Statement in Support of Cambridge Affordable Housing Overlay

The Graduate Student Council (GSC) represents the 6,900 graduate students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in all matters concerning their quality of life during their studies at MIT. We fully support all measures that ensure access to affordable, quality housing for all MIT graduate student households. As such, we strongly support adoption of the Affordable Housing Overlay by the City of Cambridge without amendments to weaken it, which represents an important step towards increasing the amount of affordable housing in Cambridge.

The Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO) would update Cambridge zoning laws to help developers who build new or renovate existing housing that is 100% affordable compete with market-rate developers. Affordable housing for renters is defined as housing where monthly rent is no more than 30% of the total household income for households earning no more than 100% of the area median income (AMI). Through a variety of provisions the AHO 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. Under the AHO, affordable housing projects would get the following benefits:

- An increased height limit that would allow affordable-housing projects to build taller buildings. New height limits would differ per region of Cambridge, and would be based on the current height limits in that region.
- A decreased open space requirement
- Decreases to the amount of parking spaces required per unit built, that could be reduced to zero required parking spaces per unit if tenants are provided free membership to a bikeshare program or a 50% reduced MBTA pass.
- As-of-right development plans, where plans that meet zoning requirements and are approved by community boards do not need to obtain additional special permits, which are often required as a result of lawsuits (from as few as one resident) that can take years to resolve.
- Ability to build multi-unit homes in Cambridge neighborhoods that are currently only zoned for single-family homes.

Over the past decade, the number of MIT graduate students has steadily increased without corresponding increases in housing availability. Only 40% of graduate students can be housed in on-campus housing, and thousands of students thus look for housing in Cambridge and the surrounding areas every year. This puts an ever increasing burden on the Cambridge housing market, which continues to drive up housing costs for students and longtime Cambridge residents alike. The development of more housing units in Cambridge is thus of critical importance to our community. While the AHO does not guarantee that more housing will be built in Cambridge, we believe it is an important first step towards encouraging construction of affordable units and allowing these units to be built more quickly. Increases in the number of units will also help to drive down rents for existing units.

We also strongly support that the AHO would allow affordable units to be built in all Cambridge neighborhoods, including those in the most suburban areas of Cambridge that have the highest income and lowest diversity. Changes to height and open-space limits, as well as ability to build multi-family homes in these neighborhoods are critical for allowing affordable housing developers to build new units in these areas of Cambridge. Like many cities, Cambridge has a long history of exclusionary housing policies that legalized housing discrimination, prevented generations of Black Americans from buying suburban homes and accumulating wealth, and segregated our neighborhoods. Allowing affordable housing units in all Cambridge neighborhoods is one small step that we must take towards beginning to right housing inequity and promoting diversity throughout the city.

As such, the MIT GSC urges the Cambridge City Council to pass the AHO as a step towards increasing housing availability in Cambridge and ensuring Cambridge can be affordable for everyone, including students.

Prepared by the External Affairs Board on behalf of the MIT Graduate Student Council. May 2020.

---------------------------------------------------------

1 100% Affordable Housing Overlay Zoning Petition 2020. Cambridge, MA.
3 Graduate Student Housing Working Group Report to the Chancellor. (August 2018)