

Urban Form Draft Recommendations

Urban Form Goals

- **Patterns of City Development:** Maintain the existing patterns of the city where they are strong and well-established, including mature residential neighborhoods, major squares, pedestrian-oriented commercial corridors, institutional campuses, and open spaces. In these areas, significant existing buildings should be preserved where they remain economically viable and new development should support and strengthen the prevailing patterns of development.
- **Growth in Evolving Areas:** Promote redevelopment and/or rehabilitation of areas currently characterized by obsolete commercial buildings, surface parking lots, automobile-oriented patterns of development, and other development that is inconsistent with the city's urban design objectives. New development should serve a mix of functions (e.g., housing, employment, education), should be pedestrian-oriented and sustainable, should include open space and other civic and urban amenities, and should allow development patterns that would be difficult to accommodate in the city's more well-established districts and neighborhoods.
- **Transitions between Uses and Districts:** Where redevelopment occurs at the edges of well-established districts and neighborhoods, the development pattern should be compatible with the prevailing pattern of the adjacent districts but may accommodate some variation in use and scale in order to smooth the transition from one district to another and encourage welcoming connections between districts.
- **Public Realm:** Create a connected network of high-quality open spaces, including public spaces (e.g., parks, plazas, streets) and publicly-accessible private spaces, that link all residents to local and regional natural assets, provide a range of activities and experiences, are inclusive of all people, and encourage social connections.
- **Activation:** Shape new development, in terms of its form, use, design, and relationship to public spaces, so that it supports an active public realm.
- **Design Process:** Strive for design excellence in all new development by providing clear guidelines to developers and by implementing review processes that are clearly defined in the ways they engage with City staff, boards and commissions, and community members.

Urban Form Strategies & Actions

Strategy: In traditional residential neighborhoods, encourage infill development that is sensitive to local context.

Actions	Priority	Status	Notes
Near-term actions (<5 years)			
Allow greater zoning flexibility for affordable housing.	High	New	Zoning Amendment
Study ways to adjust existing zoning in residential districts to encourage infill development, where it occurs, to be more compatible with prevailing patterns of development, with a focus on building setbacks, maximum heights, parking requirements, and uses.	Medium	Expanded	Future Study

Strategy: Regulate the overall form of development along our major corridors and squares, increasing density near transit nodes while accommodating the unique character of each section of these corridors, and encouraging activity on the ground floors.

Actions	Priority	Status	Notes
Near-term actions (<5 years)			
Eliminate minimum parking requirements for development along the corridors.	High	New	Zoning Amendment
Establish development standards to promote streetwall development with residential uses above commercial ground floors, including uniform standards for front setbacks, bulk control, and building façade lengths that are compatible with the established patterns of the area.	High	Expanded	Zoning Amendment
Establish development standards to promote street-activating uses (such as retail) on ground floors, including minimum ground-floor heights, limitations on the frontage length occupied by lobbies and other non-active frontages, standards for the frontage length of individual storefronts, and requirements for smaller-sized spaces (800-1,200 SF) in larger buildings.	High	Expanded	Zoning Amendment
Develop design guidelines for all commercial corridors that include a requirement for activating design elements along the street wall, including frequency of entrances, signage, awnings, and breaks in the building facade.	High	Modified	Future Study

Require developers to install a minimum number of street trees, as determined by the corridor character zones and the length of the parcel frontage.	Medium	Modified	Zoning Amendment
Prohibit parking and vehicular loading/service between buildings and the street, and prohibit curb cuts unless the parcel only has frontage on the corridor and garage entrance is no more than 20' wide.	High	Expanded	Zoning Amendment
Require primary building entrances to be located on the corridors to create visual variety and to encourage the mixing of building residents, shoppers, and passers-by on the sidewalk.	Medium	Expanded	Zoning Amendment
Streamline approval process to allow more street-activating elements in or above the public way, such as awnings, canopies, street furniture, etc.	Medium	New	Future Study (Procedures)

Strategy: Proactively guide development in evolving districts with a strong potential for change through area-specific planning and development review.

