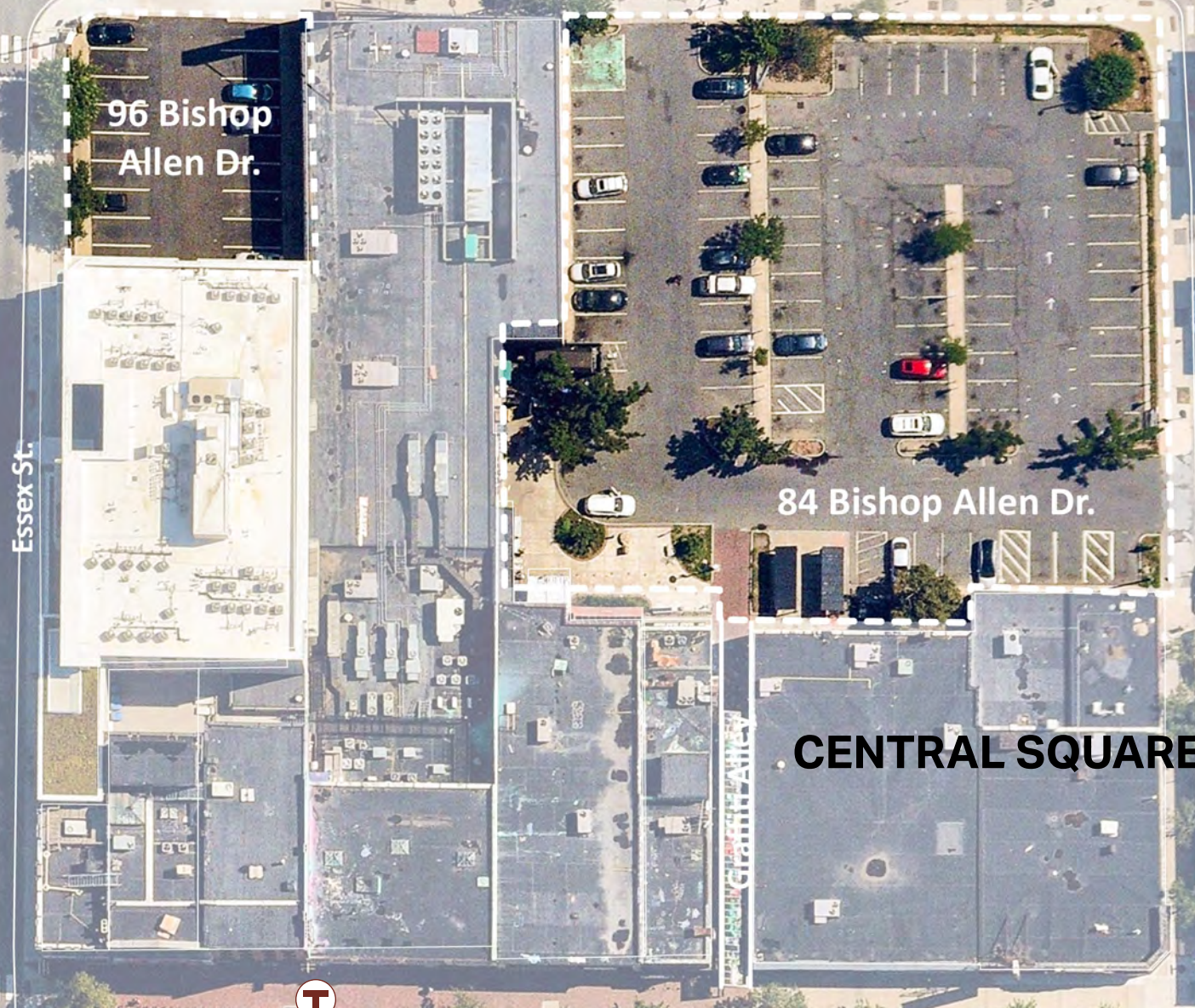
# RFI SITES: AERIAL CONTEXT



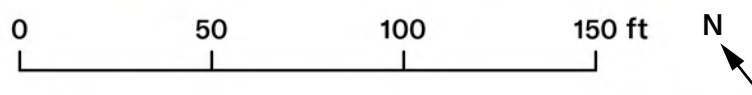
Graffiti Alley



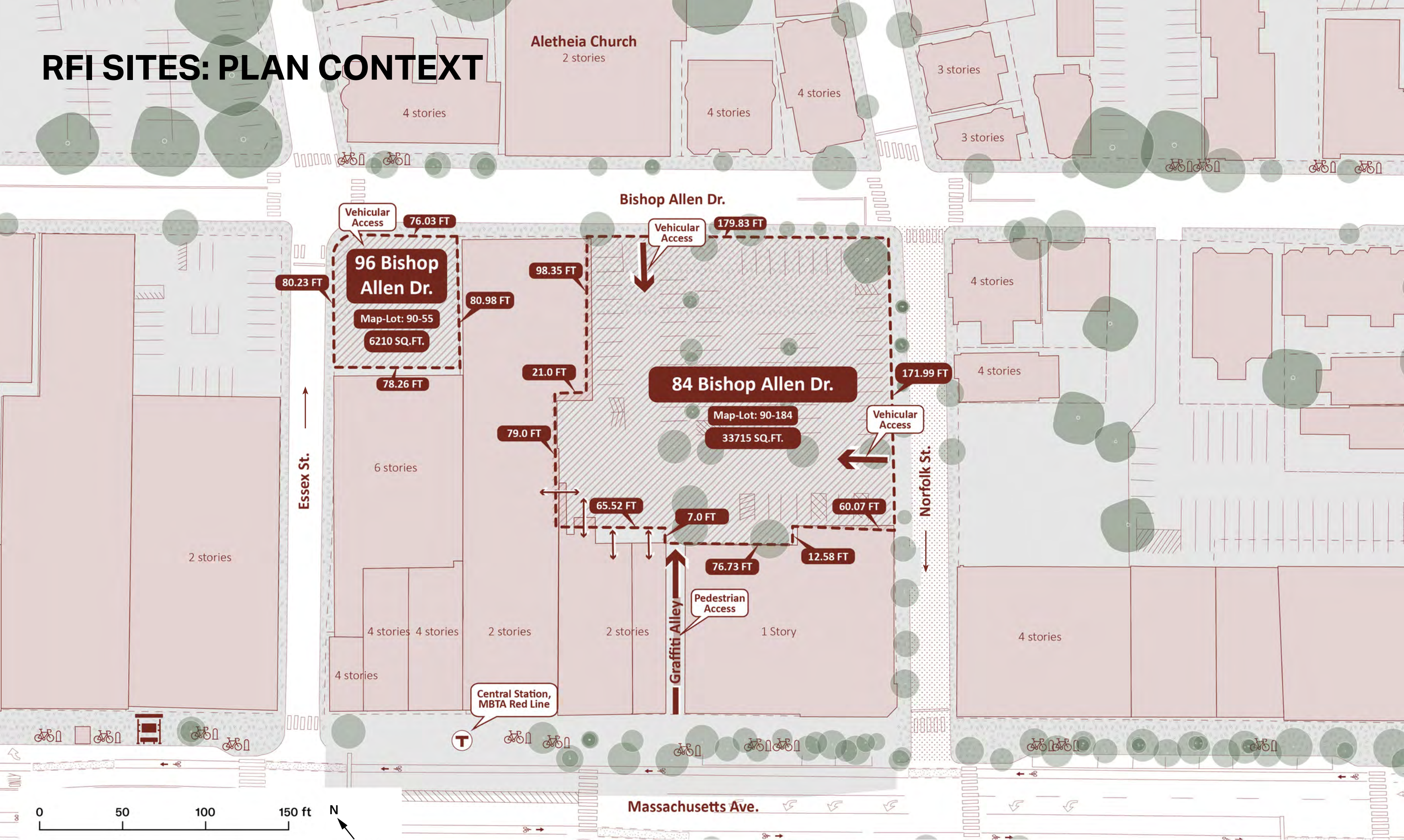
Mural



**CENTRAL SQUARE**



# RFI SITES: PLAN CONTEXT



# INSTRUCTIONS AND QUESTIONS

## QUESTIONS TO RESPONDENTS

The City of Cambridge and CRA seek to advance several of these goals through the redevelopment of the Sites. The exact form of development on the site, transaction structure, and approach to community programming are not yet determined, and the City and CRA are open to considering a variety of approaches that will realize the goals described above.

