

# Central Square Rezoning

Housing Committee  
Arts & Cultural Roundtable

October 1, 2026, 2-4pm



**CITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE**

CDD  
Community  
Development



# The Project Team Today

## Community Development Department

**Melissa Peters**  
*Assistant City Manager for  
Community Development*

**Jennifer Caira**  
*Deputy Chief of Planning*

**Jason Weeks**  
*Executive Director,  
Arts Council*

**Jeff Roberts**  
*Director, Zoning  
& Development*

**Daniel Messplay**  
*Director, Community  
Planning & Design*

**Claudia Zarazua**  
*Director, Arts &  
Cultural Planning*

**Brian Gregory**  
*Senior Urban Designer*

**Drew Kane**  
*Senior City Planner*

**Jared Staley**  
*Economic Development  
Specialist*

# Today's Agenda

## 1. Project Overview

---

## 2. Public Comment

---

## 3. Questions & Discussion

---

## 4. Next Steps

---



# Today's Agenda

## 1. Project Overview

---

## 2. Public Comment

---

## 3. Questions & Discussion

---

## 4. Next Steps

---



# What is the Central Square Rezoning Project?

CDD is leading a community process to update the zoning for Central Square. Guided by community goals identified in prior planning efforts, the recommendations will focus on:

**1** Expanding housing production, affordability, and diversity

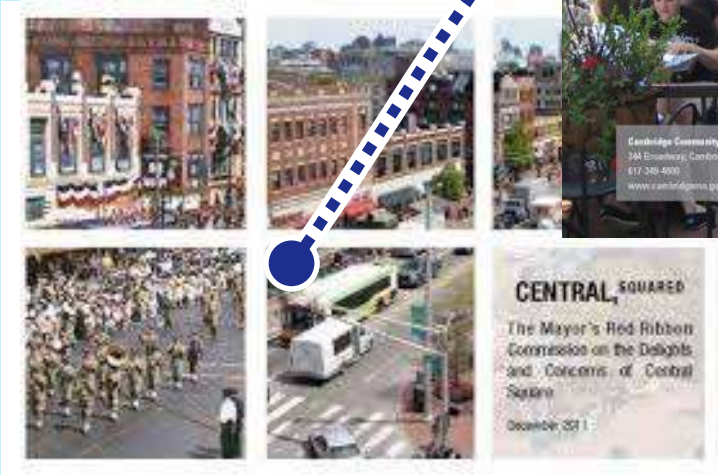
**2** Preserving, supporting, and expanding Arts, Cultural, & Nightlife spaces

**3** Supporting and growing retail and small / local businesses

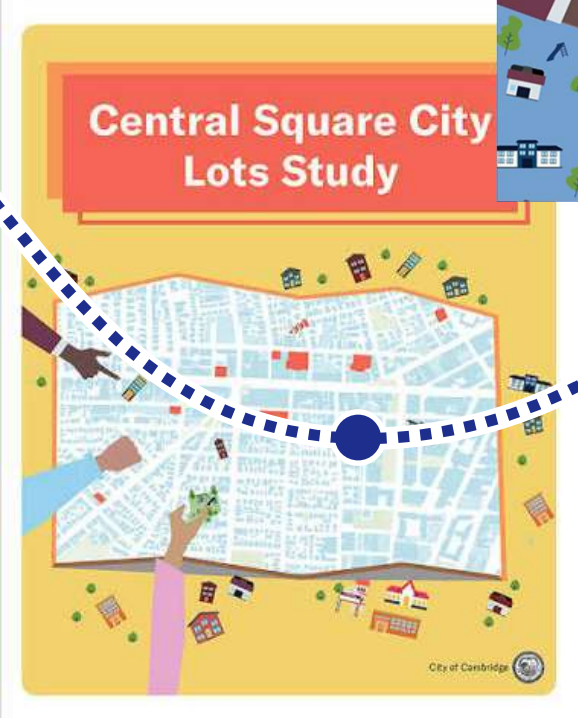
# How did it come about?

