Advancing Housing Affordability (AHA) Petition

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**PART I:**

**General Questions**

**Question:** Is the AHA opposing the AHO (Affordable Housing Overlay) Petition?

**Answer: No.** The AHA petition is seeking to address the underlying causes of our outsized housing costs, displacement, and related issues. The AHO will still continue and indeed may be further modified. Hopefully they will add a yearly review, much as CCC has done for the first year of this Ordinance. One thing we found is that most new units are being built on existing AHO sites (in some cases doubling the density and number of residents here, and also removing key parking, trees, and open spaces, with little by way of amenities such as grocery stores or parks. We also have learned that new tax-funded Affordable Housing construction is costing over $900,000 per unit as quoted recently for the Jefferson Park Project by the Affordable Housing Trust. The Advancing Housing Affordability (AHA) Citizen’s Petition addresses core values of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinances in a highly efficient and economical way. It is a much-needed complement to the AHO, but we would very much like to see real accountability and transparency in both.

**PART 1I:**

**The area-wide large employer zoning perspective**

**Question**: 100 employees is pretty small. I work in HR at an organization (not in Cambridge) with just under 300 employees. I think we would have a very hard time putting together something meaningful with our resources and existing expertise. I think you would probably end up with a lot of relatively small employers supportive in theory but actually without the resources or expertise to do this in a way that will advance the objective. So they would find it onerous and frustrating, and it may prove counterproductive or, at best, “tick the box.” I would be more supportive if the threshold were higher. If the realistic target is larger corporations (biotech, tech) and universities, then 500 or 1,000 employees feels more plausible.

**Answer:** Companies could write a plan either individually or as a group designating a few target communities, help finance housing there (or help finance employees to buy there) and create a shared transportation system if none are available. One could also designate a percentage of employees to be working from home on a regular basis (say 20-25%).

**Question:** If we were to keep the lower threshold at 100 employees what would this plan look like?

**Answer:** For a company with 100 employees, it might look like this to reach 85%

* 20% living in Cambridge
* 20% working from home outside of Cambridge and telecommunicating.
* 25% commuting from towns (x, y, z area) arriving by way of a, b, c  transport  (a bus, b train, c bike
* 20% commuting from towns (p, q, r in housing in part financed by the company (either single family homes or condos or apartments) – and arriving by p, q, r transportation.

**Question:** Why include employers at all? Should not the City be building housing to provide residences for everyone who works here?

**Answer:** The problem is that we have now 118,000 people living here, up from 112,000 ten years ago when we had the 5th densest city in the country. Now 180,000 people work in the city – not all can live here without destroying our remaining trees, open spaces, and much of our still sustainable historic architecture. But getting larger employers to the table on this (including our big universities) we hope together to create a better way to address this.

Right now this issue is tearing apart the political landscape here – with some advocating to undue zoning and allow developers to build vast amounts of new market rate housing everywhere.

**Question:** Has this ever been tried before? It seems risky.

**Answer:** there are similar policies on the West Coast where companies like Google and Facebook create housing for their employees in the broader area – as well as provide transportation from these areas to the home base. Every Cambridge employer likely would be different. The main point is that in Cambridge an area approach (including housing, transportation, parking and infrastructure) to get these employers to be a part of the solution will be important Google and Facebook already help create housing on the West Coast. Why not here? The more housing solutions they  support in our area, the more housing will be freed in Cambridge for both long term residents and newcomers.

* See: Amazon, Google, Apple seek fix for housing crisis they helped (12.1.2019): <https://www.cnbc.com>
* See Facebook commits $1 billion to help ease Bay Area housing and plans to build as many as 20000 homes that are ... deep pockets to ease the shortage of affordable housing in West Coast cities (10-22-2019): <https://www.latimes.com>

**Question:** Why compare Google’s housing actions in Silicon Valley where they own an area of land twice the combined land area of MIT and Harvard to Cambridge, where they own no land?

**Answer:** A fundamental contributor to Cambridge’s current housing, transportation, parking and infrastructure problems is the addition of thousands of corporate employees with no requirement to plan for housing them. Google - like Amazon and Facebook are very successful, indeed wealthy, companies and need to be asked to be important contributors to our community too. Harvard and MIT have had to acquire land for this purpose; the Silicon Valley companies did as well. We need everyone to become part of the solution. A key goal is also to encourage financial assistance to low- and middle-income employees to build equity by purchasing rather than renting.

**Question:** Why did you pick 100 employees as the lower threshold. That may be too small.

**Answer:** Like any city zoning petition this one will need to go through a pretty long process (and modifications) before it would be ordained (and if course it could be turned down along the way). We may end up with a higher threshold. The 100 employee mandate was taken in part from the recent federal vaccine mandate but finding the right number for Cambridge will be critical.

**Question:** Why include the universities? They should be focused on educating students not City zoning policy.

**Answer:** Our universities are great contributors to our City and the current influx in biotech and infotech companies is driven in part by how important they are as resources. Our universities in the past have also been good stewards in the City and have stepped up to provide some critically needed student housing. Graduate studies programs and university staffing have grown exponentially over the last several decades, as have some undergraduate programs. We need the universities to work with the City on an area wide approach to plan for housing, transportation, parking and infrastructure. Harvard properties in Allston and in several other communities might be used to house more of the university’s own students, post-docs, visiting fellows, and staff. MIT already has zoning allowances in Cambridge to build some 2000 housing units in Cambridgeport (per a 1971 agreement).