**The City and CRA are seeking responses to the following questions, which will inform the City's next steps towards seeking a development partner to realize the site vision.** These questions are motivated by public engagement undertaken as part of the Lot Study and represent some of the most salient open issues that will shape the future approach to the development. We hope that Respondents will be able to provide responses that address your perspective, though we recognize each individual question may not elicit a strong opinion and some responses will be more comprehensive than others. The responses to these questions will not be attributed to specific respondents during public discussions.

### Unlocking Site Potential

In developing the Sites, the City and CRA hope to achieve a mixed-use development that offers varied housing options, creates distinctive affordable ground floor commercial space, and provides cultural and open space areas. In approaching the opportunity, we appreciate feedback regarding the following questions:

- 1.1: What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of developing both of the Sites through a coordinated approach? Will this enable a better overall development project and/or a more compelling opportunity for the development community, or do you see disadvantages to approaching these sites as a package?
- 1.2: Do you believe that leveraging any other City-owned sites evaluated within the Central Square City Lot Study could help better achieve the City's development objectives (e.g. by

accommodating a portion of the desired uses, providing swing parcels for phasing, or other reasons)?

- 1.3: Do you believe that leveraging privately owned sites either in proximity to or within the Central Square BID could help better achieve the City's development objectives (e.g. by accommodating a portion of the desired uses, providing swing parcels for phasing, or other reasons)?
- 1.4: Do you believe that existing zoning will enable the "highest and best" development opportunity for the site? If not, what types of desired variances with respect to zoning (height, setbacks, FAR, use, etc.) would achieve what you perceive to be the optimal site capacity, density, or development program?

### Structuring Public Private Partnerships

Public private partnerships have helped to unlock some of Cambridge's most significant development projects. We envision structuring this project as a public private partnership and seek feedback on its optimal design:

- 2.1: The City's preference is to dispose of the site through a long-term ground lease versus selling the land fee simple. To what degree would you have a preference for fee simple ownership versus a long-term ground lease? Would you see a long-term ground lease as a barrier to interest in participating in the development opportunity?
- 2.2: To realize the development vision and the desired public benefits, the City plans to commit the land for minimal consideration. In addition to the land commitment, what other types of subsidies, cost sharing arrangements, or other financial support would you see as vital to a successful public private partnership? Are these supports essential to both the construction of the project and to its ongoing operations, or do you see support being most critical in a certain phase of the project?
- 2.3: Would you view it as desirable for a public entity to own and control the affordable commercial space, civic open space, and/or cultural space? Or, as a developer, would you generally prefer to maintain full ownership and control of the entire site program?

- 2.4: Would you view it as desirable for a public entity to occupy a portion of the development via lease? Are there certain city service-centered departments that, if located in the development, you believe could enhance the overall development program?

## Housing Alternatives

With escalating wealth inequality and the attractiveness of Cambridge as a location, the delivery of additional affordable housing is a significant priority for the City. Community engagement during the Central Square City Lots Study emphasized this as the community's highest priority for the City-owned sites. The City is seeking feedback on optimal approaches to housing delivery:

- 3.1: What do you think is the optimal scale of the residential program for the Sites?
- 3.2: If the City contributes the land to the project for no cost, what percentage of affordable and middle-income housing do you think can be feasibly delivered on-site, given anticipated market conditions? What factors are most influential in your response?
- 3.3: Are there financing models or subsidy programs (e.g., low-cost financing, low-cost equity contributions, state, and federal housing programs), beyond the land, that would be instrumental in achieving a higher percentage of affordable housing?
- 3.4: Amongst innovative or specialized housing products with limited supply in Cambridge like live/work artist lofts, a higher proportion of family-sized units, or supportive housing, which do you think could be best integrated into a residential program on these sites?