We're building from a strong foundation of prior planning:

Central, Squared  
2011



Central Square  
K2C2  
2013



Central Square  
City Lots Study  
2023



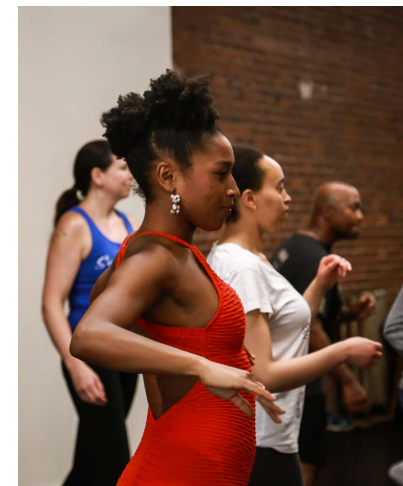
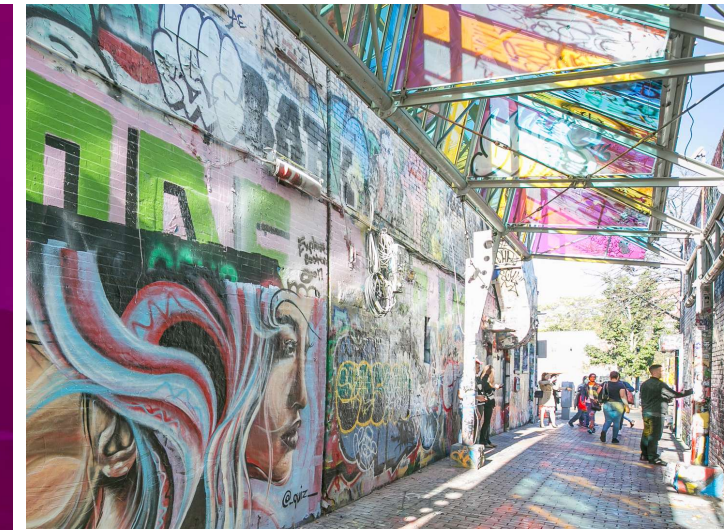
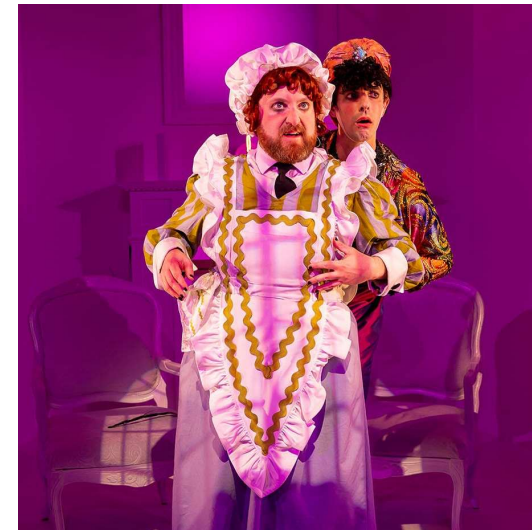
Central Square Rezoning  
2024-Today

# Central Square = Heart of the Arts

Central Square is the Cultural Heart of Cambridge – historically through today.

Central Square is Cambridge's only Cultural District, a designation by the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

It acknowledges the rich diversity and concentration of artistic and cultural uses and resources present in Central Square.



There are productive partnerships, programs, and investments...



## but still, Central Square has lost cherished spaces and institutions

Approximately  
30,000 SF of  
cultural space  
lost in the past  
10 years



# Arts & Culture spaces face shared challenges

## MAKING SPACE FOR ART

Securing Cultural Infrastructure in Boston, Cambridge & Somerville

|                                     |                                                       |                                                                                   |                                                  |                                            |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Arts & Culture are <u>invisible</u> | Arts & Culture Uses lack <u>consistent definition</u> | Municipalities lack <u>mechanisms to support &amp; incentivize</u> creative space | Creative spaces face <u>enforcement scrutiny</u> | <u>Permitting processes</u> are cumbersome |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|

# What is Zoning?

Zoning is a legal tool to **regulate land use**. It sets the **rules for how land can be used and developed**, balancing public interest with private property rights.



