



**CITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE**

# Central Square Rezoning

Central Square  
Advisory Committee

October 9, 2024



# Central Square – The Heart of Cambridge

**Our  
Historic  
Downtown,**



**Cultural  
District, and**



**Municipal  
Center**



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# Central Square Rezoning

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## Purpose & Background

# What is this project?

? **What** do we want to achieve in Central Square?

? **How** are we going to do it?

? **Where** do we want to achieve it?



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# Central Sq. Rezoning:

A community process to **update zoning for Central Square to allow for and encourage:**



More housing (incl. affordable)



Diverse retail, cultural and non-profit activity



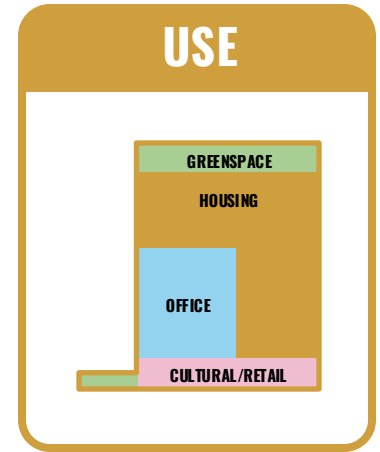
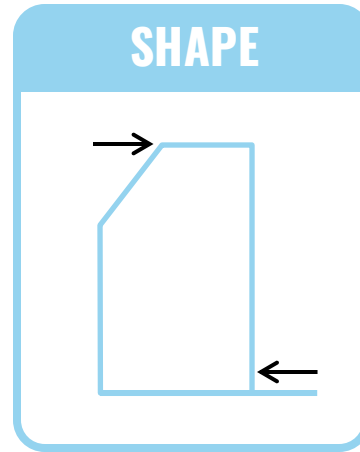
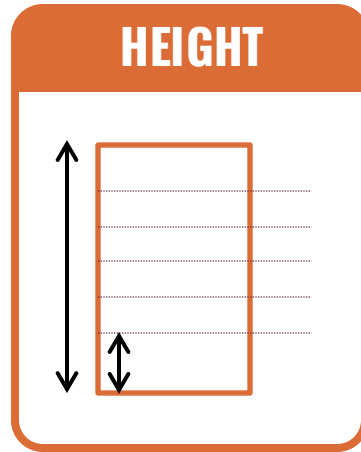
Public spaces to build community

# How do we realize the **community's goals** on private property?

## What is Zoning?

Zoning is a set of rules that dictate **how big** a building can be and **what uses** can be in it.

### Zoning Tools



# What are the Community's Goals?

## C2 STUDY (2013)



### INCREASED HOUSING STOCK & DIVERSITY

*e.g., affordable housing, family housing*



### RETAIL, CULTURAL, AND NON-PROFIT DIVERSITY

*e.g., small businesses, arts and cultural spaces; outdoor dining*



### PUBLIC PLACES TO BUILD COMMUNITY

*e.g., outdoor entertainment, pocket parks, programming*



### A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR CENTRAL SQUARE

*e.g., green buildings, tree planting, shade structures*



### PEOPLE CONNECTED TO THE SQUARE

*e.g., pedestrian and bicycle improvements*

## CENTRAL SQ LOTS STUDY (2023)

### HOUSING

*Create more housing in Centra Square, Particularly affordable housing*

### CITY AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- Accommodate cultural programs, events, and spaces
- Create high quality community services in Central Square
- Provide opportunities for social services to expand and co-locate
- Address city office and collaboration space needs

### OPEN SPACE, PARKING, INFRASTRUCTURE

- Increase parks and open spaces
- Support ongoing infrastructure improvement projects
- Meet parking needs and include transportation demand management



# Implementing Goals Through Zoning

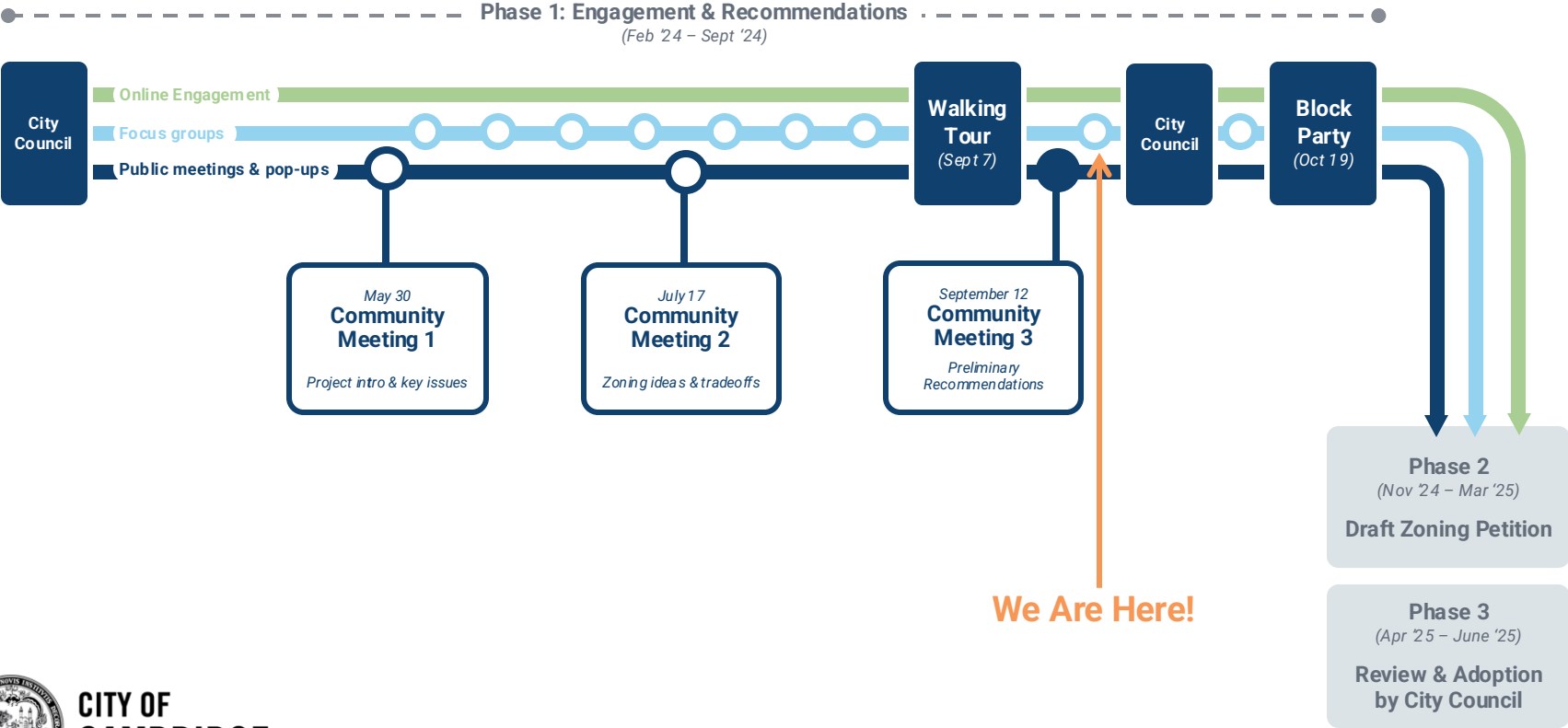


# Central Square Rezoning

## Process & Timeline



# Project Timeline



# Engagement Plan

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Public  
Meetings

Focused  
Stakeholder  
Groups

Pop Ups &  
Walking Tour

CET@CDD

City Council  
Committee  
Discussions



# Focused Stakeholder Group Meetings

## MEETINGS WITH EXISTING ORGANIZATIONS

### Central Square

- Central Square Business Improvement District (BID)
- **Central Square Advisory Committee**

### Neighborhood Organizations

- Cambridgeport Neighborhood Association
- Port Organizing Group
- Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association

## FOCUS GROUPS WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

- Nonprofit Organizations
- Businesses
- Property Owners
- Arts & Culture
- Nightlife
- CET Communities Focus Group
- Faith-based Organizations
- Seniors
- CHA residents and tenant associations



# Central Square Rezoning

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**What We've Heard So Far**

# We are refining the **community goals** in this process

MORE FREQUENT

LESS FREQUENT

Increase Height and Density

Limit Height and Density

Limit Height on Residential Edges

Preserve Human Scale

Create a Vibrant Street Edge

Create Variety in Heights

## Height & Density

**Mixed views** on increasing height and density. Many are comfortable with height **if for housing**, with a preference to contain **tallest development to Mass Ave.**

“

*Concerned about visual shadowing, and social impacts of taller buildings, especially if felt disproportionately by lower income residents*

“

*We need more people living in the Square to support neighborhood businesses.*

“

*You can also get a lot of housing through smaller projects (in large quantity)*

“

*I'm personally fine with any particular height*

“

*Don't think that people will notice the difference between a 16 and 20 story building on Mass Ave.*



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# We are refining the **community goals** in this process



## Use

Strong support for **housing, especially affordable**, keeping a space for **Starlight Square**, and encouraging the **small and local businesses that are key to Central's identity**.