## Affordable Commercial Uses

In Cambridge, the pace of revitalization and reinvestment has resulted in higher rental costs for ground-floor spaces. Retailers and restaurateurs are also contending with challenges stemming from general cost escalation throughout their operations. Similar issues are impacting the capacity of non-profit organizations to thrive in Cambridge, specifically in Central Square. The City

is seeking input on how to best incorporate anti-displacement strategies into this project:

- 4.1: What level of below-market rents or other inducements for affordable ground-floor spaces do you believe can feasibly be incorporated into the project with appropriate subsidy (which could include cross-subsidy from other uses on the site, funding support from the public sector, or other approaches)? In terms of reduced rents, more generous initial tenant improvement packages, or more flexible lease terms, which levers to support ground-floor tenants would you see as most viable from the developer's perspective?
- 4.2: What additional types, if any, of one-time construction or ongoing operating cost subsidies do you believe are needed to ensure the viability of affordable commercial uses?
- 4.3: Are there specific types of ground-floor commercial uses that you envision would best complement the project?
- 4.4: How might workforce and entrepreneurial spaces be feasibly accommodated within the project?
- 4.5: If the City were to require a certain amount of affordable ground floor uses, what sort of standards would you want to see/not want to see (minimum square footage, percentage of ground floor, etc.)?

## Cultural Space

Several historical cultural spaces in Central Square, such as dance studios, art studios, and performance venues, are at risk due to increasing rents and changes in property ownership. The City is interested in tactics for a continued promotion of cultural spaces, and requests any feedback regarding the following:

- 5.1: What types of cultural uses do you believe would best integrate into a mixed-use project at the Sites?
- 5.2: Are there other financing models or subsidy programs that would be required for the consideration of cultural spaces?

- 5.3: Cultural spaces such as performance venues often have challenges with noise mitigation particularly within mixed use projects. What strategies can be incorporated for acoustic separation?

## Civic Open Space

The Open Space Needs Assessment conducted as part of the [City's Parks and Open Space Plan \(2023\)](#) and community feedback provided through the Lot Study highlighted Central Square as an area of high open space need. The predominant open spaces in the immediate area are relatively small urban plazas or pocket parks that cannot support a wide variety of uses. Amenities such as play spaces, athletic facilities, and community gardens are also absent. As Central Square is a Designated Cultural District, art, artmaking, and spaces that support cultural arts should be integral aspects of any newly created civic open spaces. The City would value feedback regarding the following questions:

- 6.1: The City is contemplating pedestrianizing Norfolk Street between Massachusetts Avenue and Bishop Allen Drive. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages to this approach?
- 6.2: How might enhanced development density allowances impact the ability to commit to a percentage or fixed quantity of open space?
- 6.3: What would you see as preferred strategies for facilitating open space programming and maintenance? For open space management, would you prefer space to be privately owned and operated, or city-owned with a third-party operator?
- 6.4: Do you believe it could be viable to combine interior cultural spaces with outdoor spaces for larger events?

## Public and Private Parking

The City hopes that the Sites can function as a centralized reservoir for public parking that frees up other lots in Central Square for redevelopment. The City remains open to various arrangements for parking facilities and is seeking developer perspective on the following considerations:

- 7.1: The City does not require the provision of parking in development. From a marketability perspective, what parking ratios (if any) would you view as necessary to support the on-site private and public development program? Do you think a shared parking arrangement either between these uses or with public parking on site could be viable?
- 7.2: How do you envision the publicly available parking would be operated? Do you think it is preferable for the developer to own and control the parking? Or lease the parking facility back to the City for City ownership and control?
- 7.3: Would you view the opportunity to participate in the sharing of parking revenues as an inducement for the developer to participate in the project, i.e., would it be attractive to be in the parking business at this location?
- 7.4: Are there other financing models or subsidy programs that would be instrumental in achieving a public parking facility?
- 7.5: If parking was included as part of the project, what typology would you anticipate (below-grade, at-grade, structured)?