## Zoning Ordinance

Describes **what** you can build  
- the allowable uses and form.



## Zoning Map

Describes **where**  
these rules apply.



# What can (and can't) Zoning do?

## Zoning can:

- Allow and disallow uses (residential, office, etc.)
- Control building form (setbacks, heights)
- Impose Requirements (parking, open space, affordable housing)
- **Incentivize community benefits in exchange for things like additional height or density**

## Things to remember about Zoning:

- It can't preserve specific businesses or spaces.
- It can only deliver community benefits through new development.
- It is one tool among many needed to make successful arts ecosystem.



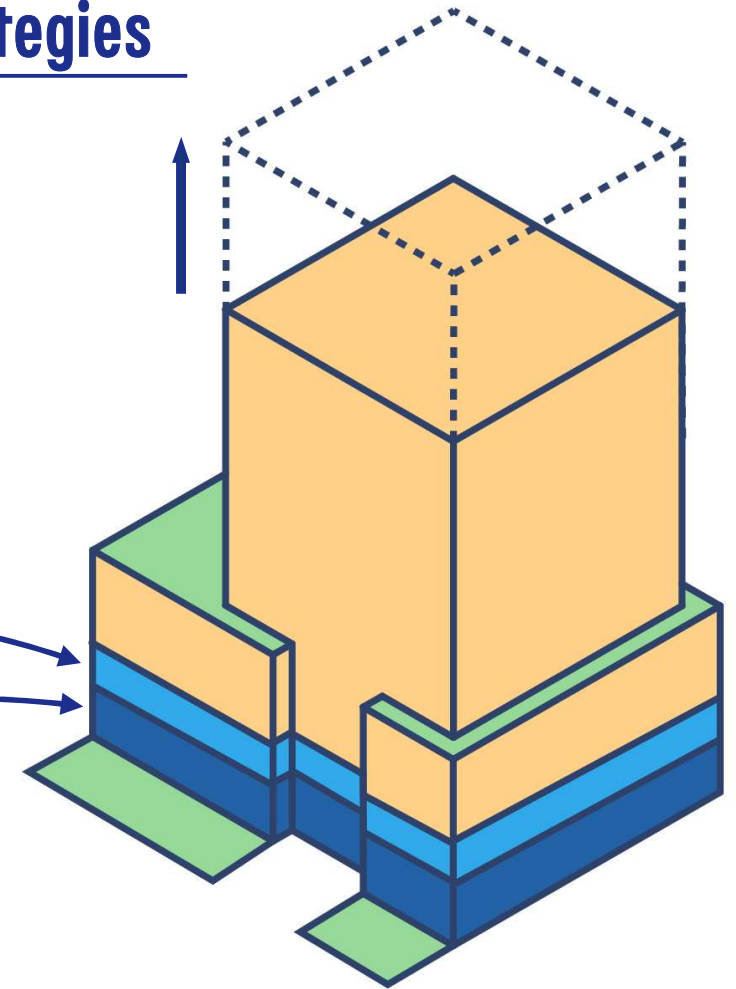
# Incentivizing Uses through Zoning

Zoning can incentivize projects to include uses that are community priorities by allowing developers the opportunity to offset the cost of producing those uses.



## Potential Strategies

- Allowing additional building height for residential uses
- Allowing uses to be moved between different sites
- Excluding desired uses from floor area limits
- Allowing a greater range of uses in additional areas



# Other Zoning goals will indirectly support the Cultural District

## Allowing for Increased Housing

- More people to support cultural institutions
- Provide housing for artists and employees

Allow additional height for residential uses in projects providing community benefits

## Incentivizing Retail & Commercial Spaces

- Activate the public realm & drive foot traffic
- Opportunities for complimentary businesses

Encourage active ground floor uses, especially along primary streets like Mass. Ave & Main St

## Encouraging Spaces to Build Community

- Create places to gather and share arts & culture
- Increase visibility of organizations in the Square

Incentivize the creation of publicly beneficial and accessible open spaces

## But Central Square Zoning's should directly support the Cultural District

The current zoning ordinance doesn't offer incentives for the creation of new cultural spaces, nor any protections or support to preserve existing spaces.

