



TOWN OF ARLINGTON

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DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING and COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

MEMORANDUM

To: MBTA Communities Working Group (MBTACWG, "Working Group")
Arlington Redevelopment Board (ARB)

From: Claire V. Ricker, AICP - Director of Planning and Community Development

Date: July 28, 2023

RE: MBTA Communities Zoning Recommendations

Introduction:

I am writing to provide additional information to the Working Group following your joint meetings with the ARB on July 24th and 25th and ahead of your August 1st meeting. This memo provides my suggested revisions to the proposal voted on by the Working Group on July 17th meeting, based on additional feedback received from the ARB and the public.

Proposal:

Subdistricts:

Mass Ave – properties with frontage on Mass Ave

Broadway – properties with frontage on Broadway

Neighborhood – properties within ~250' measured from the midline of Mass Ave or Broadway

Dimensional Controls:

Subdistrict	Setbacks			Stories
	Front	Side	Rear	
Mass Ave	15'	5'	20'	4
Broadway	15'	5'	20'	4
Neighborhood	15'	10'	20'	3.5

Bonuses:

Commercial – height and setback bonus for ground floor commercial

Affordable – height bonus for exceeding 15% affordable housing

Environmental – height bonus for "SITES Gold" certifiable (100 points)

Subdistrict	Bonuses			Max Stories (after Bonus)
	Commercial	Affordable	Environmental	
Mass Ave	+2 and 0' Front	+1	+1	6
Broadway	+1	+1	+1	5
Neighborhood	--	--	--	3.5

Discussion:

Setbacks:

Research has shown that a ten-foot setback may be enough to plant an ornamental tree, but in order to support and sustain a shade tree, a space of at least 15' by 15' is recommended. A minimum 15-foot setback for all properties in the zone will allow for the developer or future owner/tenants the opportunity to plant a tree. 15-foot setbacks are contextual to the neighborhoods currently under the overlay we're proposing, as well as being responsive to the urgent need to expand Arlington's urban tree canopy in East Arlington and along commercial corridors.

Other uses in the setbacks that the Working Group was concerned about at their July 17th meeting can be governed by definitions already included in the Zoning By-law (ZBL), and by clearly disallowing parking in the front setback under any conditions. The Working Group may also consider adding a permeable surface percentage to be applied to the setback, for example: Setback is required to have at minimum 50% permeable surface and 50% landscaped open space. DPCD also recommends that the "useable open space" requirement for currently conforming properties not apply to the MBTAC overlay district.

DPCD agrees that a zero-setback bonus makes sense for a project proposing street level commercial; DPCD recommends a step back at the fourth floor of any project as is currently required in the ZBL.

SITES Rating System for Development

The United States Green Building Council (USGBC) has several certification levels for real estate project development, the most well-known is LEED. While LEED was developed to guide building and neighborhood design, the central message of the SITES program is that any project holds the potential to protect, improve, and regenerate the benefits and services provided by healthy ecosystems. SITES provides guidance and incentives that can transform land development and management practices towards regenerative design. The SITES Rating System, and specifically its site-specific performance benchmarks, is based on the concept of ecosystem services; an understanding of natural processes; best practices in landscape architecture, ecological restoration, and related fields; and knowledge gained through peer-reviewed literature, case-study precedents, and SITES pilot projects. By achieving these benchmarks, a project will contribute to maintaining, supporting, and enhancing natural systems and the essential services they provide. DPCD recommends that an "open space bonus" be granted to developers whose projects achieve 85 points under the SITES rubric and be certifiable at the "gold" level (100 points) whether the developer seeks official SITES commissioning certification or not.

More information about SITES criteria can be found at <https://sustainablesites.org>.

Commercial Properties

To best facilitate short-term housing development in response to the current crisis, DPCD recommends SOME parcels currently zoned for business be included in the MBTAC zone on Massachusetts Avenue. As these are larger parcels with more capacity, the likelihood of these parcels siting 40B development instead of an ARB reviewable MBTAC development is not insignificant, and regardless of MBTAC zoning the Town will remain subject to 40B development for the foreseeable future. These larger parcels will also support utilization of the proposed bonuses, especially for open space, as the increased by-right allowable height should allow for more landscaped open space at the street level and on the building itself as vertical landscape and/or green roof. Multi-use is currently only developable in B districts via

special permit from the ARB with projects requiring a 20,000ft² parcel to build up to 5 stories. A parcel smaller than 20,000ft² is only allowed to build up to 4 stories. Furthermore, there are Floor Area Ratio maximums that also serve to curtail the overall size of projects.

DPCD recommends that business properties on parcels greater than 15,000ft² be evaluated for inclusion in the MBTAC zone. Parcels of that size are attractive to affordable housing developers who need larger parcels to build more units such that they can finance development deals. For example: To qualify for public funding via the sale of Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC), developments are generally expected to construct 30 units *at minimum* to make the project financially feasible and attractive to public funders.