

# DRAFT DOWNTOWN ZONING AMENDMENT SUMMARY

September 2025

The draft Downtown zoning takes important steps to strengthen protections for Downtown's historic and cultural assets, streamline pathways for adaptive reuse, modernize outdated land-use regulations, and enable the essential housing and mixed-use density that Downtown needs to grow. The amendment was approved by the BPDA Board on September 19, 2025, and will go to the Boston Zoning Commission for final approval on October 22, 2025. The draft zoning:

Creates new citywide zoning districts, called Skyline Districts, and maps them Downtown. The new districts are based on PLAN: Downtown's Enhance and Growth areas and include districts, SKY-LOW and SKY:

- The SKY-LOW District is distinguished by areas of cohesive historic buildings dating to prior eras of downtown. These districts are regulated to advance historic preservation and ensure that new development is compatible with existing buildings in scale. The district includes a historic overlay denoted as SKY-LOW-DT, tailored to the specific scale of downtown's unique historic areas.
- The SKY District is distinguished by the city's most significant job, housing, and entertainment density and accommodates future growth near major transportation assets. These districts are regulated to ensure that new development enhances the urban vitality of the city and the public realm.

Strengthens Historic Preservation and Adaptive-Reuse

- Eliminates existing zoning barriers to maximize opportunities for the conversion, adaptation, and expansion of existing buildings.
- Incentivizes the reuse of existing buildings over demolition by carefully calibrating dimensional regulations to align with existing buildings.
- Preserves the scale and character of sensitive historic areas. The latest draft expands the SKY-LOW-DT district (max. 155' building height) along Washington St, the Ladder Blocks, around the Old South Meeting House, and at the Park Plaza
- Introduces incentives for strategic development and housing that protect and enhance historic buildings and areas. New limited eligibility for Planned Development Areas (PDAs) for 1-acre sites in the SKY-LOW-DT district must



include a Landmark, be predominantly residential, and invest in and preserve Landmark(s) and historic buildings.

- Requires buildings along Washington St. that are in sensitive areas with the SKY-LOW-DT district to be limited in height.
- Ensures certain new dimensional regulations can be tailored through the development review process to minimize building impacts on the public realm and abutting structures.

#### Reinforces City's Commitment to State Shadow Regulations

- Reinforces compliance with State Shadow Regulations, adding formal references to the state laws that protect the Boston Common and Public Garden from new shadow impacts.

#### Enables the Growth of Local Businesses

- Eliminates outdated and prohibitive land-use restrictions to encourage new and diverse businesses like coffee houses, bakeries, fitness uses, and entertainment uses to thrive, fill empty storefronts, and help drive foot traffic and activity Downtown.

#### Unlocks Affordable Housing and Reinvestment Downtown

- Enables increased density at the center of Boston's transit network around sites with some of the best transit access in the City.
- Requires all residential projects to comply with Inclusionary Zoning, producing affordable housing at a scale not feasible in other parts of the City.
- Ensures building height enables and prioritizes housing along Washington St.
- Residential uses are allowed throughout all of the Skyline zoning districts.
- Research lab uses greater than 50k gsf are conditional so that site-by-site evaluation of loading and ventilation impacts can be completed.
- Hotel uses greater than 50k gsf or 50 guest rooms are conditional in order to evaluate pick-up/drop-off and site-specific accommodations that may be needed.
- Requires new buildings of significant height along Washington Street to be predominantly residential. (Recent update)
- Makes new office developments over 250,000 Gross Square Feet conditional, to ensure every opportunity to include residential and mixed-use development alongside office. This additional zoning review will sunset on January 1, 2030, unless renewed by the Zoning Commission after evaluating



its impact on Downtown's vitality and its dual role as both a housing and job center.

### **TEXT AMENDMENTS:**

#### *Article 31*

Article 31 is a new article for the Boston Zoning Code, creating the Skyline Districts. The article describes the purpose of Skyline Districts and includes dimensional regulations and additional use and performance standards for uses listed in Article 8.

#### *Article 8*

Article 8 adds Skyline Districts to the recently modernized use table, Table A, that regulates what is allowed or not allowed in each district. A new use, Accessory Public Transit Use, is also added to the code as an active use, and to differentiate this use from a Major Transportation Facility use.

#### *Miscellaneous Updates*

These updates ensure Article 31, updates to Article 8, and changes to the Zoning Map are reflected throughout the Zoning Code:

- Article 2: Adds definitions for Stepback Height, Midtown Shadow Overlay, and State Shadow Regulations.
- Article 3: Edits to formally create Skyline Districts in the Boston Zoning Code.
- Article 11: Retains existing sign regulations for the Midtown Cultural District for the same geography.
- Article 23: Parking regulations for Skyline Districts, removing any minimum parking requirements for small projects.
- Article 85: Adds restrictions on change of use or occupancy of Theater structures.
- Removal of text referencing districts, subdistricts, or areas that are being incorporated into Skyline Districts:
  - Article 38: Removed and replaced with Skyline Districts.
  - Articles 49A, 43, and 88: Removal of references to "Midtown Cultural District" and "Midtown Cultural District Plan."
  - Article 40: Removal of references to "Parcel-to-Parcel Linkage Development Area."
  - Article 45: Removal of references to "Sears Crescent Protection Area,"



- "Congress/State Street Medium Density Area," "State Street Protection

### **MAP AMENDMENTS:**

#### *Map 1A and Map 1H*

- Maps new Skyline Districts.
- Removes Greenway Overlay District from areas with new Skyline Districts to ensure districts have modernized and consistent land uses. The PLAN: Downtown amendment, which is also before the Board, adds the Greenway Overlay District's Design Guidelines to PLAN: Downtown's Design Guidelines.

#### *Map 1A and Map 1C/1G/1N*

- Moves portions of the existing Midtown Cultural District Bay Village Protections District, that closely resemble the Bay Village Neighborhood, structurally into the Bay Village Neighborhood Shopping Subdistrict.
- Adjusts the boundary of the Adult Entertainment District to align with parcel boundaries and removes the District from the Chinatown Neighborhood District because there are no adult entertainment establishments there today.