The past few years have seen some progress with the inclusion of outdoor dining and entertainment, but **a more comprehensive approach is needed.**

## 20.300 - CENTRAL SQUARE OVERLAY DISTRICT

**20.301 Establishment and Scope.** There is hereby established the Central Square Overlay District which shall be governed by the regulations and procedures specified in this Section 20.300. It is the intent of this section that these regulations will apply to a single area described generally as the Central Square business district and certain abutting portions of the neighborhoods around it.

**20.302 General Purpose.** It is the purpose of this Section [20.300](#) to augment existing zoning regulations to respond to the unique problems and pressures for change particular to Central Square. The regulations in said section provide for more careful public scrutiny of development proposals that may alter the established urban form of the Central Square area. These regulations are intended to channel the extreme development pressures in ways which will preserve and enhance the unique functional environment and visual character of Central Square; to mitigate the functional impacts of new development on adjacent residential neighborhoods; to maintain the present diversity of development and open space patterns and building scales and ages; and to provide sufficient regulatory flexibility to advance the general purposes of this Section [11.300](#).

20.303 *General Provisions.*

20.303.1 The Central Square Overlay District shall be considered an area of special planning concern and shall be subject to the applicable development review procedures as set forth in [Article 19.000](#) of this Zoning Ordinance. Development proposals listed in Subsection 19.42 and 19.43, Development Consultation Procedures, shall be subject to the Development Consultation Procedures specified in [Article 19.000](#) except that any Public Advisory Consultation shall be conducted by the Central Square Advisory Committee using procedures as specified in Subsection 20.304.1 of this Section [20.300](#).

20.303.2 Criteria for Development Consultation Review and Review of Applications for Special Permits and Variances. In reviewing applications for variances, special permits or development consultation reviews the permit or special permit granting authority or the Central Square Advisory Committee shall be guided by the following criteria:

