

# Toward A Sustainable Future

## Cambridge Growth Policy

UPDATE 2007



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS  
Planning Board and Community Development Department



# ***Toward A Sustainable Future***

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# *Toward A Sustainable Future*

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## INTRODUCTION





*In this aerial view, there is evidence of many trends in Cambridge's recent history. Central Square, in the foreground, has become an increasingly healthy mixed-use center. University Park, now complete in the middle ground, had only begun to develop at the time of the first growth policy document. In the upper left of the photo, Kendall Square and the East Cambridge Riverfront are completing the transformation from traditional industrial areas to vibrant mixed-use districts. (Photo courtesy of Forest City Enterprises)*

# **Introduction**

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## **Use of the 1993 Document**

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In 1992, the City undertook a process to create a growth policy plan that would analyze the previous decade of extensive development and provide a framework for managing future growth. As a result of that process, the City published *Toward A Sustainable Future* in 1993, which has served as the City's master plan throughout the last decade of growth and change. Prior to the creation of the 1993 document, planning policies had been expressed in a series of plans for discrete areas of the city, such as the 1978 *East Cambridge Riverfront Plan*, the 1979 *Alewife Revitalization Plan*, and the 1983 *Cambridgeport Revitalization Plan*. These plans helped the City guide both public and private development, and were incorporated by reference into the Zoning Ordinance. The City had also developed objectives for other topics of concern, such as affordable housing, recreational programming, and institutional planning. Given the major redevelopment that was occurring in the 1980s, it seemed useful to coordinate all those underlying policies and objectives into a single master plan. The resulting growth policy document has been an extremely valuable reference in the continuing process of development since the nineties.

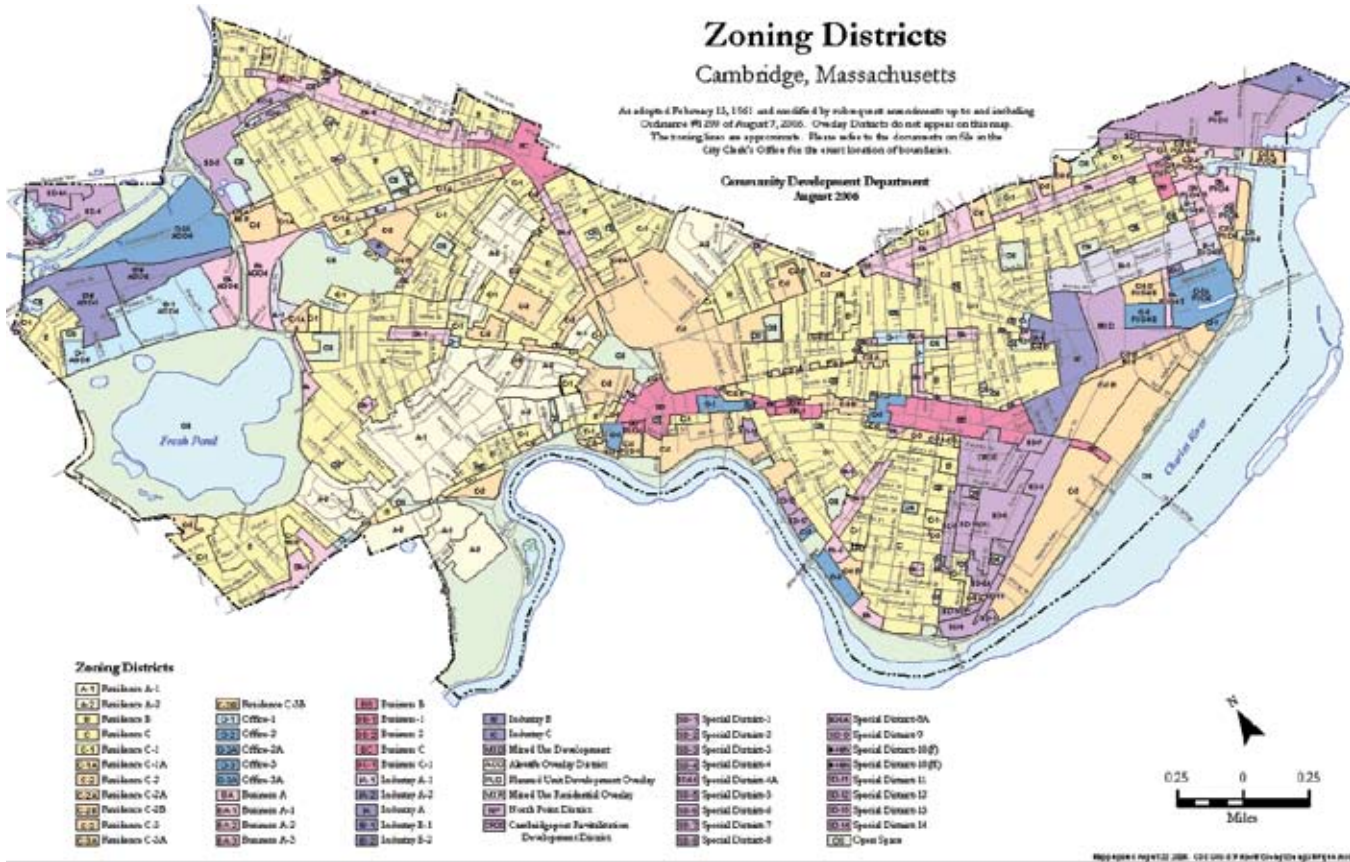
In addition to providing the policy context for an urban design or land use plan for portions of the community, the growth policy document helps guide the rezoning process that may be needed from time to time to achieve the visions of such plans. It also provides a policy context for evaluating specific actions such as the creation of new open space areas on public or private land. Further, it is helpful at a more detailed level in evaluating small-scale zoning changes in neighborhoods and in considering permitting conditions such as those that may be appropriate to attach to special permits or variances.