“

*All buildings should have ground floor retail to activate a space.*

“

*Central is a nightlife destination for the whole region... Beyond drinking, we need indoor recreation and human services*

“

*Affordable homeownership, not just rental. 100% affordable can risk some segregation. Want all levels of income access.*

“

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



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# We are refining the **community goals** in this process

MORE FREQUENT

LESS FREQUENT

Maintain Cultural Vibrancy

Maintain Income + Community Diversity

Maintain Affordability of Housing + Retail

Avoid Gentrification + Displacement

Avoid Luxury and Biotech (Like Kendall)

Maintain Accessibility and Safety

## Community

Strong support for **supporting existing community** and **maintaining affordability of housing and retail**

“

*I'm more worried about losing cultural spaces... Cantab, Middle East, Man Ray are very vulnerable in single story buildings.*

“

*Need to restrict biotech so that it doesn't take over Central (like Kendall)*

“

*Central needs socioeconomic balance; the middle class has disappeared. Let's avoid luxury housing.*

“

*Concern about development replacing parking on Green St Garage and additional traffic.*



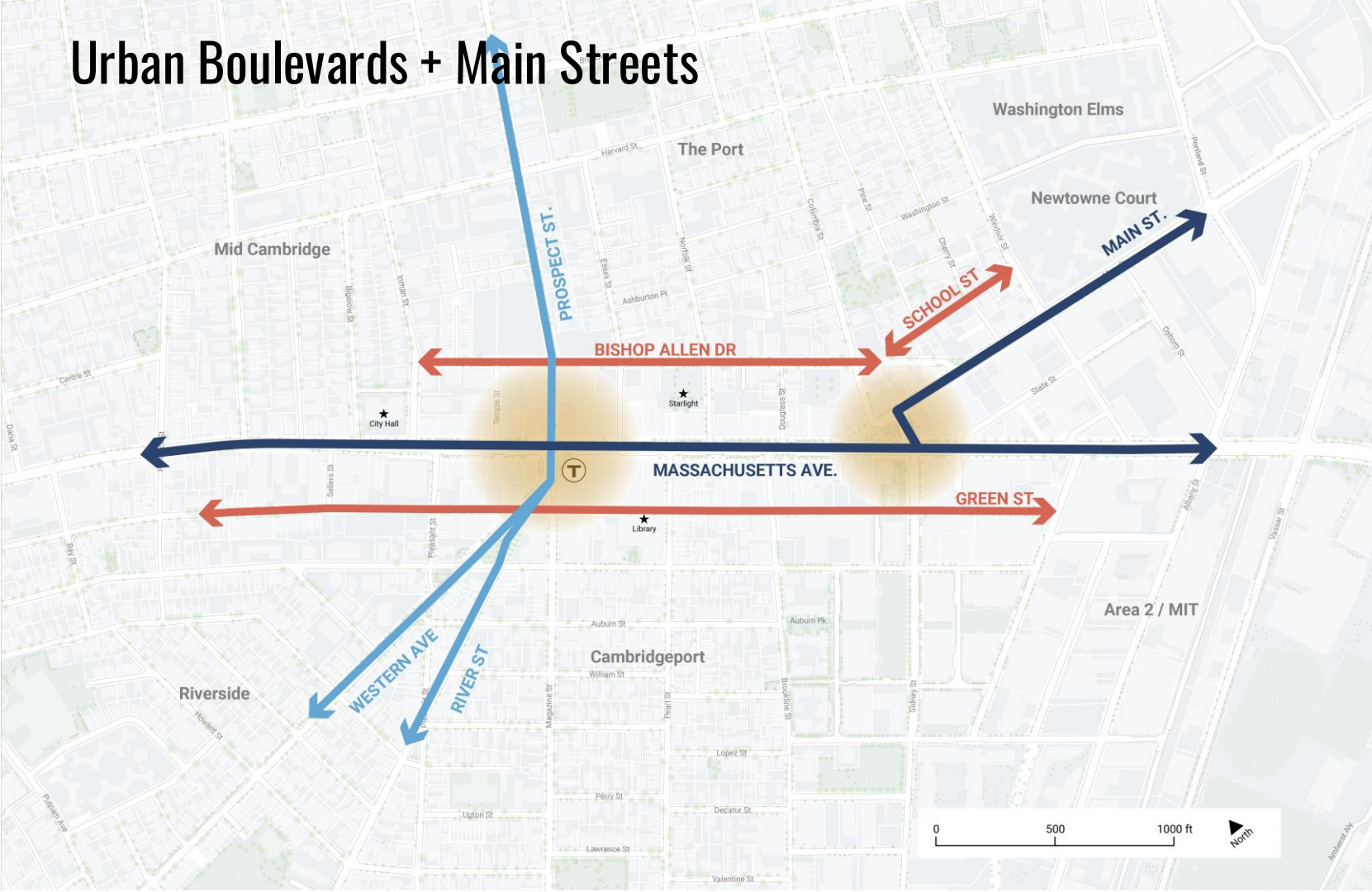
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# Central Square Rezoning

**Question 1:  
Where in the Square?**



# Urban Boulevards + Main Streets



**Urban Boulevards:**  
Main road for traffic and pedestrians. Connects to other major districts. High retail activity.

**Neighborhood Main Streets:**  
High pedestrian activity, connect into residential uses. Some retail activity.

**Transition Streets:**  
Transition between high activity main street and residential neighborhood.

**Nodes:**  
Centers of activity

2024 Zoning Proposal

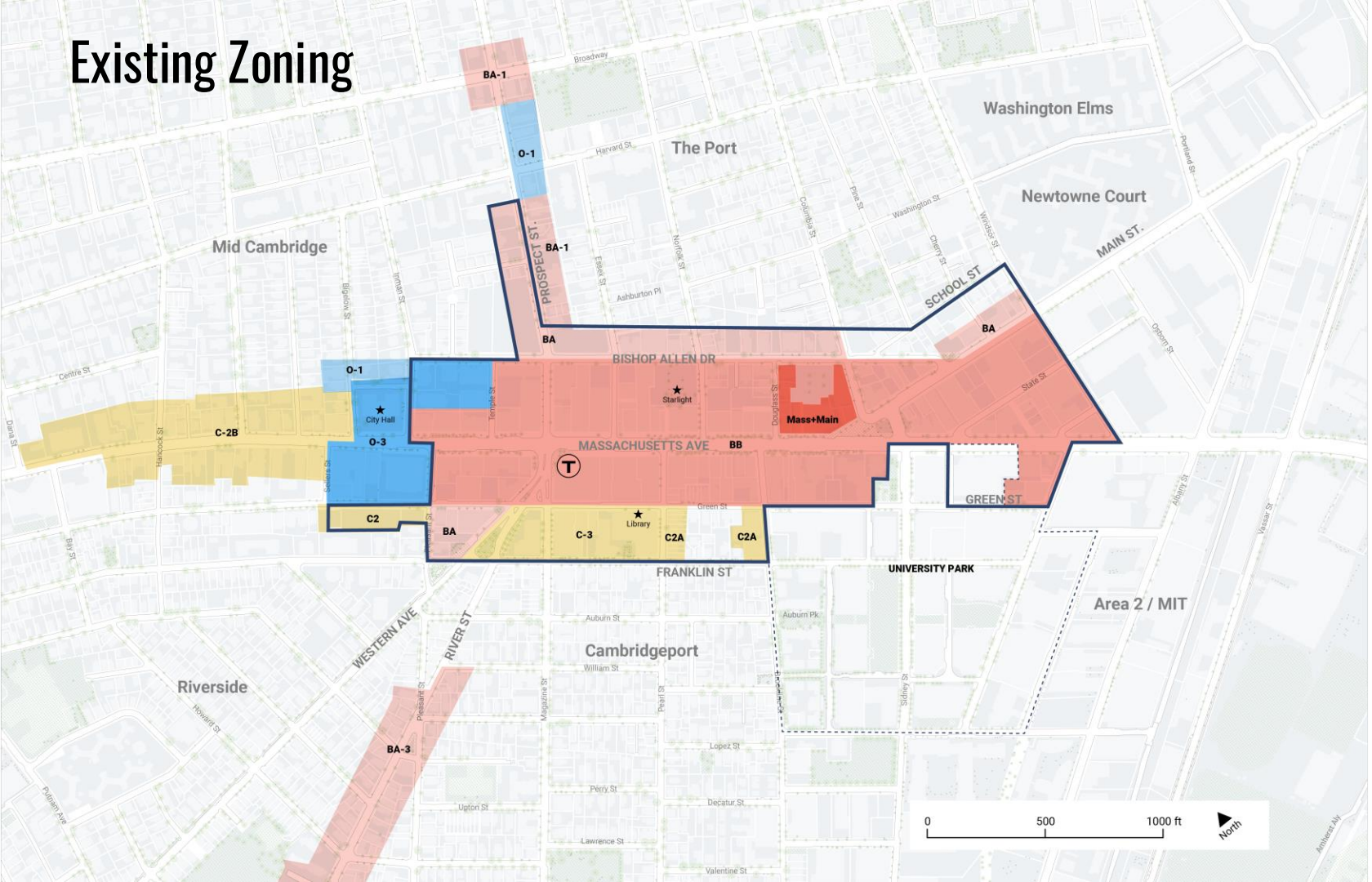
C2 Zoning Recommendations

Community input

Current Zoning

# Existing Zoning

Existing Central Square Overlay District



2024 Zoning Proposal

C2 Zoning Recommendations

Community Input

Current Zoning

# Community Feedback

“Worth extending up Prospect St to Harvard at minimum, ripe for neighborhood edge treatment”