Cambridge, November 1987, and

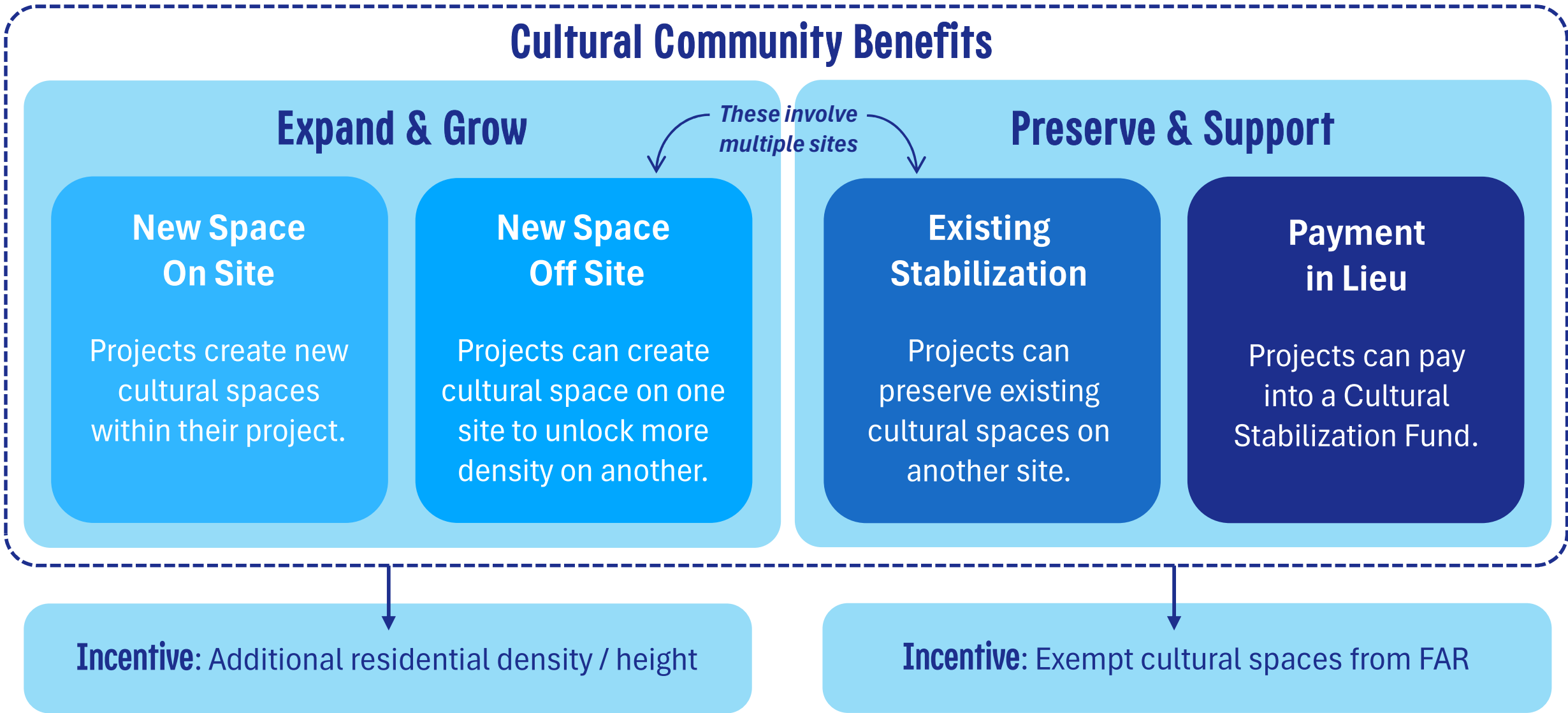
Variances, [10.40](#) - Special Permits

contemplated physical change

*If you only looked at the zoning,*

*If you only looked at the zoning, how would you know this is Cambridge's Cultural District?*

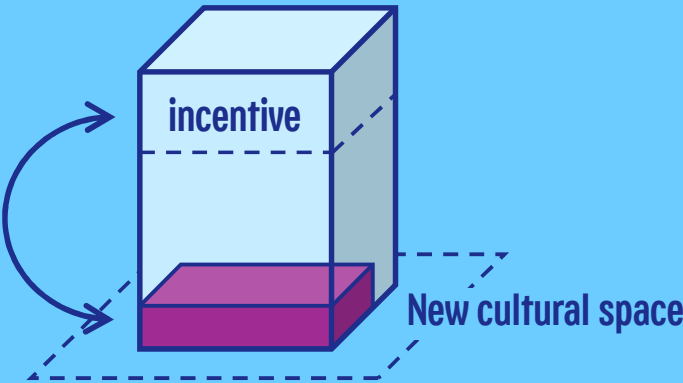
# What are the potential cultural incentives we've been exploring?



# Cultural Community Benefits: Expand & Grow

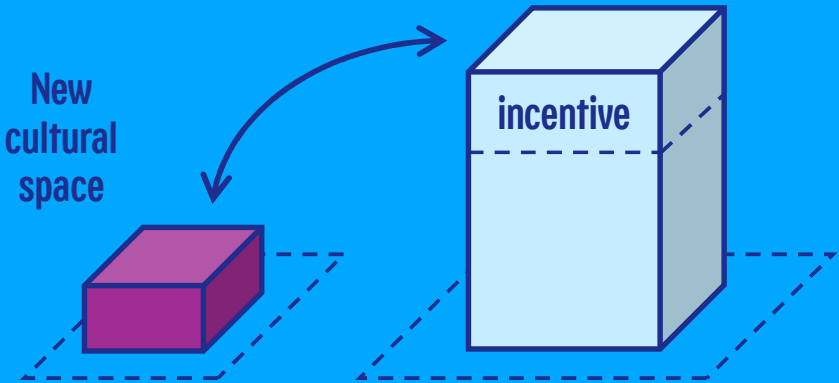
## Creating New Space On-Site

Projects happening on one site or adjacent sites can create new cultural spaces within their project. These would need to meet certain spatial and accessibility criteria to qualify.



