

City of Cambridge

Executive Department

YI-AN HUANG
City Manager

CMA 2025 #236
IN CITY COUNCIL
September 15, 2025

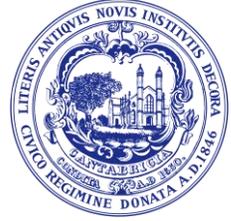
To the Honorable, the City Council:

Please find attached response to Awaiting Report Item Number 25-43 from Melissa Peters, Assistant City Manager for Community Development, regarding a request for an interim report on demolition and building permit applications received during the six-month period following the City Council's adoption of the Multifamily Housing Zoning Amendment on February 10th, 2025.

Very truly yours,

Yi-An Huang
City Manager





To: Yi-An Huang, City Manager

From: Melissa Peters, Assistant City Manager for Community Development

Date: September 11, 2025

Re: **Response to Policy Order 2025 #104 Re: Permit Data**

Permit Data

The above-referenced policy order requested an interim report on demolition and building permit applications received during the six-month period following the City Council’s adoption of the Multifamily Housing Zoning Amendment on February 10th, 2025. The tables below summarize applications received by the Inspectional Services Department (ISD) along with numbers for the prior two six-month periods for comparison.

Demolition Permit Application Submission and Issuance Data

Record Type	Applications Submitted 2/11/24 to 8/10/24	Applications Submitted 8/11/24 to 2/10/25	Applications Submitted 2/11/25 to 8/10/25 (Post MFH Zoning Adoption)
Demolition Permit Applications Submitted	32	29	46
Permits Issued to Date*	25	26	13
Existing Residential Uses	14	12	31
Permits Issued to Date*	12	11	7

Building Permit Application Submission and Issuance Data

Record Type	Applications Submitted 2/11/24 to 8/10/24	Applications Submitted 8/11/24 to 2/10/25	Applications Submitted 2/11/25 to 8/10/25 (Post MFH Zoning Adoption)
Building Permit Applications Submitted for Residential Uses	28	28	25
Permits Issued to Date*	23	23	9

Demolition permit applications include full and partial demolition. Building permit applications include New Construction, Addition/Alterations, and Application to Modify Building Plans.

** Includes all issued permits resulting from applications submitted during that time period.*

Housing Permit Trends

It is difficult to draw broad conclusions from such limited data at this time. The numbers show an increase in demolition permit applications over the past 6 months (14 more applications than during the same 6-month period last year), and a similar increase in demolition permit applications for residential uses (17 more than during the same 6-month period last year). The increase has occurred across both full and partial demolition permit applications. There has been no substantial increase in building permit applications during the past 6 months compared to the same time period last year.

The number of demolition permits issued has not yet demonstrably increased. One reason could simply be the time required for permit review, which would explain the difference if many of the new applications were submitted more recently. However, as indicated by the data from prior 6-month periods, not every application for a demolition permit results in an issued permit. For example, it is common for demolition permit applications to be filed incorrectly (for example, when the wrong type of application is applied for) and then abandoned by an applicant, sometimes resulting in a new application.

More time is needed to see whether the increase in demolition permit application submissions translates into an increase in actual demolitions and redevelopment projects. An increase in demolition permit applications could be a leading indicator of increased residential redevelopment, but there is not enough data to predict or quantify redevelopment activity.

Informal Inquiries and Requests

Historical Commission Inquiries

The Demolition Review Ordinance (2.78, Art. II) assigns the Cambridge Historical Commission (CHC) Executive Director the responsibility of reviewing demolition permit applications for 50+ year old buildings. If the Executive Director makes an initial determination of significance, a public hearing is scheduled with the full CHC. Possible outcomes of the CHC review include a finding that the building is significant but not preferably preserved within the context of the proposed replacement, or a delay of up to one year for the purpose of exploring preservation options or mitigation of the effects of demolition. Demolition review does not always result in demolition delay.

Property owners and developers frequently request an informal preliminary determination regarding historical significance from the CHC Executive Director. These requests are in advance of the permit application process specified in the Demolition Review Ordinance. These informal requests are often made for informational purposes and serve owners, real estate professionals, and developers as they make preliminary decisions about properties.

