

## CAMBRIDGE ADOPTS A ZONING ORDINANCE ALLOWING 4 TO 6-STORY RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS CITYWIDE

As early as 2021, Cambridge, Massachusetts began reconsidering regulations that restricted development to only one- and two-family homes in some parts of the city. During [a series of City Council Housing Committee meetings](#) in 2024, a bold alternative emerged: allow six-story residential buildings almost everywhere. By August, city staff and the Housing Committee had drafted a written proposal to reform Cambridge's zoning to allow mid-rise apartment complexes in every residential district. This includes the [Residence A-1 district](#), a relatively sparsely populated area near Brattle Street where the median assessed value of a single-family home [is nearly \\$5.5 million](#). Brattle Street's upzoning is a testament to the comprehensive nature of Cambridge's zoning reforms, as many affluent communities nationwide [have successfully resisted inclusion](#) in reforms that liberalize land use regulations.

Ultimately, [proponents view](#) increased flexibility for developers and property owners as crucial to meeting affordability targets and alleviating the housing shortage on a regional level. [A presentation](#) to the City Council in May pointed out that most new affordable housing in Cambridge is created via the city's inclusionary zoning program, which requires most otherwise market-rate projects to set aside 20 percent of the floor area for low- and moderate-income occupants. Historically, exclusionary zoning, which includes the strict use rules limiting new construction to one- and two-family homes in parts of Cambridge today, has prevented lower-income occupants from settling in the more desirable neighborhoods of the Boston area.

These reforms have proven controversial among many residents who view them as a sudden and drastic change to the city's land use policies. Specifically, opponents are concerned that the new zoning will [accelerate the displacement](#) of existing tenants in smaller buildings and is insufficient to replace older, middle-market housing with new income-restricted affordable units. Some neighborhood groups [also anticipate](#) the loss of open space and other negative environmental impacts from redevelopment enabled by the new zoning.

From September 2024 to February 2025, a public hearing process gave residents and various elected bodies



several chances to weigh in on the rezoning initiative, during which many of these concerns got significant airtime. On February 10, the City Council adopted a modified version of the zoning changes by a vote of 8-1. [The final ordinance](#) allows four-story buildings by right on any residential parcel. Six-story buildings [are allowed](#) on any residential parcel greater than 5,000 square feet if at least 20 percent of the units are income-restricted.

While the six-story height limit and universal multi-family allowance are perhaps the starkest changes proposed in the new zoning, the proposal also [reduces or eliminates](#) a series of density and dimensional standards that restrict the number of homes able to be created on a given lot. These include "floor area ratio" limits, rear and side setback rules, and "lot area per dwelling unit" minimums. Non-zoning regulations and processes, such as building codes and Historical Commission reviews, [were not affected](#) by the new ordinance.

Despite the comprehensive nature of the zoning changes, city officials project that these reforms will only result in [about 1,195 new](#) housing units (including 220 units of income-restricted housing) by 2030, or about a 2 percent addition to the city's housing stock. Still, in Cambridge housing advocates and wary neighbors alike are witness to a uniquely far-reaching upzoning proposal that could inspire similar efforts elsewhere.

**There are an estimated 400,000 adult children living with their parents in Massachusetts.**

[Source: [Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities](#)]

# STATE'S UNLOCKING HOUSING PRODUCTION COMMISSION REPORT INCLUDES BOLD REFORM RECOMMENDATIONS

The Massachusetts Unlocking Housing Production Commission (UHPC) is one of a handful of councils and commissions tasked with advising the Healey administration's housing policy strategies. On February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025, the UHPC released "Building for Tomorrow," [a 108-page report](#) packed with recommendations for scaling up residential construction in Massachusetts to alleviate the state's dire housing shortage.

Among the boldest of these recommendations are sweeping statewide land use reforms designed to allow denser housing in more places and reduce construction costs. These include suggestions to end minimum parking mandates for residential uses, eliminate minimum lot size requirements in most places, allow two-family homes to be built on any residential lot, and allow three- and four-family homes to be built on any residential lot with sewer and water service. Many of these land use actions mimic the provisions of [the "YIMBY Act,"](#) a bill currently pending in the state legislature.

However, the UHPC report goes far beyond broad zoning reforms to recommend long-term strategic planning around housing across jurisdictions. For example, the report recommends the state invest in expanding utilities infrastructure, subsidize the development of prefabricated housing factories, improve data reporting around housing production, and create an "Office of State Planning" to better coordinate municipal housing policies.

The report also seeks reforms to energy codes, building codes, environmental regulations, and existing affordable housing policies such as [Chapter 40B](#), among other recommendations.

Most importantly, Governor Healey has signaled she doesn't plan on letting the UHPC report sit on a shelf. [A spokesperson said](#) the Governor "will be closely reviewing [the Commission's] recommendations."

While most of the proposed reforms require legislative action, some could be implemented with administrative or regulatory changes alone, especially those related to existing housing production programs, building and energy codes, and infrastructure provision. Implementing the more ambitious land use and zoning reforms would likely involve months or even years of hotly debated bills such as the YIMBY Act.



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***There is an urgent mandate to build more housing in areas where walking, biking, and public transportation can get people to places they want to go. Better design is an end in itself, but it is also a means to gaining political support for more housing.***

***A team of Northeastern University researchers on the need for well-designed and contextual housing developments***

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

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## COMING SOON

Upcoming issues of *The House Call* will include segments on:

- Minimum parking requirements
- The updated MBTA Communities Act regulations
- U.S. Census Building Permit Survey data
- And more!