Actions	Priority	Status	Notes
Ongoing actions			
Continue to implement district plans, such as Envision Alewife, K2C2, etc.	High	Existing	Continuing Effort
Near-term actions (<5 years)			
Initiate district plans for specific areas to inform new zoning approaches and design guidelines that support the Envision Cambridge objectives.	High	New	Future Study
Prepare a streetscape/landscape character master plan that identifies particular and differing streetscape character types, and prepare guidelines to reinforce desired setbacks, types of landscaping, building frontages, etc.	Medium	New	Future Study

Strategy: Design the built environment to encourage social interaction and civic engagement.

Actions	Priority	Status	Notes
Near-term action (<5 years)			
Incentivize flexible community space in private and institutional developments.	Medium	New	Zoning Amendment
Amend development standards to encourage balconies, roof terraces and decks, and projecting bays to overlook streets and other public spaces.	Medium	Expanded	Zoning Amendment

Allow the maximum height of mixed-use projects with active ground floor uses to be increased in order to achieve taller ground floor spaces.	High	New	Zoning Amendment
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Strategy: Leverage private development to create and maintain high quality public open spaces and provide dynamic programming.

Actions	Priority	Status	Notes
Ongoing actions			
Encourage community use of private recreational and open space facilities at reasonable levels where the private function of those facilities would not be impaired and where the recreational activity provided by the private facility is not well served in available public facilities.	Medium	Existing	Continuing Effort
Encourage family-friendly design in residential and commercial buildings and public realm improvements through development review (i.e. playgrounds, etc.)	High	Expanded	Continuing Effort
Near-term action (<5 years)			
Seek partnerships with the private sector and community groups to provide, sponsor, and assist in or contribute to maintenance and programming of the public realm including plazas, open spaces, sidewalks, and recreational facilities.	High	Expanded	Partnership
Conduct a citywide assessment to determine where new public or publicly accessible open space should be expected as part of redevelopment projects, in cases where the amount of land area and/or the ownership patterns provide the flexibility to accommodate such spaces.	Medium	Modified	Future Study
Develop citywide programming, design, signage, and maintenance and operations guidelines for publicly accessible private open space (POPS).	Medium	New	Future Study
Allow developers to contribute to a fund for open space when it cannot be reasonably provided on site or when the City has identified an opportunity for creation, expansion or enhancement of a larger, shared open space nearby.	Medium	New	Future Study
Develop regulations and guidelines to promote the addition of public pathways on large development sites where they would create desired neighborhood pedestrian and bicycle connections.	Medium	Expanded	Future Study

Strategy: Enhance the network of public open space through new open spaces and improved local and regional connections.

Actions	Priority	Status	Notes
Ongoing actions			
Identify opportunities for increasing the amount of open space in or near remaining priority areas identified in the <i>Green Ribbon</i> study (2000) and other planning studies.	High	Existing	Continuing Effort
Design and implement clear wayfinding (not necessarily signage, but other visual cues to be considered) for biking and walking routes to the City’s open spaces and other key destinations.	Medium	New	Continuing Effort
Near-term action (<5 years)			
Develop public realm design guidelines with an emphasis on establishing standards for street infrastructure, landscaping, trees, seating, public art, and community amenities, to account their role as places and not just as transportation routes. Implement a consistent, though varied, family of materials and street furnishings that can provide a greater sense of continuity between open spaces.	High	New	Future Study
Medium-term actions (5-10 years)			
Allocate funds to convert paved traffic islands into green spaces or reconfigure roadways to eliminate them.	Medium	New	Future Investment
Long-term actions (<10 years)			
Build the connections to integrate “Alewife Square” into the fabric of the City (as recommended in the Alewife District Plan)	Medium	New	Long-Range Plan Effort
Prioritize the planning and implementation of routes providing physical and visual connections to citywide open spaces and regional paths and trails, including the Charles River, Fresh Pond, Danehy Park, Alewife Reservation, and regional greenway system.	Medium	New	Future Study
Work with state agencies and other parties to encourage greater access and more active use of the Charles River, including tables and seating areas, canoe/kayak launches, boat rentals, public swimming, and restaurants and cafes, as well as at other state-owned parks and recreational areas where the regional use of those facilities would not be unduly restricted.	Medium	Expanded	Partnership

