

# City Council Election Primer

## Endorsements

Looking at endorsements made by organizations, and the criteria used to make such endorsements, is a great place to start learning about the candidates. Below are several such endorsements, organized by the topic the organizations are primarily concerned with.

## **Housing**

Issues you'll see:

- Affordable housing overlay - proposed zoning changes aimed at helping affordable housing developers compete with market-rate developers with the goal of getting more affordable housing built in Cambridge. For more information, see below.
- Parking minimum - Cambridge zoning laws require that all units built have a certain number of parking spaces associated with them. This number can differ depending on the area of Cambridge, but is typically 1 parking space per unit. Some candidates have called for this parking minimum to be abolished.
- Citywide minimum zoning - Different areas of Cambridge have different requirements for the ratio of private open space per lot area. Higher ratios mean more open space and more suburban areas. Citywide minimum zoning would decrease this ratio to 15% citywide.

### *A Better Cambridge*

"ABC believes that, for Cambridge to continue to live up to its promise, we must solve our housing affordability crisis. One of the most important ways to do that is to build new homes in our city and region. Increasing density is crucial to racial justice, environmental sustainability and quality of life... In fact, ABC is fighting to ensure that Cambridge increase the actual *amount* of below market rate housing created, and not merely the *percentage* of such units in prospective developments. High percentages don't mean much if new housing never happens."

Full platform [here](#).

- [Endorsed candidates](#)
- [Questionnaire Summary](#)
- [Full questionnaire responses](#)

### *Cambridge Residents Alliance*

"Some economists claim that increasing the housing supply should result in lower rents and house prices. It doesn't work that way in Cambridge. Instead, market development that caters to high-income people has a ripple effect—it raises the price of neighboring housing. The number of affordable homes lost through redevelopment is far greater than the number gained by inclusionary zoning, which sets aside 10-15 percent of new units for low and moderate income households...Cambridge needs a serious long-term plan to protect its neighborhoods and develop affordable housing."

Full housing platform [here](#).

- [Endorsements](#)

## Climate Change

### *MA Sierra Club*

“To explore, enjoy, and protect the planet; to practice and promote the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources; to educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment; and to use all lawful means to carry out those objectives”

More info [here](#).

- [Endorsements](#)

### *Sunrise Boston*

“Boston hub of Sunrise, a national youth movement to end the corrupting influence of fossil fuel \$\$ in politics and elect true climate leaders.”

More info [here](#).

- [Endorsements](#)

## Bike Safety

Issues you'll see:

- Inman Square protected bike intersection - redesign plan for Inman square to increase the number of protected bike lanes. See more details on the plan [here](#)
- Cycling safety ordinance - passed earlier this year; requires that the streets on the bike plan add permanent protected bike lanes if they are reconstructed
  - Bike plan is a plan to make 20 miles of protected bike lanes in Cambridge and can be found [here](#)

### *Cambridge Bicycle Safety*

“a group of Cambridge residents interested in promoting safety for cyclists of all ages and abilities in Cambridge, Massachusetts”

More info [here](#).

- See candidates who are Bike safety champions and supporters [here](#)

## Other

### *MIT Democrats*

Statement on chosen candidates: “They come from diverse backgrounds, are serious about fighting climate change, are advocating for better transportation, have pledged to support the Affordable Housing Overlay, and have embraced other pro-housing policies.”

- [Endorsements](#)

### *Our Revolution Cambridge*

"Our endorsed candidates propose building low and middle-income social housing on public land and enacting strong tenant protections."

- [Endorsements](#)

### *Cambridge Citizens Coalition*

"We are a group of Cambridge residents from various parts of the city who support smart, responsible growth, affordable housing, sustainability, the preservation of our environment and the enduring importance of our architectural legacy."

Read more [here](#).

