



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: December 10, 2014

Re: **Walden/Sherman Rezoning Petition**

Overview

The City Council has referred a petition to rezone a small district at the corner of Walden and Sherman Streets from its current designation of Business A to a designation of Residence C-1, which is the predominant zoning designation in the surrounding residential neighborhood.

The following topics are covered in this memo:

- Description of the area to be rezoned
- Summary of current and proposed zoning requirements
- Discussion of impacts from the proposed zoning change
- Charts of current, proposed and alternative zoning regulations
- Map of the current zoning in the area

Planning Board Hearing

When a rezoning is proposed, the Planning Board and City Council must each hold a public hearing before the City Council can act to amend the Zoning Ordinance. After hearing public testimony, the Planning Board can deliberate and vote to send a recommendation to the City Council. If the Planning Board makes no recommendation, then the City Council may take action no less than 21 days after the Planning Board hearing. The City Council must take final action within 90 days of the earlier of the two public hearings. If no action is taken, the public hearing process must be repeated before a zoning change can be adopted. If the Council votes, a 2/3 majority is required to adopt; otherwise, the petition fails and cannot be heard for at least two years.

The Planning Board can recommend that the City Council:

- ADOPT the petition (and thereby amend the Zoning Ordinance as proposed);
- NOT adopt the petition;
- Adopt the petition with suggested modifications;
- Conduct further study of issues related to the proposal or explore other zoning alternatives.

Description of Area

Location

Walden and Sherman Streets form a moderately busy intersection within the predominantly residential Neighborhood Nine. The corner is located just over a half mile from Porter Square in one direction and about the same distance from Huron Village in the other. It is directly adjacent to St. Peter's baseball field and less than a quarter-mile from the entrance to Danehy Park.

Existing Buildings and Uses

The BA district covers a very small area, about 400 feet of linear frontage along the north side of Walden Street. It includes all or part of 11 lots, most of which are residential buildings, with some exceptions discussed below. Across Walden Street is a neighborhood of mostly 3-story residences, although there are two non-conforming businesses, a bar (Paddy's) and a convenience store (Walden Spa). The surrounding area is similarly residential, with some larger-scale apartment buildings nearby along Walden Street and some commercial and institutional uses further up Sherman Street. A portion of the Cambridge Montessori School is within the western end of the BA district.

The two most significant lots in the district are directly at the Walden/Sherman corner. At the northeast is a three-story mixed-use building that formerly had the Masse Hardware Company at the ground floor and has four apartments above. The Masse company has recently closed, and it has been proposed to convert the ground floor space to two additional residential units (see discussion further below). The lot at the northwest corner was most recently used as a surface parking area and warehouse for the Masse company. Previous to that, it was a gas station.



Northwest corner of Walden/Sherman



Northeast corner of Walden/Sherman

Summary of Current and Proposed Zoning

Current Zoning

This district has been zoned Business A (BA) since the Cambridge Zoning Map was established in its current form in 1943. BA districts are found throughout the city in low-scale retail or mixed-use areas such as Cambridge Street, sections of Fresh Pond Parkway and part of Memorial Drive. BA is one of a "family" of BA designations including BA-1, BA-2 and BA-3, each having somewhat different requirements.

Since 1943, the allowed uses in BA districts have generally included residential, office, retail and restaurants. For non-residential uses, the maximum floor area ratio (FAR) is 1.0 and the maximum height is 35 feet, permitting either one-story commercial buildings covering most of the lot or 2-to-3-story buildings on smaller footprints.

The dimensional requirements for residential uses are different than for business uses and have evolved over the years. In the 1962 version of the Zoning Ordinance, residential development was required to follow the Residence C-2 district regulations, which allowed an FAR of 1.75, minimum 600 square feet of lot area per dwelling unit, and heights up to 85 feet, but required significant yard setbacks based on a formula calculation. Since a 1997 zoning amendment, residential development in BA is required to follow the Residence C-2B requirements, which are similar but restrict heights to 45 feet and impose some stricter setback requirements.

The Residence C-2B requirements have made it challenging to design housing in BA districts, especially on smaller lots where it is difficult to meet the setback requirements. It has been especially challenging to design mixed-use buildings, given that the different design standards for commercial and residential development must be applied separately to commercial and residential sections of the building.

Proposed Zoning

Residence C-1 is one of the most common zoning districts in Cambridge, covering many of the city's traditional residential neighborhoods including East Cambridge, Area Four, Mid-Cambridge, Riverside, and significant parts of Agassiz, Neighborhood Nine and Strawberry Hill.