“Extending the district to Hancock St makes sense – it's still very near the T station”

“Tall housing along the Mass Ave corridor is fine. It shouldn't go down River St.”

“It makes sense to have shops down [River] street”

“Might be good for clarity to just fully include partially covered parcels”

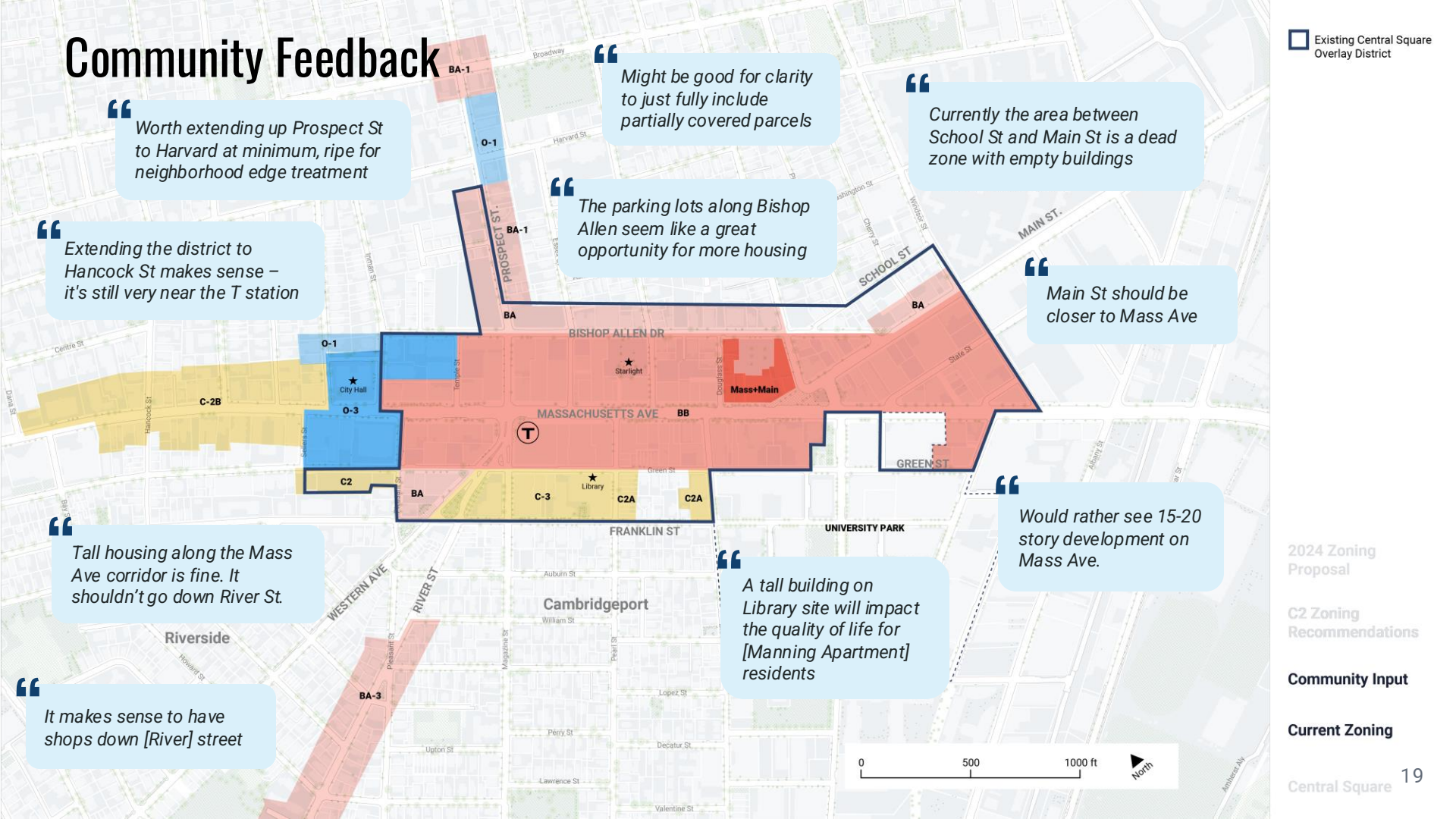
“The parking lots along Bishop Allen seem like a great opportunity for more housing”

“Currently the area between School St and Main St is a dead zone with empty buildings”

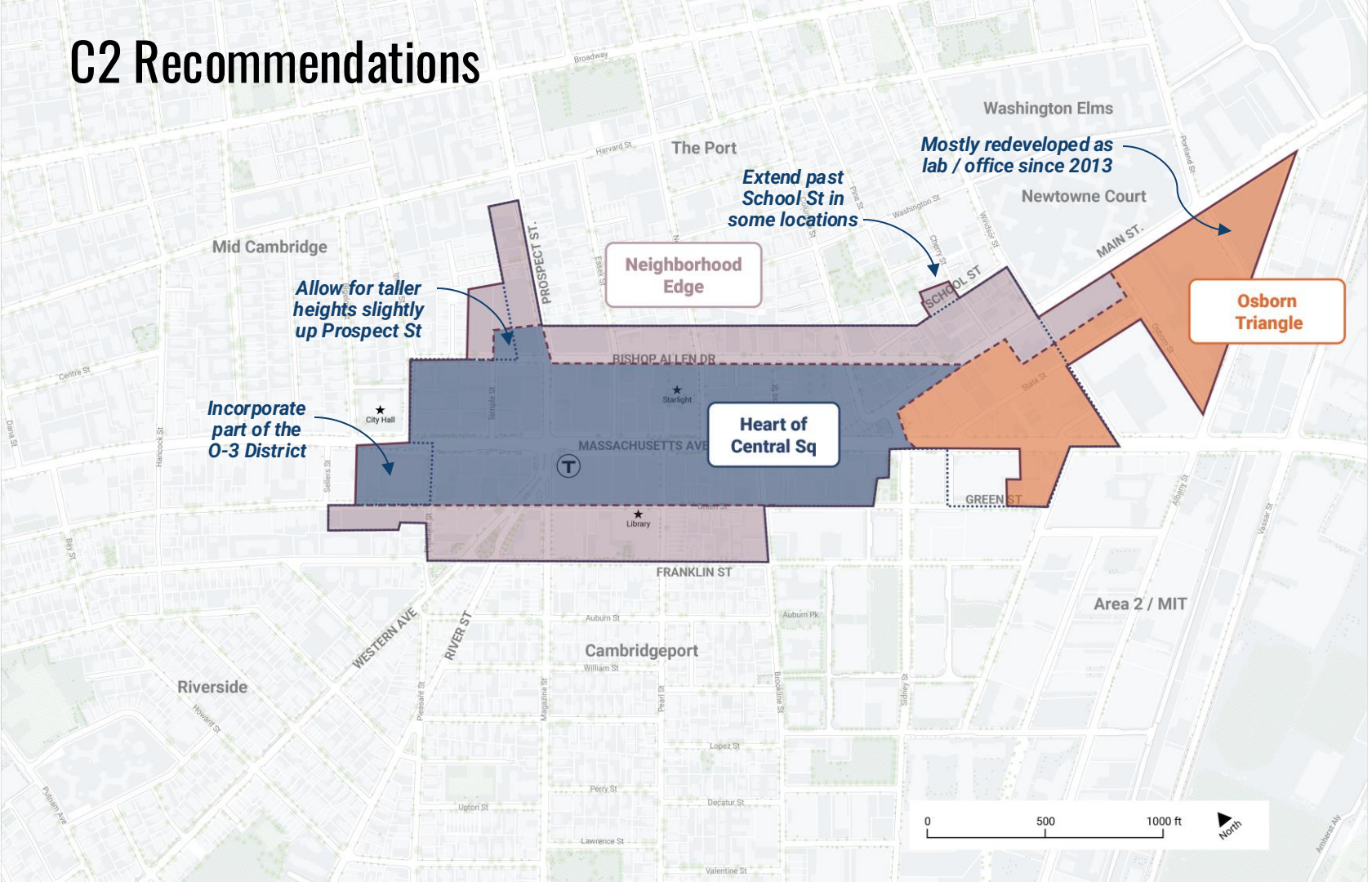
“Main St should be closer to Mass Ave”

“Would rather see 15-20 story development on Mass Ave.”