Strategy: Improve the public open space network by preserving, maintaining, and enhancing existing open space facilities to serve a diverse population.

Actions	Priority	Status	Notes
Ongoing actions			
Encourage open space and recreational facilities that serve a wide range of functions and clientele, including the elderly and special needs populations, either through expansion of the existing inventory, through multiple use of existing facilities, or through creative programming of those facilities.	High	Existing	Continuing Effort
Continue to develop parks, playgrounds, school yards and other open spaces that embrace Universal Design (inclusive design) approaches.	High	Existing	Continuing Effort
Design playful public spaces that are fun, physically challenging, creatively stimulating, and socially engaging, following the recommendations and guidelines of the <i>Healthy Parks and Playgrounds</i> and <i>Play in the Public Realm</i> reports, and balancing safety considerations with developmentally-appropriate levels of challenge and risk-taking.	Medium	Existing	Continuing Effort
Maintain and protect reservations and other natural resource areas, carefully balancing public access and use with preservation and conservation.	High	Existing	Continuing Effort
Preserve small open spaces that provide passive or visual benefits to the public, even where they do not allow for intensive or active recreational use.	High	Existing	Continuing Effort
Prioritize the repair, maintenance and timely upgrade of existing open space and recreational facilities.	High	Existing	Continuing Effort
Carry out public realm improvements to support placemaking in Cambridge's commercial districts and corridors.	High	New	Continuing Effort

Strategy: Revise the development review process to create predictable outcomes without compromising design quality.

Actions	Priority	Status	Notes
Ongoing actions			
Encourage developers to have an initial meeting with the City's urban design team early in the design process. This will allow the City to frame the essential urban design issues of a project, as defined by Envision Cambridge	Medium	Modified	Continuing Effort

and other relevant plans and guidelines, before conceptual design commences.			
Near-term actions (<5 years)			
Continue to review and update area and neighborhood-specific design guidelines to ensure that the urban design outcome of projects are appropriate to their specific neighborhood context, and more predictable to stakeholders and developers.	High	Expanded	Future Study
Consider environmental impacts more carefully in areas subject to significant change and address those with clear, design-based or performance-based guidelines, e.g. wind and shadow impacts, solar glare and reflectivity, etc.	High	Expanded	Future Study
Review and revise the citywide urban design objectives and criteria to establish a set of comprehensive, overarching urban design principles for the city.	Medium	Modified	Future Study
Establish a consolidated set of citywide urban design guidelines based on development types or design themes. The city's urban design guidelines should reflect the historic context within which change will occur, while continuing to allow flexibility and creative design solutions that are responsive to contemporary circumstances,	High	Expanded	Future Study
Develop design guidelines for as-of-right affordable housing development.	Medium	New	As part of the affordable housing overlay zoning
Investigate approaches that enable applicants to informally present initial design concepts to the Planning Board for preliminary design review at the pre-application stage.	Medium	New	Process Implementation
Review designated areas of special planning concern and recommend revisions	Medium	Modified	Process Implementation
Update guidance on the development review process, including the development of a process diagram to clearly articulate requirements and application steps	High	Expanded	Process Implementation
Review the various elements of project review in Article 19 of the zoning that might be applicable to different projects and seek opportunities to simplify and clarify roles and expectations for developers, city staff, boards and commissions, and community members.	High	Modified	Future Study