## Diversity and Inclusion Approach

The City is committed to ensuring that the Project creates opportunities for businesses and individuals who have traditionally been underrepresented in development projects of this scale and nature. The City anticipates that the Project will involve the inclusion of diverse businesses such as Minority Business Enterprises (MBEs), Women Business Enterprises (WBEs), Veteran Business Enterprises (VBEs), Service-Disabled Veteran Business Enterprises (SDVOBEs), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Business Enterprises (LGBTBEs), and Disability-Owned Business Enterprises (DOBEs), as well as individuals from those categories.

- 8.1: What strategies do you believe are most successful in promoting the participation of individuals who are members of diverse businesses enterprises in the development and operation of projects? Are there particular phases or aspects of the project where you think diverse businesses or individuals can be especially emphasized: project management, design, construction, financing, and/or ownership?
- 8.2: What kinds of support from the public sector do you believe would be most helpful in creating opportunities for diverse business enterprises and individuals in the project?



## RFI Question and Answer Process

Questions related to any aspects of this RFI must be submitted to the City by **XX/XX/XXXX**. Responses from the City to all questions posed by potential respondents will be provided to all parties who have asked questions and posted via the City's online purchasing website no later than **XX/XX/XXXX**.

## RFI Site Tours

Pre-submittal site tours will be offered weekly beginning on **XX/XX/XXXX** (3 total). Each site tour will be limited to 12 participants, and those interested in attending must register in advance by contacting TBD at TBD. The City and CRA will schedule additional site tours as needed.

Upon arrival at the property, all attendees must sign in with staff and provide their contact information. Participants will have the chance to tour the property and ask any questions. While the City may offer oral comments or responses during the site tour, these will not alter the terms of the RFI. If the City deems it necessary to formally clarify or modify the RFI, a written Addendum will be issued. Participants are encouraged to bring a copy of the RFI to the site tour and are reminded to submit any questions about the RFI to TBD via e-mail by **XX/XX/XXXX**. Any material changes or clarifications regarding the RFI will be provided in the form of a written addendum on the City website at TBD.

## RFI Submission Requirements

Submit a signed response with a digital copy of the RFI Submission Requirements responses in either Adobe Acrobat (.pdf) (preferred) or Microsoft Word (.doc) format, no later than **XX/XX/XXXX** at 12:00 PM to:

- Name
  - Address
  - Phone Contact
- The RFI responses should provide the following information:**
- Cover letter that provides information for the respondent, including contact details (2 page limit)
  - Description of relevant project experience undertaken by the respondent (5 page limit)
  - Answers to the questions posed above (no page limit)

## RFI Review

During the review of responses, the City and CRA will carefully evaluate the answers from the Questions to Respondents as outlined in this RFI. As a result of this RFI, the City and CRA may proceed with a development partner solicitation process including the issuance of an RFQ/RFP open to any development entity, or alternatively, the procurement may be canceled without the issuance of an RFQ/RFP.

This Request for Information (RFI) process is being initiated to assist the City of Cambridge and CRA in structuring an effective developer selection process and disposition structure with feedback from market participants. It is important to note that no decisions or preferences regarding the selection of a development partner for the sites will be made at the conclusion of this process, and all responses will be reviewed to help formulate any potential selection process toward the site's future development.

# APPENDIX



**Central Square City Lots Study**  
<https://www.cambridgema.gov/Departments/communitydevelopment/centralsquarelots>

**Central Square (C2) Final Report 2013**  
[https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/Planning/Studies/K2C2/finalreports/k2c2\\_central\\_final\\_report.pdf](https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/Planning/Studies/K2C2/finalreports/k2c2_central_final_report.pdf)

**Central Square (C2) Design Guideline 2013**  
[https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/Planning/Studies/K2C2/finalreports/k2c2\\_central\\_design\\_final.pdf](https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/Planning/Studies/K2C2/finalreports/k2c2_central_design_final.pdf)

**Envision Cambridge**  
<https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/compplan/envisioncambridgefinalplan/envisioncambridgefinalreport1.pdf>

**The Zoning Ordinance**  
<https://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/zoninganddevelopment/Zoning/Ordinance>