“A tall building on Library site will impact the quality of life for [Manning Apartment] residents”



# C2 Recommendations



 C2 Recommendation

 Existing Central Square Overlay District

2024 Zoning Proposal

**C2 Zoning Recommendations**

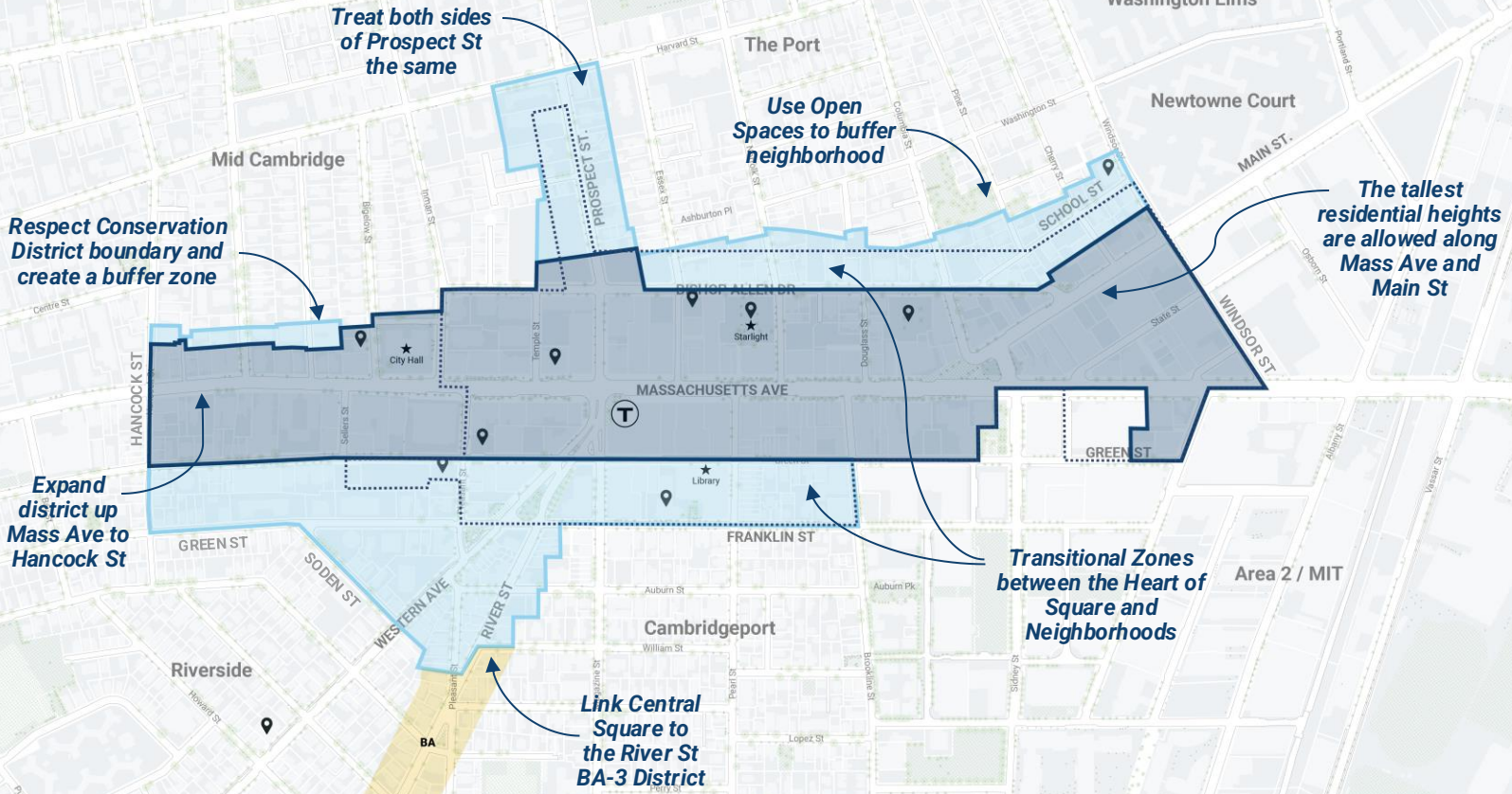
Community Input

Current Zoning



# Current Recommendation

- Central Square Lots Study sites
- Heart of Central
- Neighborhood Edge
- Existing Central Square Overlay District