The Demolition Review Ordinance does not apply to buildings in designated historic districts, neighborhood conservation districts, or individually protected buildings. For these properties, the

CHC staff also keeps track of demolition inquiries and applications for designated historic properties.

The table below provides information from CHC staff on informal inquiries received during the 6 months following adoption of the Multifamily Housing Zoning Amendment and the prior two 6-month periods.

Type of CHC Staff Inquiry	Inquiries Received 2/11/24 to 8/10/24	Inquiries Received 8/11/24 to 2/10/25	Inquiries Received 2/11/25 to 8/10/25 (Post MFH Zoning Adoption)
Informal Inquiries about Determinations of Significance	29	19	137
Informal Inquires about demolition of Designated Historic Properties	0	1	10

There has been a significant increase in the number of informal inquiries received by CHC staff following the adoption of the Multifamily Housing Zoning Amendment. It is unclear what conclusions to draw from this increase, because the requests are informal. The adoption of the new zoning was very well publicized, and many of these requests may be the result of property owner interest in the ordinance and not necessarily an indicator of imminent plans for redevelopment. Despite the uptick in inquiries, only three demolition ordinance projects required review by the Historical Commission at a public hearing during the last six months; all three were approved. Three other demolition requests within Neighborhood Conservation Districts (NCDs) were reviewed at hearing by NCD Commissions during the same period. One has been approved, and the others are actively under discussion.

Additionally, prior to the adoption of the Multifamily Housing Zoning Amendment, it was not uncommon for existing properties in residential districts to have less redevelopment potential under zoning than the existing development. Therefore, zoning tended to be more of a limiting factor than historical significance. With the easing of residential zoning limitations, it now makes sense that an informal request to the CHC for a determination of significance would be a necessary part of standard due diligence for any potential real estate transaction.

Community Development Reflections

Although CDD staff are not directly involved in every permit application, there are a couple ways that CDD staff have informally gauged response to the Multifamily Zoning Amendments.

The new Multifamily Housing Zoning includes a provision requiring that in all Residence C-1 districts, the builder of a project that is more than three stories and 35 feet above grade needs to notify neighbors about the proposal and hold a meeting to answer questions and get feedback

before getting a building permit. This feedback is non-binding. CDD staff receive notifications of these meetings and posts them on our [Residential Neighbor Notification Meetings](#) webpage.

To date, CDD has received and posted 9 notices for Residential Neighbor Notification Meetings. Some of these meetings have been for large multifamily redevelopments, but many others have been for more modest expansions to add units or square footage to existing buildings in a way that exceeds the 35-foot / 3 stories threshold to require the meetings.

CDD staff also field general zoning questions from the public. Since February, many of those questions have been related to the Multifamily Housing Zoning Amendment. Because the questions are open-ended and informal and come in a variety of ways (e.g., e-mails, phone calls, walk-ins, referrals), it is impossible to quantify them in a meaningful way. However, many requests fall into the following categories:

- Homeowners or non-professional property owners seeking to understand the zoning for the purpose of making improvements (e.g., accessory units, enlargements).
- Homeowners or non-professional property owners interested in selling their property and seeking to understand development potential under the new zoning.
- Developers seeking information about zoning to assess potential development sites that are on the real estate market.
- Appraisers or other professionals connected to the finance industry conducting due diligence on sites that are part of a real estate transaction.
- Developers with sites under agreement seeking more specific information about zoning requirements or development review and permitting processes.
- Design teams actively working on redevelopment plans asking questions about zoning requirements or requesting informal staff consultations.
- Residents with questions or complaints about potential development projects that they have heard about in their neighborhood but do not yet have applications under review.

Conclusions

There has clearly been strong interest in the potential created by the Multifamily Housing Zoning Amendments since its adoption. This interest has come from many parts of the community, including developers, designers, property owners, and residents, and is aligned with the overall goal of the effort to enable more residential development to address unmet housing needs in Cambridge.

Even with relaxed zoning requirements, the process of redeveloping a site takes time and involves many steps including site control, design, financing, and permitting before beginning construction. Larger developments often take more time than smaller developments at each stage of the process. Although there are leading indicators that point toward a potential increase in residential development, it is too early to draw conclusions about the exact amount or types of redevelopment that will result from the new zoning.