Residence C-1 allows multifamily housing at a maximum FAR of 0.75, height of 35 feet, minimum 1,500 square feet of lot area per dwelling unit, and minimum front, side and rear yard setbacks determined by formula. On a typical 5,000 square-foot house lot, C-1 zoning would allow a 3-story residence with up to three dwelling units, yard setbacks, usable open space and parking. The most significant recent change to the C-1 requirements was a 1999 rezoning that increased lot area per dwelling unit and open space requirements in response to the construction of new dwellings in the yards of larger house lots.

Impacts of Proposed Zoning Change

Existing Residential Lots

A review of records from the City's Assessing Database helps to provide a sense of the size, scale and use of existing buildings and how they relate to current and proposed zoning requirements. However, the information is not perfectly accurate for zoning purposes and should be treated as approximate.

The following list summarizes the approximate conformity of the six existing residential lots that are partially or entirely in the BA district.

- LAND USES: All are two-family or multifamily residential, allowed in both BA and C-1.
- HEIGHT: Most buildings are three stories, and comfortably below the 45-foot limit in BA but probably closer to the 35-foot limit in C-1. If an existing building has a height that is just above 35 feet, the proposed change to C-1 would result in a nonconforming height.

- DENSITY: Most lots are relatively dense in terms of floor area ratio (FAR), which ranges from about 0.9 to 1.2, and lot area per dwelling unit, which ranges from about 900 square feet to 1,400 square feet. These figures conform to BA requirements, but most likely none would conform to C-1 density limitations (see chart on last page).
- YARDS AND OPEN SPACE: It is very difficult with available information to determine the conformity of yard setbacks and open space, but given the small size of the lots it is likely that many would be nonconforming under either BA or C-1 requirements.

Montessori School

A small portion of the Cambridge Montessori School is located in the BA district. There is also a small adjacent lot that appears to provide driveway access to the school from Walden Street. If the zoning were changed to Residence C-1, it would make the school subject to Cambridge's Institutional Use Regulations, which provide some limitations on institutional development in residential areas. Because the use exists, and because the majority of the school is already in a Residence C-1 district, this change would probably not have a significant impact, but it should be noted.

Existing “Massey” Building

One of the lots most impacted by the proposed change to Residence C-1 would be the existing mixed-use building that was previously home to Massey Hardware (including an attached one-story commercial building, which is under common ownership). That building has an existing FAR greater than 2.0, which exceeds both current and proposed zoning limitations, but contains only 4 dwelling units, which conforms to both current and proposed zoning. There are no yard setbacks or open space on the lot.

Any commercial space at the ground floor would become nonconforming if the zoning were changed to Residence C-1. Recently, the owner had proposed to convert the ground-floor space into two residential dwelling units (the owner applied for relief from the Board of Zoning Appeal, but the application was withdrawn in September, 2014). While that would bring the lot into greater use conformity with Residence C-1, it would exceed the number of dwelling units allowed under C-1 zoning.

Existing “Massey” Warehouse/Parking Lot

The only site with significant redevelopment potential under current or proposed zoning is the parking lot and warehouse at the corner opposite the Massey building. This lot is about 14,000 square feet, the largest in the district, and has dimensions suitable for construction of a multifamily residential building. The proposed rezoning was prompted by a buyer expressing interest in redeveloping the site for housing.

The chart on Page 7 provides a summary of the zoning allowances for that site under existing and proposed zoning. Although redevelopment would still be possible if the district were rezoned to Residence C-1, such a rezoning would reduce the allowed gross floor area and units by about 60% as well as reducing the allowed height from 45 feet to 35 feet. Any retail or office uses, if they were desired, would not be allowed if the zoning were changed to Residence C-1.

Parking is another complicating factor if the site were redeveloped, whether under current or proposed zoning. The requirement for housing (regardless of the zoning district) is to provide one parking space for every dwelling unit created. Because the parking currently on the site is accessory to the Masse building across the street, parking may need to be provided for the existing building as well as any new housing that is created. Also, under the Residence C-2B dimensional requirements, enclosed parking must adhere to required yard setbacks whether it is located above or below grade. As a result, parking tends to be located on surface lots or open areas that are partially covered by buildings.

Conclusions

The existing character of development in the Walden/Sherman BA district is mostly residential, with a density that is somewhat less than what is allowed under Business A zoning but somewhat greater than what would be allowed under Residence C-1 zoning. For those residential lots, an intermediate zoning such as Residence C-1A might be more appropriate (see rightmost column on the following page).