2024 Zoning Proposal

C2 Zoning Recommendations

Community Input

Current Zoning

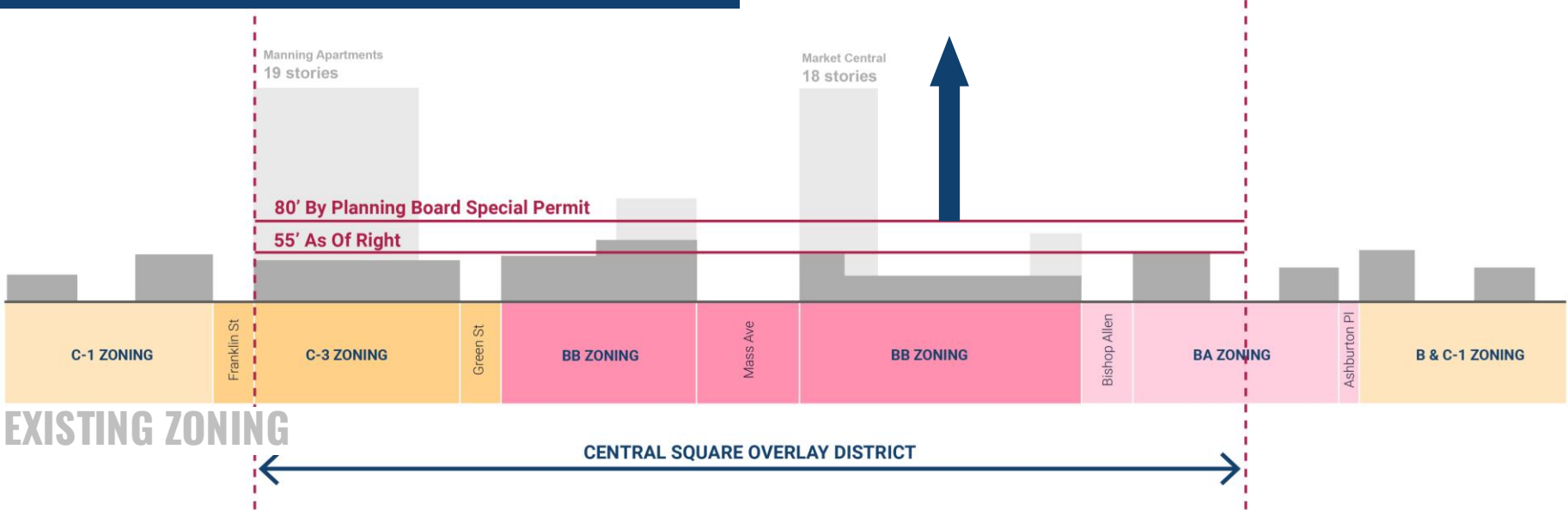


# Central Square Rezoning

**Question 2:  
How High for Housing?**

# How can we encourage new housing?

Raising residential height limits will allow for more housing in Central Square



# What should the maximum allowable height be?

12 Floors  
The Smith  
Boston



18 Floors  
Market Central  
Central Square



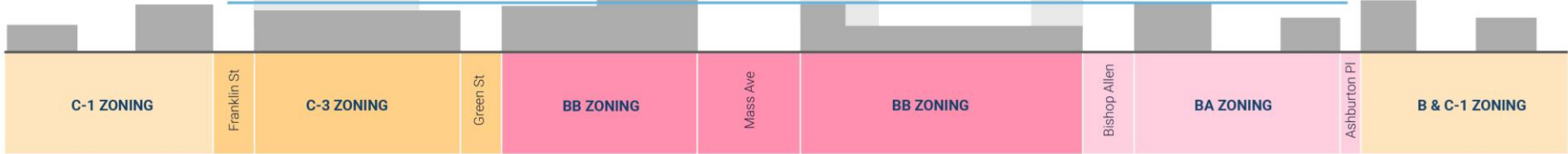
22 Floors  
Proto  
Kendall Square



22+ Stories

18 Stories

12 Stories



HEIGHT OPTIONS



# How should this relate to adjacent neighborhoods?

“Allowing 15-story buildings next to 3-story houses concerns me

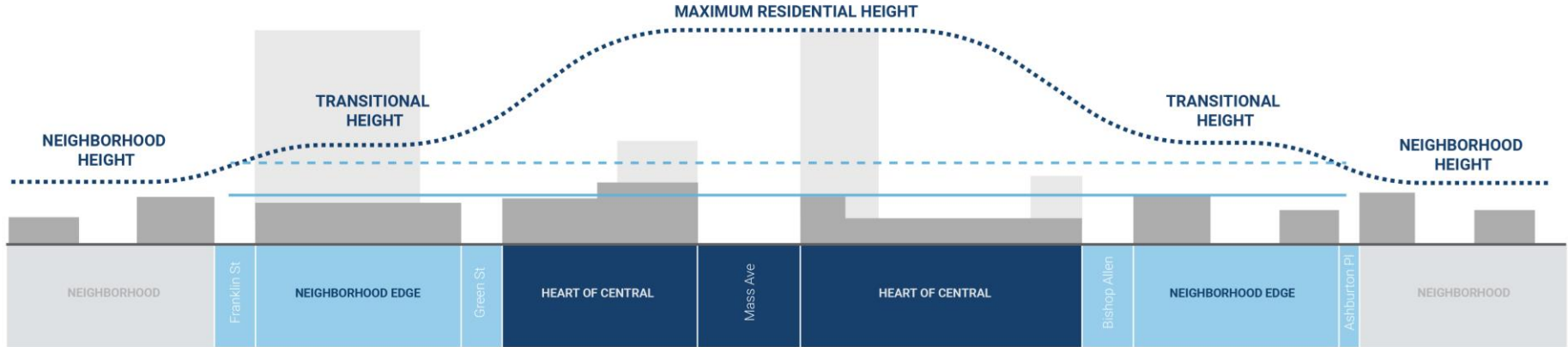
“I Support density on Mass Ave

18 Floors  
Market Central  
Central Square



“Development should be focused in the Heart of the Square, with the Edges scaled down to 5-7 stories

“Bishop Allen gets residential quickly! Could that be a better transition



“HEART OF CENTRAL” AND  
“NEIGHBORHOOD ZONES”

# How high for housing?

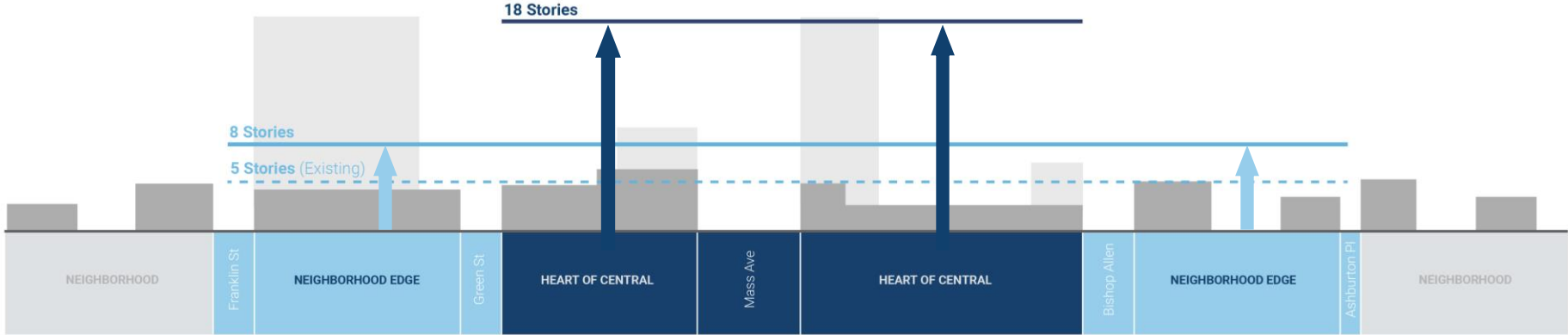
“ Central should be one of the densest neighborhoods in Cambridge

“ Density doesn't always mean height

“ 12 stories or more along Mass Ave is okay

“ I'm fine with any height as long as it's housing

“ We need to come to terms with higher density to mitigate our housing dilemma



RECOMMENDED ALLOWABLE HEIGHTS

# Base + Tower

“

On a major Boulevard like Mass Ave, where facades are roughly 100' apart, does zoning limit building to 80' tall?

“

Take a Parisian approach to density – dense, connected street wall and 6 stories in height

“

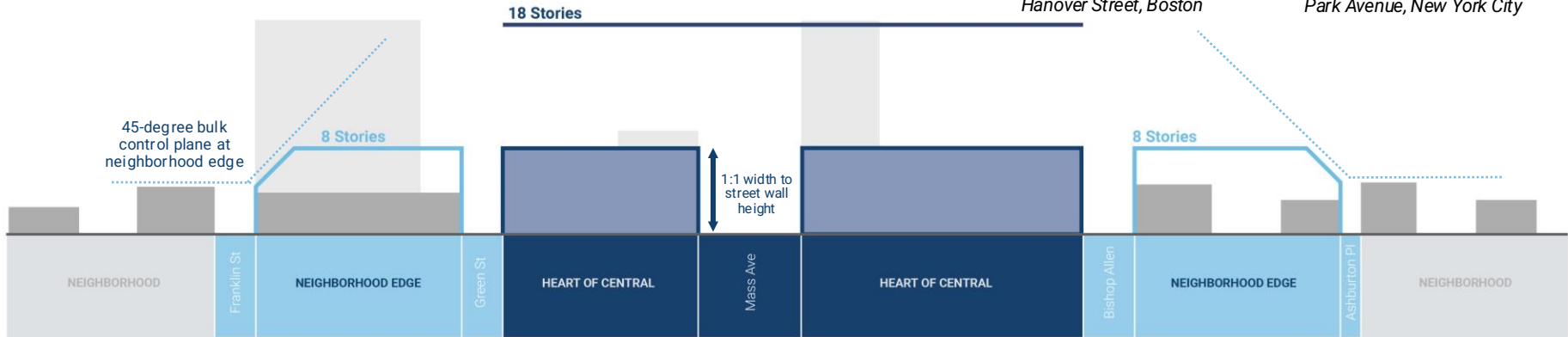
Hopeful some of the C2 vision can come to fruition



Hanover Street, Boston



Park Avenue, New York City



BASE HEIGHT

# Base + Tower

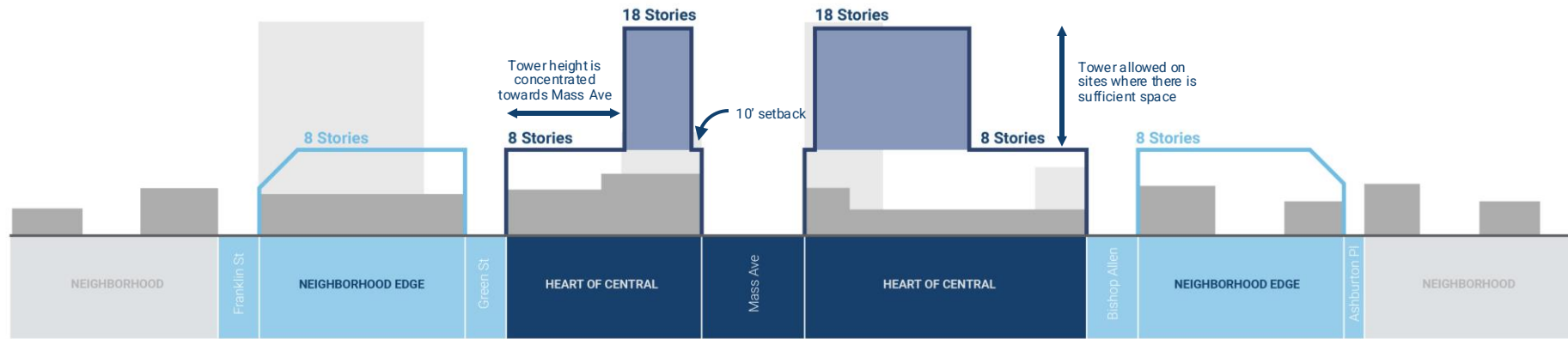
“ Don't think that people will notice the difference between a 16 and 20 story building on Mass Ave.