## Creating New Space Off-Site

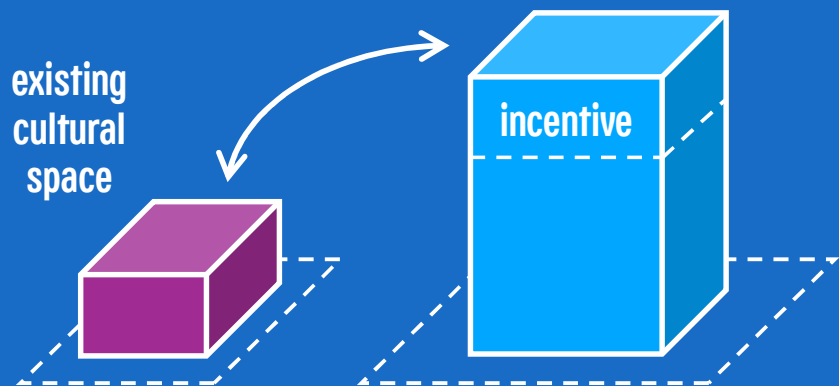
Projects involving multiple sites in Central Square can create cultural space on one site to unlock additional residential density on the other.



# Cultural Community Benefits: Preserve & Support

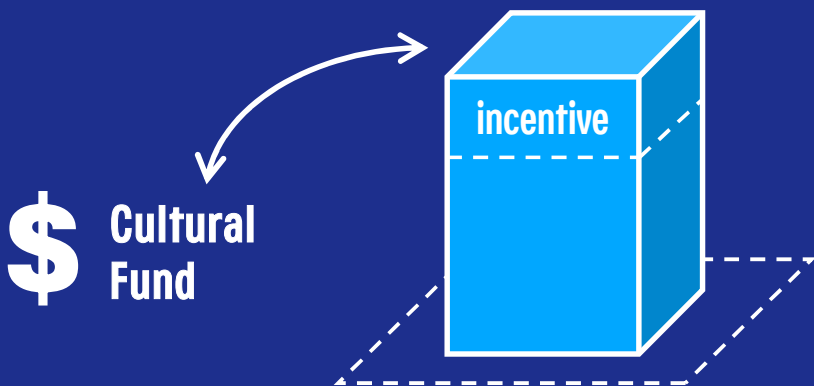
## Existing Stabilization

Projects on one site can acquire and preserve existing cultural spaces on another site in Central Square to ensure they remain and are accessible to the cultural community.

