

Urban Form Draft Goals, Strategies, and Actions

Urban Form Goals

- **Development Patterns:** Maintain the existing patterns of the city where they are well-established and advance the city's values through a mix of preservation and complementary infill development. In areas like the residential neighborhoods, major squares, pedestrian-oriented commercial corridors, campuses, and open spaces, significant existing buildings should be preserved, and new development should support and strengthen the prevailing patterns of development there.
- **Growth in Evolving Areas:** Promote redevelopment that is mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented, and sustainable within areas currently characterized by surface parking lots, automobile-oriented patterns of development, and obsolete commercial buildings. New development should serve a mix of functions (e.g., housing, employment, education), should include open space and other civic amenities, and should allow development patterns that would be difficult to accommodate in the city's more well-established districts and neighborhoods.
- **Transitional Development:** Where redevelopment occurs at the edges of well-established districts, the development pattern should be compatible with the prevailing pattern of the adjacent districts, accommodating variations in use and scale. Cambridge should ensure new development at the edges of stable neighborhoods fits into and improves the existing context, transitioning between scales or uses where appropriate.
- **Public Realm:** Create a connected network of rich and varied public 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. Cambridge's open space network should include public space, such as parks, plazas, and streets, as well as publicly-accessible private spaces.
- **Activation:** Shape the form, use, and design of new development, especially its public spaces, so that it supports an active public realm. New development should create spaces for informal social life, particularly on the commercial corridors and in evolving areas.
- **Design Process:** Strive for design excellence in all new development by creating a development review process that is clear and efficient in its engagement with City staff, boards and commissions, and the community. Cambridge's process for approving new developments should encourage dialogue between property owners, the City, and the project's stakeholders, and all development should be held to consistently high design standards.

Urban Form Strategies & Actions

*New or modified/expanded actions are in bolded text.

Strategy: Preserve the integrity and diversity of Cambridge's built environment

| Actions | Priority | Status | Notes |
|--|-----------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Ongoing actions | | | |
| Protect buildings in historic and neighborhood conservation districts, as well as individual landmarks and properties governed by preservation restrictions. | High | Existing | Continuing Effort |
| Investigate potential additions to the historic inventory through public engagement, planning, and designation studies. | Medium | Existing | Continuing Effort |
| Utilize CPA-funded preservation grants to preserve and promote the restoration of significant historic properties. | High | Existing | Continuing Effort |
| Honor local projects with Preservation Awards. | Medium | Existing | Continuing Effort |
| Work with private and commercial owners, institutions, and public agencies on historic preservation issues, and participate in reviews of state and federal projects that impact historic resources. | High | Existing | Continuing Effort |
| Ensure new development reinforces and enhances the complex urban aspects of Cambridge as it has developed historically, and where relevant, ensure historical contexts are respected. | High | Existing | Continuing Effort |

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

| Actions | Priority | Status | Notes |
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| Near-term actions (<5 years) | | | |
| 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 |
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| 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 trees, as determined by an urban design study | Medium | Modified | Zoning Amendment |

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| 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 |
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| 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 |
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| 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 |

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| 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 |
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| 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 |

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

| Actions | Priority | Status | Notes |
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| 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 | Medium | Expanded | Partnership |

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| recreational areas where the regional use of those facilities would not be unduly restricted. | | | |
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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 |
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| 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 |
| Incorporate the principles of Universal Design in open space projects. | 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 Healthy Parks and Playgrounds and Play in the Public Realm 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 |
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| 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 | Medium | Modified | Continuing Effort |

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| essential urban design issues of a project, as defined by Envision Cambridge 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, design themes, and respect to the historic context. | 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 |