“ Taller buildings are good because they maximize land use which is the density and efficiency of the land and other environmental considerations

“ Zoning should enable 4 or 5 more 20-story towers

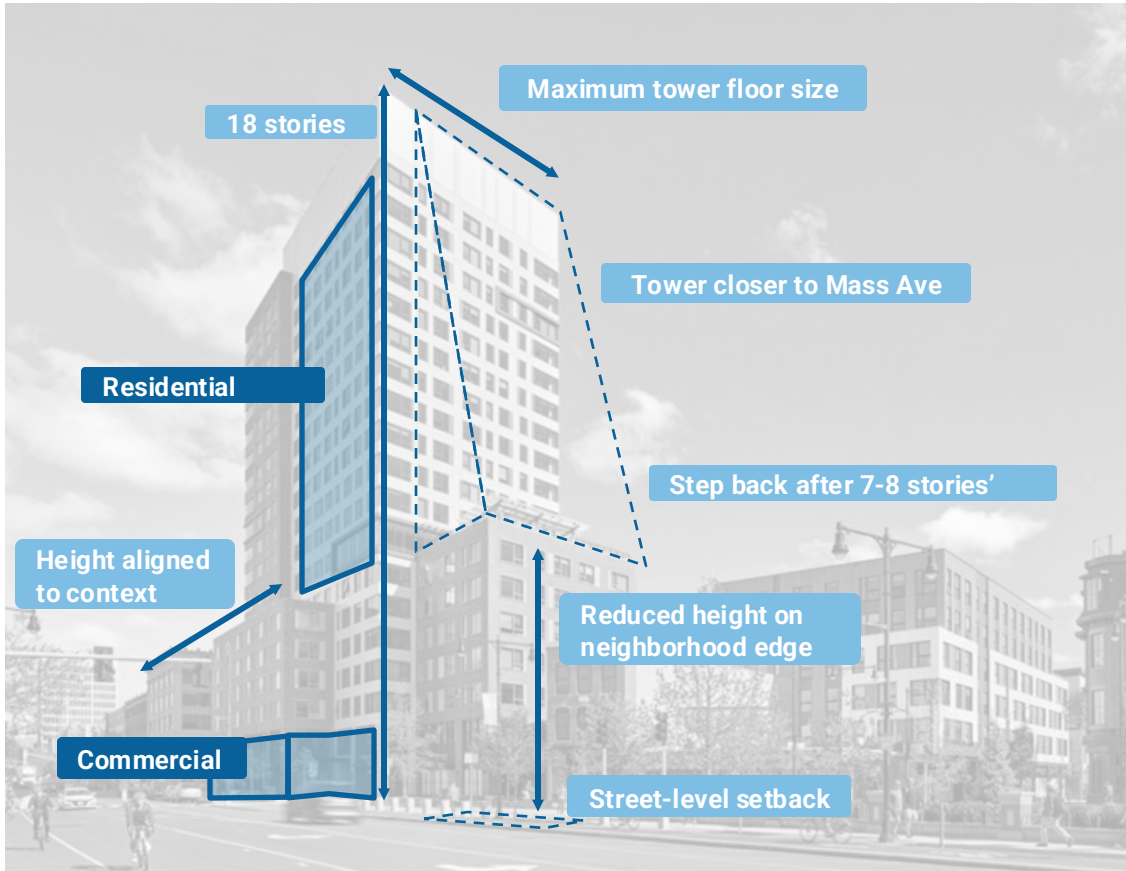
“ Central Sq is a good place for people to live without cars, making high-density housing a reasonable option

“ Okay with any height as long as it's for housing



TOWER HEIGHT

# Base + Tower



“  
Market Central doesn't really have a negative effect on me (Port resident)

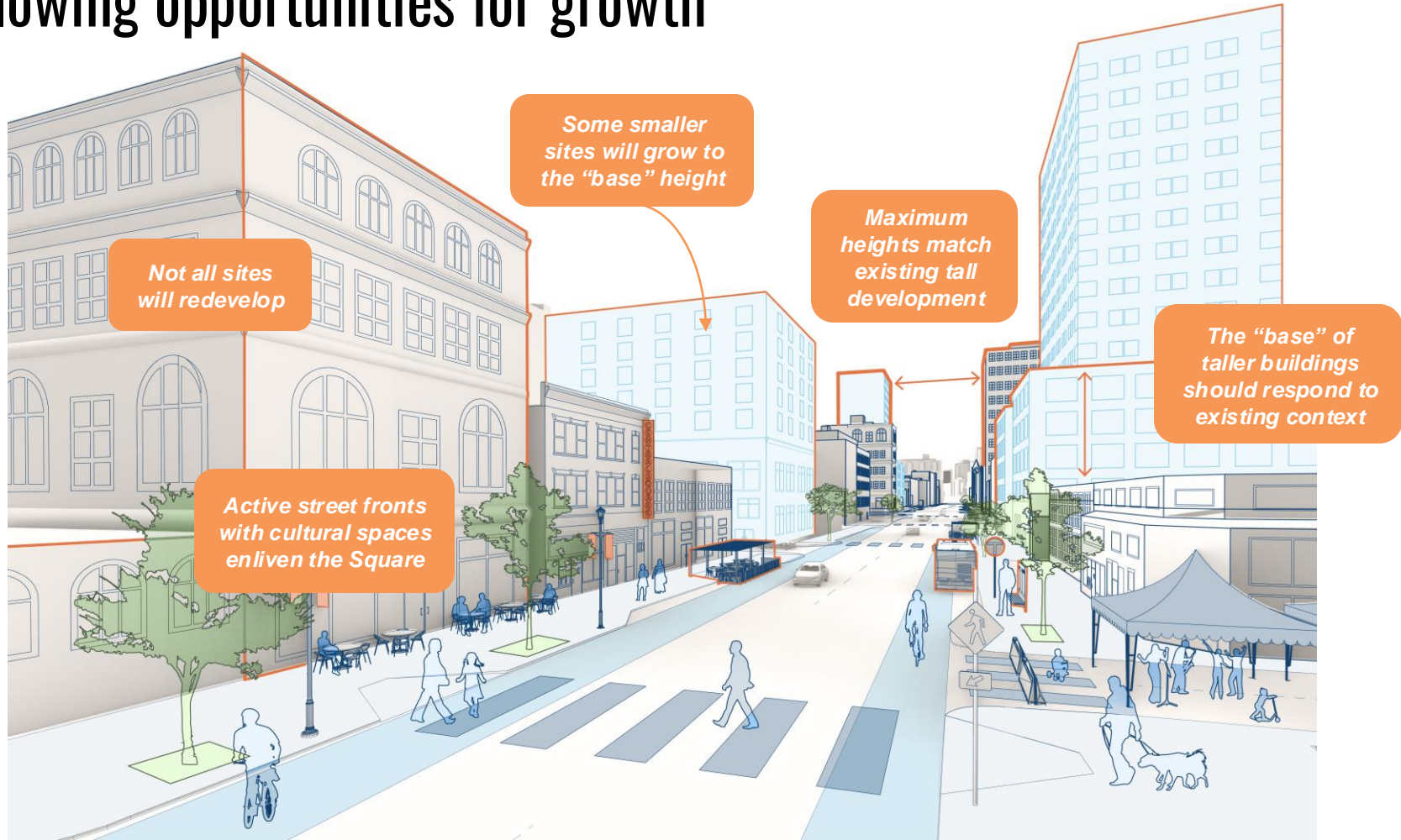
“  
It's great having access to the things in all the buildings (LINK resident)

“  
I'm concerned about visual shadowing and social impacts of taller buildings, especially if felt disproportionately by lower income residents

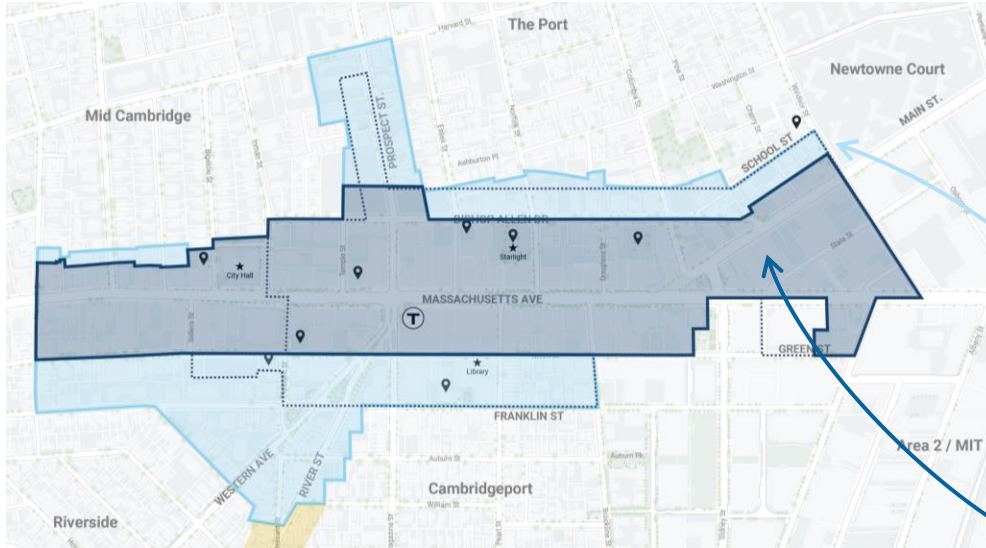
“  
Don't go straight up along Mass Ave, make the buildings step back like Market Central so they don't make the sidewalk unpleasant

**Market Central (2018)**  
Central Square

# Allowing opportunities for growth



# What does this mean for the Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO)



Growing the Central Square Overlay Boundary will allow for a **greater area to qualify** under the Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO).