- [Endorsements](#)

## Affordable Housing Overlay

The Cambridge City Council has a lot of power over zoning laws, which determines what can be built, where, and how much of it. Thus, the City Council can impact the availability of housing in Cambridge. Most candidates recognize that Cambridge is in a housing crisis - there are not enough affordable units to accommodate everyone who wants to live here. However, candidates hold a range of opinions on the best way to address this problem. The Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO) is a plan introduced during the last City Council term and exemplifies many of the debates around affordable housing availability. In reading about the City Council race, you are likely to see discussion of it; here we give a brief overview of the plan and its potential impacts.

### *What is affordable housing?*

Affordable housing for renters is housing where rent is less than 30% of total income for those making 80% of the average median income (AMI). For a single person, 80% AMI is \$56,800 and thus rent would need to be less than \$1,420/month to be considered affordable.

### *What is the Affordable Housing Overlay?*

The AHO would help developers who build new housing that is 100% affordable (see above) compete with market-rate developers by changing zoning laws for such affordable housing developers. These changes (listed below) would allow affordable housing developers to build more dense housing than would be allowed for market-rate developers, which would help them to sell/rent it below market-rate.

Affordable-housing projects would get the following benefits:

- Increased height limit, i.e. affordable-housing projects could build taller buildings. The new height limits would differ per region of Cambridge, and would be based on the current height limits in that region.
- Decreased minimum open space requirement, i.e. affordable-housing projects could build more densely
- Decreased parking requirements, i.e. fewer parking spaces required per unit built, which would also allow more dense development. The parking requirement would go down to 0.4 spaces/unit for all of Cambridge, and be zero for units close to public transit.
- Development plans are as-of-right, i.e. if the plan meets zoning requirements it would not need to obtain special permits or variances. Projects typically require these special permits as a result of lawsuits (from as few as one resident), which can be costly and take years to resolve. Developers would still have to get projects approved by community boards, but projects could not be stalled by such suits, thus decreasing the cost and risk for affordable-housing developers
- Allow for multi-unit homes, i.e. in areas where only single-family homes are allowed, affordable housing developers could build or rebuild single-family homes with multiple units.

More details on the overlay [here](#).

### *What do the proponents of the AHO say about it?*

Proponents of the AHO argue that it is an important first step towards increasing the amount of affordable housing in Cambridge. By giving affordable-housing developers the benefits described above, it would

encourage new construction of affordable units and allow these units to be built more quickly. The increase in number of units would also help drive down rent prices for existing units. Proponents also argue that the AHO is important for increasing diversity in Cambridge because all areas of Cambridge would now be zoned for affordable-housing units, including in the most suburban areas of Cambridge with the highest income and lowest diversity. In addition, the AHO would have environmental benefits by both decreasing the number of parking spaces (and thus cars) as well as allow people to live closer to where they work, thus reducing pollution from commuting.

### *And the opponents?*

Opponents have a variety of arguments against the AHO. Some worry that the AHO will change the character of Cambridge neighborhoods by allowing for buildings that are incongruous with others in the area. They propose instead a plan that would allow for development of affordable housing in certain areas to increase the housing diversity of Cambridge overall while maintaining the character of individual neighborhoods. Some argue that the decreased minimum zoning requirements would have a negative environmental impact by harming the city's tree canopy. Some fear that affordable housing developments will displace middle-income (120% AMI) households and that the AHO should allow such households to move into affordable housing units if they are displaced. And some think that giving the green-light to developers would result in development of high-end units (rather than affordable-units) that would actually drive up housing costs in Cambridge. They propose that instead Cambridge develop a long-term plan for the city that involves a required percentage of affordable housing.

### Sources:

1. [Cambridge CDD 100%-Affordable Housing Overlay](#)
2. [City of Cambridge 100%-Affordable Housing Overlay Proposal \(March 2019\)](#)
3. ["Cambridge has everything to gain from the Affordable Housing Overlay"](#). A Better Cambridge Action Fund (Apr. 11, 2019)
4. ["Point: Yes to affordable housing; no to the citywide overlay."](#) Digboston. Suzanne Preston Blier (Aug. 22, 2019)
5. "Affordable Housing Overlay Deconstructed." Part I and II. Jan Devereux (July 5 2019)