## **Purpose of This Update**

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The original document anticipated that periodic revisiting of the text would be fruitful, as the community continues to evolve. This is a good time for such an update, as the community has recently accomplished the most ambitious recommendation from 1993, which was to restudy the zoning ordinance in the light of development trends. This study culminated in the Citywide and Eastern Cambridge zoning updates of 2001. The principal area needing further study was the Concord-Alewife section of western Cambridge, and a plan for that area has just been completed, with rezoning adopted by the City Council in June 2006.

The policies continued to be remarkably pertinent in each of those planning efforts; the next logical step is to update the growth policy text that runs with the policies, and in so doing, describe the many significant community-building accomplishments that have occurred in Cambridge since the publication of the original docu-



The zoning map gives a good idea of the layout of uses in the city, with yellows for residential, beige for higher density residential and the campuses, red and pink for retail nodes and corridors, and purple and blue for business areas.

ment. To respect the extensive community process that created the policies in 1993, as well as the 2000 growth management community process, during which those policies were reaffirmed, **the wording of the policies is unchanged.** Certain policies may be more or less relevant depending upon the topic at hand; it is important to remember that every policy cannot always prevail in every land use decision. The array of policies in the document provides a range of considerations, but the policies by themselves do not obviate the need to make choices. The text of this update explains the many plans, projects, and initiatives that have been unfolding since 1993, and their relation to this master planning document. Further, there are suggestions for future development plans and initiatives.

### Summary of Changes in Cambridge Since 1993

The amount and kinds of changes since 1993 are widespread and significant; at the same time, Cambridge remains an exceptionally liveable community with a unique character. In keeping this balance, there are several major trends that characterize the City's development process over the last dozen years.

#### Land Use

Despite the expectation in 1993 that there would not likely be another intense period of construction comparable to the eighties boom, a similar phenomenon occurred in the nineties. The 2000 Citywide Rezoning study assumed instead that

the city would be likely to undergo cycles of more intense growth alternating with slower growth. To refine that vision for future growth, the City has adopted an updated set of land use controls, adjusting the amount of development allowed, encouraging housing, adjusting parking requirements, and requiring design review for most larger development projects.

### Transportation

Car ownership and use continue to exert a strong pressure on development. The City promotes the use of alternate mobility modes in special permit conditions, as well as through parking and transportation demand management. In addition, the City works to set a good example by encouraging its employees to take transit.

### Housing

Rent control ended in 1995. Since then, older neighborhoods have seen a great deal of reinvestment and modest amounts of infill housing. In 1998, the City passed inclusionary zoning, which requires a percentage of affordable units in all larger projects. In older industrial districts, higher density housing is appearing through conversion and new construction. Remnant industrial uses in neighborhoods may also be converted to residential use if the housing market remains strong.

### Economic Development and Employment

The Cambridge economy remains strong overall, with three triple A bond ratings for the City from the major rating companies. As has been true throughout the city's history, a hallmark of its economic health is adaptability to change. For example, at the time of the last update, the biotechnology industry was emerging as an economic force; today, the life sciences are central to the Cambridge economy, largely due to the presence of Harvard, MIT, hospitals, and research centers. Social and other services in the community are well-funded, sustained by taxes from the private market.

### Institutions

The universities continue to be major employers in the city, and are important sources of economic vitality. They are growing on their campuses and renovating many older buildings in order to maintain their competitive edge, particularly in the life sciences. Many academic departments, such as the Harvard Law School, need more spacious facilities to keep up with competition from other universities. This need for growth exists despite the fact that student populations are generally steady.

### Urban Design

Urban design plans from twenty years ago are well on the way to being completely realized. Citywide project review, adopted in 2001, is helping the community scrutinize new projects on an equitable basis. This review process, described in Article 19 of the Zoning Ordinance, requires traffic and urban design review for major projects, with focus on traffic impacts, the urban setting, environmental context, open space amenities, and housing issues. Plans for major new developments, such as North Point and Eastern Cambridge, are being implemented.



*The transit station at Kendall Square is integrated into a mix of uses.*



*Development around Auburn Court at University Park exemplifies many growth policy objectives: a welcoming new open space leading from the historic neighborhood through new mixed-income housing to new biotech buildings, with heights lower close to the neighborhood.*

## Open Space

Since 1993, many new parks have emerged, such as North Point Park in the New Charles River Basin and Quincy Square near Harvard Square. Extensive renovations have been made to many existing parks and playgrounds (ranging from the intimate quality of Franklin Street Park to the large scale of Dana Park), and the Green Ribbon Committee created a vision for further improvements to the City park system. Over the next several years, ten acres of additional public parkland will be created in the private development area known as North Point.

## Environment and Sustainability

The City has greatly increased its environmental planning and monitoring, with initiatives such as the publication of the Climate Protection Plan, seeking LEED certification for public buildings and encouraging it for private buildings, and the Lead Safe program for deleading housing units.

In the pages that follow, these trends will be explored with reference to the policies that will continue to guide future change.