**Question:** I have always found the summers without students to make the city feel dull and lifeless by comparison. Sitting in Winthrop Park on Friday night and being surrounded by fresh-to-the-city undergrads exploring their new digs was absolutely joyful. Why are you proposing that universities do more?

**Answer:** We all enjoy the students. They have been a key part of the Cambridge community since 1636. Harvard itself was founded near Winthrop Park. Early on and continuing through much of the 20th century Harvard has worked hard to house their undergraduate students. Most of those in Winthrop Park on Friday likely live in the nearby Harvard residence halls. We ask all of our universities to address housing their students, post-docs and affiliates with an area-wide perspective that includes other towns.

**Question:** How many students are we talking about?

**Answer:** Zillow which has collected [rental data](http://realestate.boston.com/renting/2020/09/22/college-neighborhoods-see-rents-drop-dramatically/) rental data since 2017 estimates that 20% of Boston rental units are occupied by students. In Cambridge, with a population now of 118,000, the number of students in rental units could be circa 23,600 students, if not higher. The City’s  [2020 Annual Town Gown Reports](https://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/planud/institutionalplanning)submitted by Harvard, Hull International Business School, Lesley, and MIT indicate that together these four institutions have 14,058 undergraduate and 21,364 graduate students attending.  Of these, 11,509 undergraduates and 11,110 graduate students reside in Cambridge, either in university housing or living in apartments off campus. They comprise about 28.5% of the city population age 18 and older. Unfortunately, the Town Gown report does not yet ask universities to differentiate the numbers or percentages of those housed by the institutions or in affiliated housing from those who do not. As we await more accurate numbers from our universities, let’s use 18,000 as a minimal working number (10% of the total Cambridge population, half the size estimated by Zillow). Even this number, which still leaves out post-docs and institutional fellows, is significant. If these 18,000 rental units could be brought back into the Cambridge long term residential housing unit pool, it would make a huge difference - providing far more availability, and likely lowering costs. In [Berkeley](https://www.berkeleyside.org/2021/07/21/uc-berkeley-housing-enrollment-neighbors-lawsuits), California, neighborhood groups have pressed the university to build more beds or cap student enrollments. No one is suggesting that here, but bringing all our universities to the table to create an area plan will be important.

**Question:** Including "tech companies" in the list of employers you believe should be doing something about housing in Cambridge, while actively opposing housing construction funded and led by the city's fourth largest employer [the City of Cambridge] is a problem.

**Answer:** The City of Cambridge itself is a big player in this in terms of employees, and they could use their/our own properties (underused garages or open lots) or buy new ones to house city employees (teachers, social workers, police, fire fighters, others). We can do other things as well. For example, when we build new schools or libraries, why are we not adding housing to these structures as a key part of the plans? Cambridge, like other employers, could also include in its plan that more of its employees work from home through telecommunication.

**Question:** Whatever you think about the housing crisis in Cambridge, requiring large employers to build their own housing for workers, who can remain housed only so long as they remain employed, may not be a good idea.

**Answer:** In practice what this actually means is that employers co-invest in affordable housing production, with X number of units reserved for their workers. Or yes, they do include apartments in their projects, but strong protections are provided to avoid sudden eviction. Not all employers will do this but some already have similar programs in place. We are looking at a holistic approach – with some employees owning their own homes or renting independently (in Cambridge or elsewhere) some employees living in co-owned or rental units (in Cambridge and elsewhere), and some employees working principally from home.

**Part III:**

**Modifying Zoning in Single Family and Two-Family Residential Districts**

**Question**: Proposing a solution to promote affordable housing and then explicitly requiring that new housing does not change the look of the house from the street suggests that aesthetics are more important than housing or affordability – why do this?

**Answer:** Cambridge has a wide array of historic and still very sustainable residential housing. We are seeking a means to optimize. One factor in Cambridge’s housing shortage is the restriction that all residents in single-family- or two-family-zone homes must be from the same one or two families. Many such homes are now occupied by just a single family member, forcing owners to leave hundreds of rooms empty throughout Cambridge or violate the law by renting to unauthorized tenants in order to support the home. The AHA petition will create additional housing by allowing creation of additional units within the shells of single-family and two-family homes, with modest changes such as doors and windows in the rear or on side walls near the rear, preserving existing sustainable residences and legalizing the many illegal apartments that now exist. Plus, we are adding an important affordability factor by asking that owners who add three or more units must meet City affordability housing guidelines, pro-rated to the number of units, with a bonus to encourage adding affordable units. Without this affordability component there is a real threat that these properties will be bought up by outside land investors, current historic and sustainable housing torn down, more market-rate (luxury) housing built in its place, increasing property values and housing costs for renters and owners alike.

**Question:** Should we not just build more? Why not just let individuals and companies just build more housing in Cambridge? Won’t this further gum up the works by ensuring that no more jobs get created in Cambridge?

**Answer:** In the current climate of massive international and national property investments, we can’t simply build our way out of this situation. And Cambridge, now the 5th most dense City in the country with over 75,000 residents, does not have a lot of space left. Google (and every other employer) is encouraged to come up with an area wide plan (not just building more in Cambridge) for housing, transportation, infrastructure and parking. By working together with other employers, we can come up with a far better and more equitable situation that will continue to encourage jobs to move here and have places to live for its many wonderful new employees who will individually and together continue to revitalize this city. We believe it is possible to address the situation better than we do now. If we don’t make the effort, we don’t help solve the problem and resentment and distrust continue to build.