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# Cambridge considers the elimination of single-family-only zoning



The Cambridge City Council is examining residential zoning.

GARY HIGGINS / BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL



By **Greg Ryan** – Senior Reporter, Boston Business Journal

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A Cambridge City Council committee met Wednesday to consider a proposal to allow multifamily housing citywide and to create more incentive for developers to build bigger in exchange for income-restricted units.

While Cambridge is friendlier to apartment and condo development than many municipalities, parts of the city are restricted to single-family homes, while other neighborhoods are limited to single- and two-family houses and townhomes.

Housing advocates nationwide have pushed cities to end single-family zoning as a way to boost residential production and limit the rise in housing prices. The Cambridge City Council has mulled eliminating the zoning in recent years without following through. Earlier this year, it passed a measure calling on city officials to work with lawmakers to craft zoning language to accomplish that goal while promoting affordable housing.

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At a Housing Committee hearing on Wednesday, officials discussed not only allowing multifamily and townhomes citywide, but taking other steps to make multifamily housing easier to build, including standardizing minimum-lot dimensions and reforming requirements around how far buildings must be set back from the street.

Burhan Azeem, a city councilor, and Jeff Roberts, the city's development director, floated the possibility of increasing a bonus for developers that would allow for six-story residential buildings citywide if income-restricted units are included.

“These are the solutions that we think will be most effective in responding to the council order request and that we think can be advanced the most quickly,” Roberts said.

The median sales price for a single-family home in Cambridge was \$2 million last year. That's up nearly 30% from 2019, according to Massachusetts Association of Realtors data. The median sales price for a condo in the city in 2023 was \$920,000.

The proposal is still in its early stages, with details and zoning language to come, but council members heard testimony from Cambridge residents as well as experts such as Jason Furman, a Harvard University professor who served as President Barack Obama's chief economist. Furman said that his study of slow economic growth and high inequality in the White House pointed to local land-use restrictions as a chief culprit.

“The economic theory is clear – that when you have increased supply, you would expect both the quantity to go up and the price to go down,” Furman said, adding that empirical studies consistently show that loosening restrictions either lowers or has no effect on housing prices while enabling more people to live in a community.

Beth O’Neill Maloney, executive director of the Kendall Square Association, endorsed spreading multifamily development citywide, calling housing affordability a key challenge to the region’s economic competitiveness.

A few commenters expressed concern that the proposal does not go far enough to ensure low-income residents can find affordable places to live in Cambridge.

According to the Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston, more than two-fifths of the Boston metro area’s cities and towns have over 90% of their land zoned for single-family use.

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2	5	Shawmut Design and Construction
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