The **Neighborhood Edge** zones would **preserve the AHO's height advantage**, which allows for 15 stories versus the proposed 8 stories (almost double).

In the **Heart of Central Square**, AHO projects would be allowed to **match the proposed 18 story height**. Allowing AHO projects additional height beyond this limit is unlikely to yield larger projects, as 100% affordable high rise is often more challenging to finance.



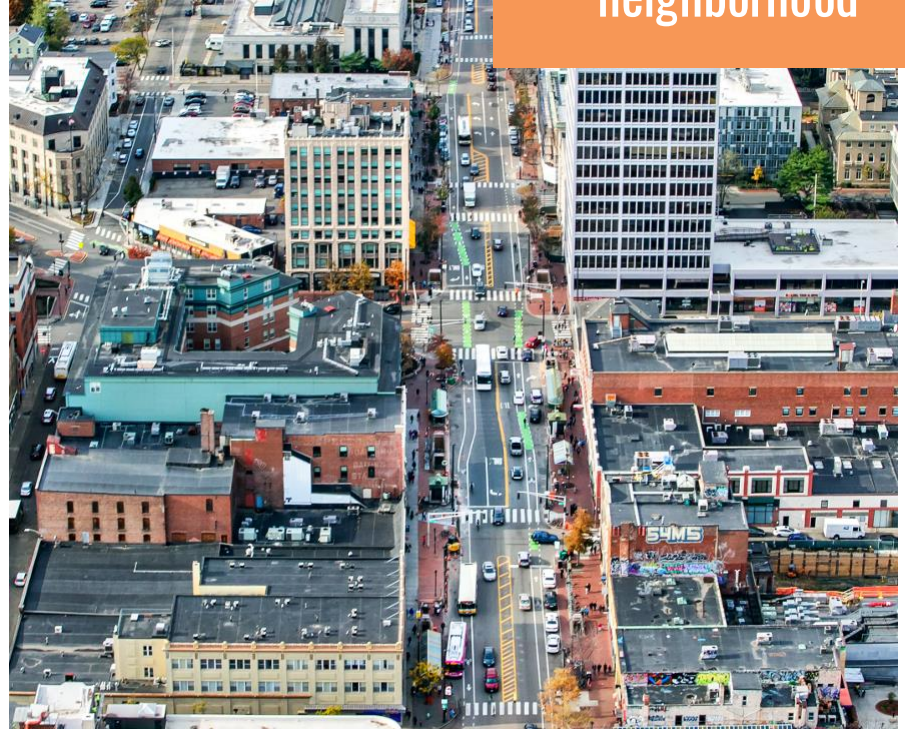
# Central Square Rezoning

**Question 3:  
How Do We Keep Central Unique?**



# Cambridge's cultural district and downtown

Active ground floors  
along major streets  
help create a vibrant  
neighborhood



# What kind of arts and cultural uses do we want to encourage?

## EXAMPLES OF CULTURAL SPACE

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- Gallery
- Art Studio
- Production Studio
- Theater
- Museum
- Entertainment or Music Venue
- Social Club
- Night Club
- Maker Space
- Community Gathering Spaces
- Community Center



Central Square has a rich history of cultural spaces

# What tools do we have to incentivize them?

To create more of these uses, we can allow them through zoning and incentivize the uses we really want to see

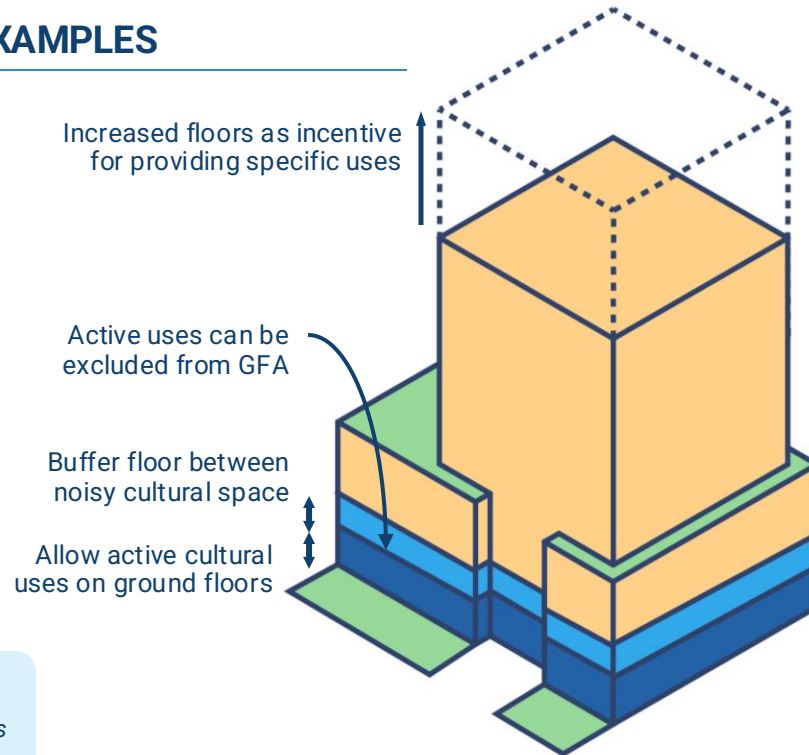
“

*It can be challenging having housing directly above louder cultural spaces. You need some sort of buffer between them*

“

*Okay with slightly taller heights if it gets us more arts and cultural spaces*

## EXAMPLES



# How do strategies differ between Central Square's core and edges?

## Heart of Central

**Allow** all cultural uses as-of-right

**Require** active uses on the ground floor of larger projects

**Incentivize** cultural uses through development bonuses:

- additional non-residential space, and/or
- additional floors of housing

## Neighborhood Edge

**Allow** all cultural uses as-of-right except for more impactful uses

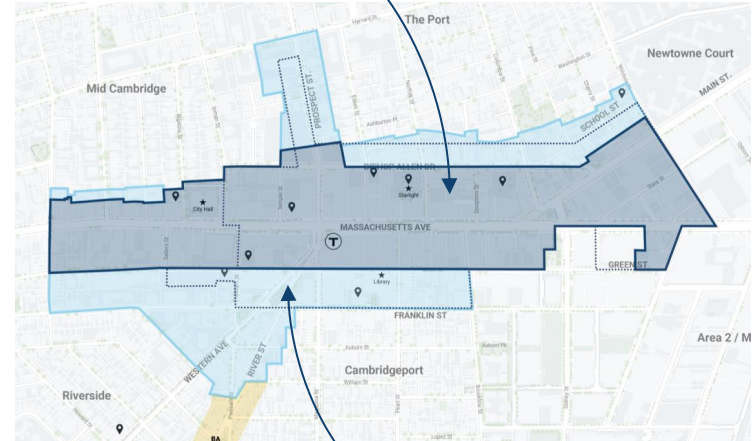
**Incentivize** cultural uses through development bonuses:

- additional non-residential space, and/or
- additional floors of housing

“

*It would suck to have someone put a loud night club in a transition zone, right next to residential housing*

