

MIT students press for more on-campus housing



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By [Tim Logan](#) GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 14, 2017

Some graduate students at Massachusetts Institute of Technology are pushing the university to build more on-campus housing, and using MIT's plans to build in the heart of red-hot Kendall Square as leverage.

A group of grad students and Cambridge residents Monday filed a proposal with the city that would prevent MIT from developing the 14-acre site of the Volpe Transportation Center — which MIT is [buying from the federal government for \\$750 million](#) — until it adds up to 1,800 more dorm beds for graduate students.

The zoning petition would need approval from the Cambridge City Council, and its proponents framed it more as “the beginning of a conversation” than an outright demand. And it comes as MIT officials pledge another review of graduate student housing. It’s the latest round in a long debate over how MIT, and other Boston-area schools, should house their growing student bodies in an increasingly crowded city.

Officials in Boston have been pushing colleges and universities to add dorm space, especially for undergraduates, to keep more of the city’s roughly 150,000 students on campus. More than 1,000 dorm beds opened last year alone, [according to a recent city report](#), with 6,400 more under construction or planned.

In Cambridge, MIT provides on-campus housing for most of its undergraduate students, but only has space to house about 30 percent of 6,500 graduate students. Many of the rest rent in Cambridge or nearby parts of Boston or Somerville, facing high rents and adding pressure to already pricey rental markets.

“We are very concerned about the affordable-housing crisis,” said Doug McPherson, an urban planning graduate student at MIT who helped organize the petition. “Housing costs have risen significantly and the availability of apartments available for people with a midrange income have gone down.”

In 2014, an MIT task force urged the university to add 500 to 600 graduate student apartments over a decade. The first 250 will come in a larger replacement for the aging Eastgate Apartments on Wadsworth Street, set to open in 2020. MIT has announced no new plans beyond that, though it is planning to build a new 450-bed undergraduate dorm on Vassar Street by 2020.

At the Volpe site, which MIT won rights to develop in January, [the university in June filed zoning plans that would include up to 1,400 apartments and condos](#) — with 280 set aside for low- and moderate-income residents — in market-rate buildings, but no student housing. A majority of the site, which is among the biggest development sites in Cambridge, would be used for office and lab space.

The jobs in those new buildings will only increase demand for housing in Cambridge, McPherson said.

“If MIT is going to be embarking on this commercial venture that’s going to make the Institute a lot of money, the least they can do is house more of their graduate students,” he said. “Take us off the market and relax some of the demand on the housing market in Cambridge.”

Their proposal would require MIT to build up to 1,800 units of graduate student housing, in phases, within a mile and a half of the Volpe site, as it builds commercial space on the 14-acre site. McPherson said he hopes it will be part of the discussion as Cambridge officials consider zoning for the Volpe site this fall.

Sarah Gallop, codirector of MIT's Office of Community and Government Relations, said university officials were still reviewing the petition. But separately, they have begun talking with the Graduate Student Council about housing issues, said Gallop. They're launching a working group to study the best area to add the 250 more dorm beds that were recommended in 2014, and what the university might need beyond that.

"In recent weeks, graduate student leadership has been talking with [university officials] and have worked out an approach to really delve into more detail on this," she said. "That dialogue is just getting started."

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