Neighborhood Housing FAQ

Why is now the time to do this and why hasn't it been done before now?

Neighborhood Housing is the culmination of nearly a decade of work on Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) beginning in 2017. In order to provide a clear pathway for all types of ADUs and improve permitting for homeowners and neighborhood builders, the City has to comprehensively address the antiquated zoning code. The City of Boston operates under its own zoning enabling act due to the concentrated population density, diversity of land uses, topography, and unique spatial history - and it is because of these same factors that Boston has more work to do to update the rules for our unique neighborhoods to ensure that ADUs can be permitted appropriately. This difference in enabling legislation is why the 2024 law allowing ADUs across most of Massachusetts does not apply to Boston.

Neighborhood Housing, and its preceding efforts, bring the City into alignment with statewide ADU policy, while also delivering a simplified, modern zoning and permitting process designed specifically for Boston's communities.

This zoning appears to just allow what's already existing, why doesn't it go further?

The primary purpose of Neighborhood Housing is to simplify the process of upkeeping and renovating existing homes, provide strong and appropriate rules for new small-scale housing, and enable the construction of ADUs. The City has other planning and zoning initiatives that are focused on growth and transformation.

Will Neighborhood Housing change the feel of my neighborhood? What about open space and tree canopy?

The proposed zoning includes rules for the size of buildings, where they can be located on a lot, unit count, and land use. All of these requirements are meant to reinforce the look and feel of your neighborhood, and ensure that new projects fit in with their surroundings. Any projects that do not follow these rules will need to go through special processes with additional scrutiny.

Open space and the preservation of tree canopy was a strong consideration of ours when drafting the zoning. To address this, in addition to rezoning twenty (20) parklands and urban wilds under the City's care and custody in Hyde Park, Roslindale, and West Roxbury to Open Space, we have added a new Permeable Area requirement to ensure that there is adequate space for existing (and new) trees to exist in yards. The updated yard requirements also guarantee that homes remain adequately spaced from one another, with plenty of breathing room, open to the sky, on all sides.

I'm worried about buildings becoming too tall. Does Neighborhood Housing allow for large towers?

No, it does not. The updated zoning is designed to match what already exists in neighborhoods. In most places, the allowed building heights will not change from what the zoning already allows, which is typically three or four stories.

How does this specifically benefit homeowners (as opposed to making development easier for large developers)?

Neighborhood Housing creates clear rules to follow when renovating and maintaining existing buildings or adding an ADU, which is the primary benefit to property owners. Clear, predictable rules also constrain out-of-scale development. The current variance-driven system incentivizes out-of-scale proposals – clearer rules would change that.

How does this work help create more affordable housing?

Outdated and restrictive zoning actively limits the types of buildings that can be designed and constructed. This means fewer housing options for residents overall, whether they are looking to downsize or grow. Updating our outdated zoning is just one tool in creating more affordable housing. By making it more predictable and easier to understand, we can reduce construction timelines, avoid unnecessary costs, and make building and renovating in Boston more accessible.

New zoning through the Neighborhood Housing Zoning Initiative will also directly speed up income-restricted projects the City is building across neighborhoods through initiatives like Welcome Home Boston.

Does this mean single-family homes will be made illegal everywhere?

Single-family homes remain legal in all of the proposed districts.

Looking at the zoning map, what do the gaps represent? Why aren't they included?

Neighborhood Housing focuses solely on updating the zoning for small-scale residential areas. Mixed-use and Commercial areas are not being addressed through this initiative, so you see "gaps" along corridors like Centre Street, Washington Street, Cleary Square, and other areas where other land uses exist and different zoning is needed.

Do you have an estimate on how many lots would get rezoned, and roughly what percentage would now be zoning compliant?

Approximately 24,000 lots are proposed to be rezoned. Currently, 94% of these lots are non-compliant with the existing zoning code. Neighborhood Housing aligns with zoning so that almost half of existing homes and lots will have zoning that matches what's there; the other half will still rely on "grandfathered" rights for an existing smaller yard or other non-conforming feature.

Why didn't you include my house in a particular district? It matches your description of houses and lots for the district.

Districts were mapped based on physical compatibility with dimensional requirements, and the physical patterns of the surrounding context to enable reasonable additions and ADUs on most lots in an area.

Even within the same neighborhood, adjacent blocks may have different lot patterns. For example, one block may feature smaller lots and shallower yards, resulting in higher lot coverage for similarly sized homes compared to larger lots across the street.

How did you determine the districts and their dimensional requirements?

Staff began by studying the patterns of building size and lots across the city. The dimensional requirements are a direct reflection of the existing conditions within West Roxbury, Hyde Park, and Roslindale.

In addition to dimensional analysis, staff studied small-scale construction across Boston to understand the impacts of the outdated zoning on permitting and requests for zoning relief. This ongoing work helps us understand the changes residents want to make to their homes and the scale of new construction.

The Planning Department, with support from external architecture and design firms, has also completed extensive modeling, test fits, and feasibility studies to understand the differences between what the zoning says should be there, what exists on the ground, and what a property owner might do following the updated zoning.

What are you doing to protect the historic character of these neighborhoods?

The Planning Department has reviewed the proposed zoning in detail with the staff of the Office of Historic Preservation.

The updated zoning proposed by Neighborhood Housing is much more aligned with the rules and regulations that governed neighborhoods when much of the City's original housing was actually constructed. Additionally, the proposed rules are stricter for new construction than for existing buildings - further incentivizing preservation and reuse.

All overlay districts and Landmark designations are not affected by the proposed zoning.

Are ADUs always included in the written unit maximum or only for certain districts?

Yes, the maximum unit count for each district is inclusive of ADUs. All units, including accessory dwelling units, are counted the same and are included in the total unit count of the lot.

What happens if someone doesn't follow these new rules? Isn't the ZBA just going to approve them anyway?

Having clear rules for what is appropriate, including a reasonable path to build an appropriate project, increases the scrutiny on proposals that do not follow the rules and have requests for zoning relief.

What happens if a neighbor wants to put an addition onto an already nonconforming structure?

The new rules permit both maintenance and regular upkeep of existing structures, and extension on nonconforming structures, provided that the changes do not worsen the violation. For example, if a building on the ground floor violates a yard requirement, you can still build a second story vertically (following the height rules of the district) as long as it does not encroach further into the yard.

My street is already too crowded and it's difficult to find parking. How does updating parking requirements help?

Current zoning in Roslindale, Hyde Park, and West Roxbury mandates 1.5-2 off-street parking spots regardless of lot size or existing parking. Many existing homes don't have that - and don't have space for that much parking. Proposed flexible rules for parking homeowners let homeowners choose what to keep when making changes, whether trees or open space or parking, and let builders right-size parking to meet buyer's and renter's needs.

On-street parking is not regulated by the zoning code. The City continues to explore reforms and updates to Residential Parking Permits to make sure on-street parking is working across different neighborhoods.

Does this change zoning for small businesses / accessory home businesses?

While Neighborhood Housing does not address mixed-use or commercial districts, it modernizes zoning for small businesses run out of homes by updating the use definition of 'Accessory Home Occupation', to allow for low-impact home businesses (e.g., instructional lessons, professional counseling, artisanal crafts, and individual sales) to occur within the main building or an ADU.

When is this coming to my neighborhood?

Draft zoning is currently proposed in Hyde Park, Roslindale, and West Roxbury. The City plans to begin later phases in 2027.