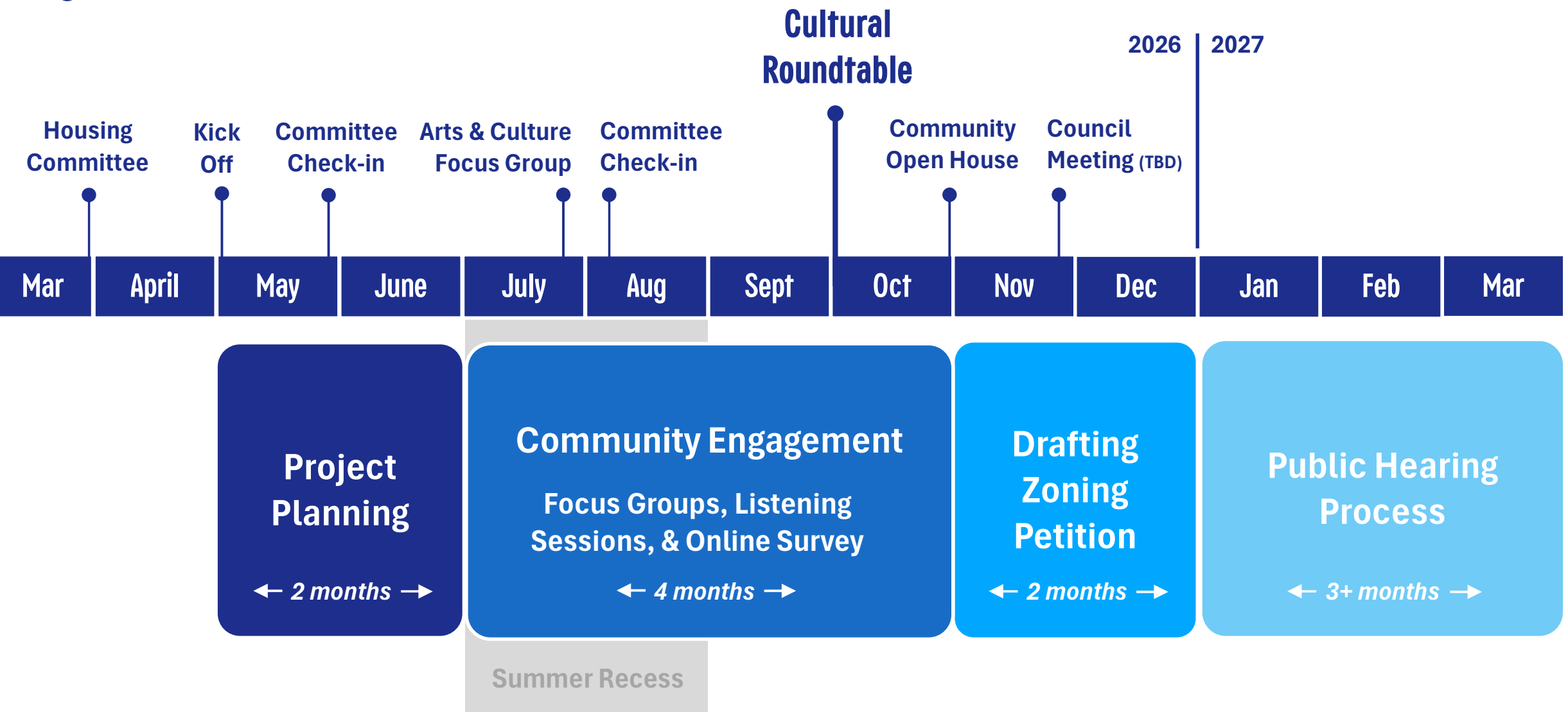


## Payment in Lieu

In situations where creating new cultural space wouldn't be beneficial, projects can pay into a Cultural Stabilization Fund which would be accessible to cultural organizations and uses in Central Square.



# Project Schedule



# Today's Agenda

## 1. Project Overview

---

## 2. Public Comment

---

## 3. Questions & Discussion

---

## 4. Next Steps

---



# Today's Agenda

1. Project Overview

---

2. Public Comment

---

3. Questions & Discussion

---

4. Next Steps

---



# Questions

**What are the most pressing challenges that arts & cultural institutions are facing in Central Square?**

**Do you rent or own your space, and how does that impact how you plan for the future?**

**What assistance would you like to see from the City to help you stay in Central Square?**

**Do any of the approaches shared today resonate strongly with you?**

**What one thing do you feel is the most critical for us to know as we advance this project?**

**What's missing? Are there other approaches we should be exploring?**

# Today's Agenda

1. Project Overview

---

2. Public Comment

---

3. Questions & Discussion

---

4. Next Steps

---



# Ongoing Engagement Opportunities



Take the Online Community Survey before it closes on October 9<sup>th</sup> and sign up for project emails at: [bit.ly/CentralSquareRezoning](https://bit.ly/CentralSquareRezoning)



Join us on October 29<sup>th</sup> at the Street Theory Collective space for a Community Open House



**Thank you for sharing your  
knowledge, insights, and  
experiences with us today!**

October 1, 2026

Central Square Rezoning