The more interesting challenge is to determine what is the desired character of the lots at the immediate Walden/Sherman intersection that were recently vacated by the Masse company, which will need to transition to some new use. A change to Residence C-1 would indicate a desire for the corner to transition to housing of a moderate scale surrounded by yards and open space, with parking potentially on the surface or partially covered by the building. This option would result in stronger uniformity with the surrounding district and probably result in the least impact on traffic. However, the reduction in development potential could also inhibit or delay the redevelopment of the parking lot and warehouse site so that it remains in its existing condition.

Given past use patterns and the relative prominence of that intersection, it may be desirable to encourage a more mixed-use form with neighborhood-serving retail space at the ground floor and a residential density that is incrementally higher than the surrounding residential neighborhood. This might be accomplished by retaining a base zoning that allows some commercial use, or by applying an overlay zoning such as the Mixed Use Residential (MXR) Overlay used in some other parts of the city. Some setback and open space relief might also be desired to provide flexibility in designing a mixed-use building form.

CDD staff will be present at public hearings and can discuss options in response to the direction sought by the community, the Planning Board and the City Council.

Summary Chart of Current and Proposed Zoning Regulations

	Current Zoning (BA)	Proposed Zoning (C-1)	Alternative (C-1A)
Allowed Uses	Residential, institutional, office, retail	Residential, limited institutional	Residential, institutional (potential for limited commercial through MXR overlay)
Maximum FAR (Gross Floor Area / Lot Area)	1.75 residential * 1.00 non-residential	0.75 *	1.25 *
Minimum Lot Area Per Dwelling Unit	600 square feet *	1,500 square feet *	1,000 square feet *
Maximum Height	45 feet residential 35 feet non-residential	35 feet	45 feet
Front Yard Setback (feet)	Residential formula: $(H+L)/4$ ** Minimum 10 Non-residential: none	Formula: $(H+L)/4$ ** Minimum 10	Minimum 10
Side Yard Setback (feet)	Residential formula: $(H+L)/5$ ** Non-residential: none	Formula: $(H+L)/5$ ** Minimum 7.5	Formula: $(H+L)/7$ ** (may be reduced to 10 min. by special permit)
Rear Yard Setback (feet)	Residential formula: $(H+L)/4$ ** Non-res. formula: $(H+L)/5$ ** Minimum 20	Formula: $(H+L)/4$ ** Minimum 20	Formula: $(H+L)/5$ ** (may be reduced to 10 min. by special permit)
Required Private Open Space	15% of lot area (residential only)	30% of lot area (residential only)	15% of lot area (residential only)

*Does not include Inclusionary Housing bonus, which allows an as-of-right increase of up to 30% in floor area and dwelling units for a project of at least 10 units or 10,000 square feet.

** In yard setback formulas, H=building height, L=length of building fronting that particular side of the lot.

NOTE: This is a partial summary and does not include all applicable zoning requirements.

Zoning Summary: Masse Warehouse/Parking Lot Site

- Lot Area: 14,000 square feet (approx)
- Walden Street Frontage: 140 feet (approx)
- Sherman Street Frontage: 100 feet (approx)

	Current Zoning (BA)	Proposed Zoning (C-1)	Alternative (C-1A)
Maximum Gross Floor Area (square feet)	24,500 residential * 14,000 non-residential	10,500 *	17,500 *
Maximum Dwelling Units	23 units (29) *	9 units (13) *	14 units (18)*
Front Yard Setback: Walden (feet)	10-46 residential** None non-residential	10-44 **	10
Front Yard Setback: Sherman (feet)	10-36 residential** None non-residential	10-34 **	10
Side/Rear Yard Setbacks (feet)	Up to 46 **	Up to 46 **	Up to 37 ** (may be reduced to 10 min. by special permit)
Required Private Open Space	2,100 square feet (residential only)	4,200 square feet (residential only)	2,100 square feet (residential only)

*Does not include Inclusionary Housing bonus, which allows an as-of-right increase of up to 30% in floor area and dwelling units for a project of at least 10 units or 10,000 square feet. Number in parentheses indicates the maximum number of dwelling units if inclusionary housing bonus is applied.

** Depending on exact height and building length, and determination of side and rear yard locations.

NOTE: ALL FIGURES APPROXIMATE

Walden Street Rezoning Petition

Cambridge, Massachusetts