*This creates a busier ground floor within the Heart of Central Square*

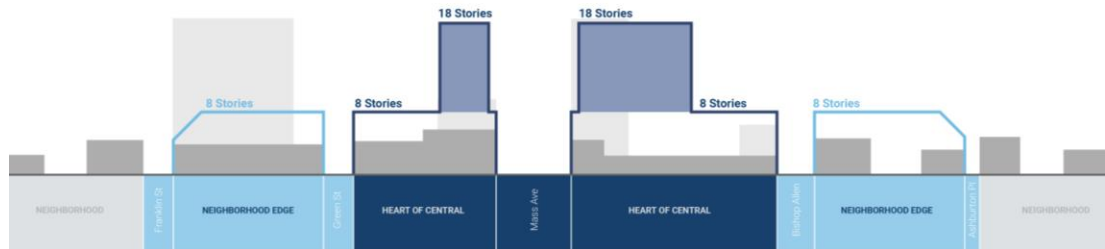
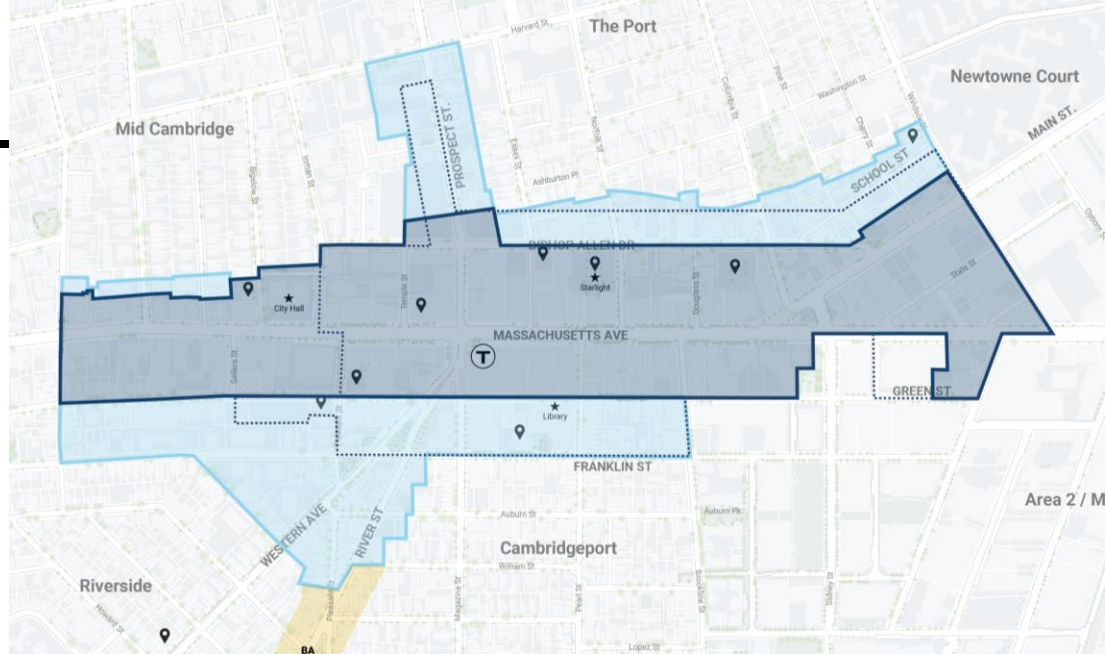


*Impactful uses (such as music venues, nightclubs, and theaters) will need to go through special permit and review*

# Topics for discussion:

? Does this height / shape / boundary resonate with your vision for Central?

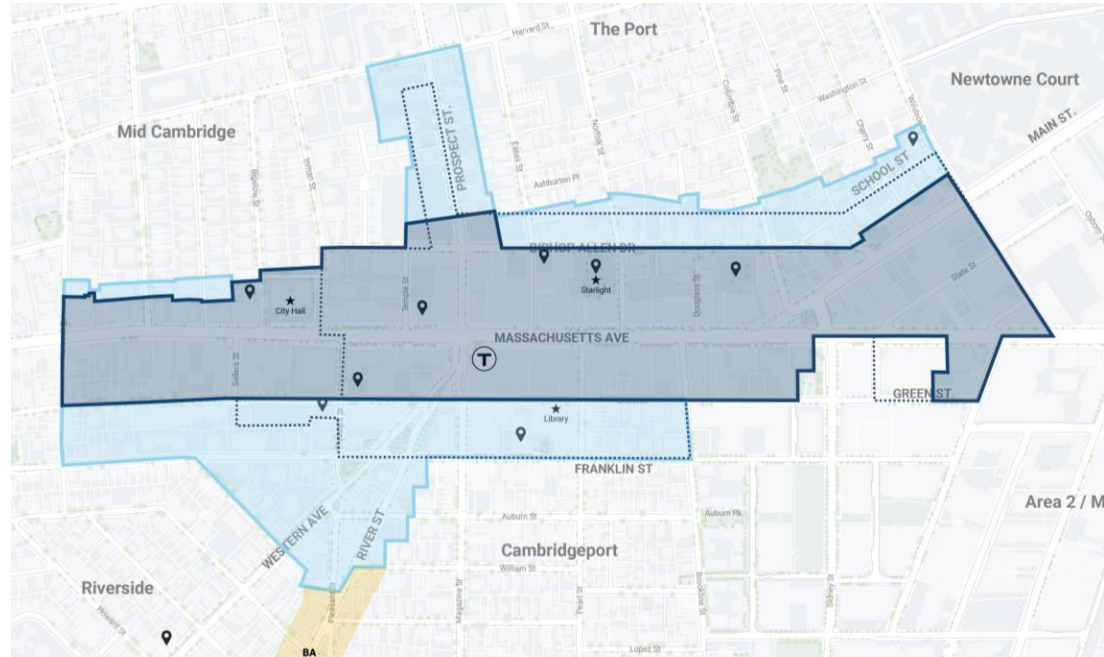
? What kinds of uses or spaces are most important to you in maintaining Central Square as a cultural district?



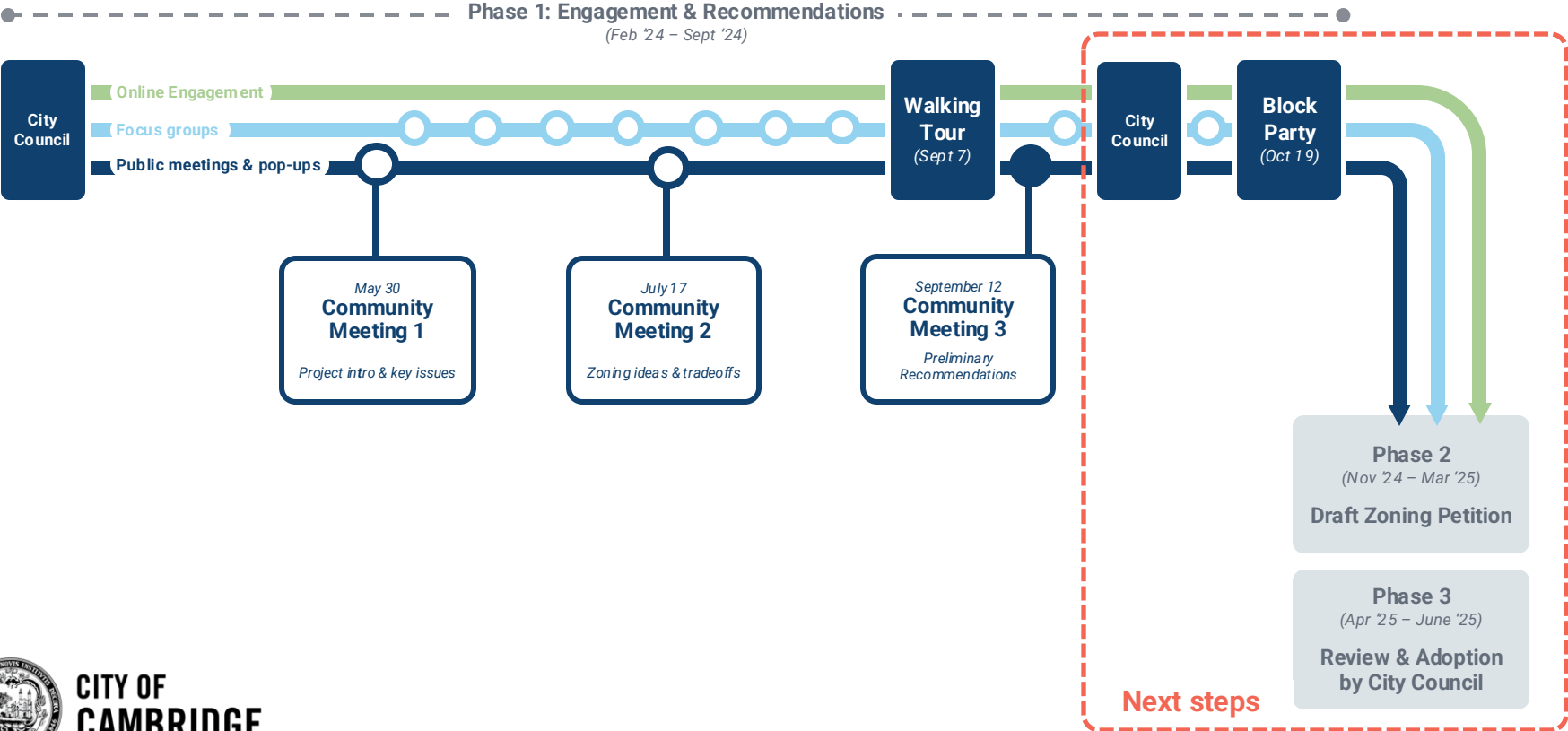
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# CSAC Suggestions:

- Membership criteria should be more flexible
- Make advisory review of Central Square-related zoning amendments and planning studies an explicit responsibility



# Project Timeline





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**Thank You!**

