



## MALL ROAD'S MIXED-USE INNOVATION DISTRICT PROPOSAL

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. What's the **problem** we're trying to solve?
2. How are we going to **address** these problems?
3. What is the "**Mixed-Use Innovation District Zoning Proposal**"?
4. Is this like **3rd Ave.**?
5. Why not **rely on developers & PDDs** instead of creating a new zoning?
6. What are the **main elements** of the new zoning district?
7. How does this **compare** to the other zoning articles at Town Meeting regarding ADUs and Middle Housing?
8. **Where** is the Mixed-Use Innovation District going to be?
9. Why is zoning part of our economic development **strategy**?
10. What are the **benefits** to Burlington?
11. What is the **height** of buildings allowed in this district?
12. Why are we including **residential** in a commercial area?
13. What if residential is the only thing developed, like what happened with the **Town Center Overlay**?
14. How much residential is allowed?
15. Can Burlington **afford** the services required by this development?
16. Will this lead to too much development?
17. What about **traffic**?
18. Have property **owners** been involved?
19. Why include the Macy's portion of the Mall? Aren't they filing tax **abatements**?
20. **How** was this proposal developed?
21. How will the Town **ensure** responsible development?
22. Can the zoning be **adjusted** if needed?



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### 1. What's the problem we're trying to solve?

- a. Burlington's Mall Road and Middlesex Turnpike commercial corridor is the economic core of our community, offering jobs and amenities and generating substantial commercial tax revenue - which reduces our residential taxes.
  - i. However, shifts in work patterns and lifestyle preferences require us to think about how this area will stay relevant and vibrant into the future. Remote work has increased office vacancies.
  - ii. Currently, in Burlington, office vacancies are at 20 percent<sup>1</sup> and young professionals are leaving the state; 25 percent of young professionals between 20-30 years report plans for leaving Massachusetts<sup>2</sup>. Still, others seek attractive places to live, work, and enjoy life without relying on their car for every outing or enduring long commutes. *And importantly, businesses want to lease spaces near their employees and customers.*
  - iii. In addition, past building patterns have created unintentional environmental issues, such as heat island effects, stormwater impacts, and challenges to getting around without a car, contributing to traffic and emissions.

### 2. How are we going to address these problems?

- a. For these reasons, our strategy is to use our local land use policies to encourage new development patterns in this area that integrate residential and new commercial opportunities, similar to 3rd Ave.
- b. It also allows us to improve the area through redevelopment by requiring standards for making better walking connections, adding open space, and building more sustainably.

### 3. What is the "Mixed-Use Innovation District Zoning Proposal"?

- a. The proposal is an amendment to the Burlington Zoning Bylaws that Town Meeting will consider on January 27, 2025.
- b. It proposes a new zoning district with a new set of rules. The proposal results from a two-year, community-driven effort to address the abovementioned issues.

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<sup>1</sup> CoStar Data 2024 Q4 Office Vacancies

<sup>2</sup> Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce Foundation Young Residents Survey, 2024



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### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- c. The new district applies to 16 parcels comprising approximately 117 acres, around the Burlington Mall area.
- d. The "Mixed-Use Innovation District" is a tool to guide development over time and functionally integrate shops, housing, offices, green spaces, and restaurants by allowing for strategic infill development (e.g., repurposing parking lots for new projects).
- e. The zoning proposal has policies prioritizing public spaces, open areas, and community-focused development. Over time, incremental development would enhance the existing commercial area while promoting private investment and sustainable growth.

#### **4. Is this like 3rd Ave.?**

- a. Yes! 3rd Ave and the Planned Development District (PDD), approved in 2005, serve as a model for this zoning proposal, blending residential and commercial spaces. The heights of the buildings are similar to what is allowed at 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave.
- b. A case study conducted by Landwise shows that since the PDD rezoning in 2005, the tax revenue increased by 94% compared to the amounts generated if the original zoning had remained, \$6.4M, compared to \$3.3M.

#### **5. Why not rely on developers & PDDs instead of creating a new zoning ?**

- a. This is a community-driven approach, creating a template that focuses on the collective benefit rather than isolated projects, making it a more effective and strategic solution for the area.
- b. While the PDD, or Planned Development District, process is an option in our zoning for individual property owners, it is time-intensive, complex, and uncertain. Developers often avoid it because it requires a significant effort and may not lead to Town Meeting approval, which creates a barrier to investment.
- c. Additionally, relying solely on PDDs makes it difficult for Burlington to coordinate development across multiple properties.
- d. The zoning proposal functions like a template. It provides a vision and a clear framework for the type of buildings allowed. It ensures that projects collaborate to create cohesive pedestrian networks, complementary urban designs, and a unified approach to development.



## MALL ROAD'S MIXED-USE INNOVATION DISTRICT PROPOSAL

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

#### **6. What are the main elements of the new zoning district?**

- a. Integration of residential, retail, and commercial uses.
- b. It includes a provision to keep the area commercially dominant, limiting residential projects to 40% of existing commercial space.
- c. Design standards: sustainability focus & complete streets with public realm
- d. 20% outdoor green space with amenity guidelines
- e. Commercial-dominant mix per development site
- f. Building heights are similar to other areas like 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave and The District: 70ft residential, 120ft commercial max

#### **7. How does this compare to the other zoning articles at Town Meeting regarding ADUs and Middle Housing?**

- a. There are three zoning proposals that allow for some housing options:
  - i. Mixed-use Innovation District is around the Mall area. This allows both commercial and residential uses, integrating housing in a limited and strategic manner to stimulate the existing commercial office and retail uses and enhance that area over time.
  - ii. The Middle Housing Overlay District is located around the Town Center area. This allows for small townhouses.
  - iii. Accessory Dwelling Unit Bylaw Amendment is in single-family districts. This allows small dwelling units to be part of an existing home as required by a state statute.

#### **8. Where is the Mixed-Use Innovation District going to be?**

- a. The new district applies to 16 parcels comprising approximately 117 acres. Initially proposed for over 50 parcels and 500 acres, feedback from our land use boards led to the current, more focused scope. The sites included in the final proposal are more commonly known as:
  - i. Burlington Mall
  - ii. Kohl's
  - iii. Burlington Square (home to the old Tower Records site, soon to be Tatte, and Cava)
  - iv. Across from The District (including Chipotle and Cabot Furniture)
  - v. Three parcels in The District (500, 1400, and 1000 District Ave)



## MALL ROAD'S MIXED-USE INNOVATION DISTRICT PROPOSAL

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

#### **9. Why is zoning part of our economic development strategy?**

- a. We are using zoning as a tool to shape the future of our commercial district so that it is attractive to the next generation. The commercial district is a vital part of Burlington's economy, contributing significant tax revenue, which helps keep residential taxes low.
- b. We crafted these zoning changes through community and stakeholder involvement. The state or the MBTA Communities statute does not require this. The proposal is self-initiated and geared toward maximizing Burlington's ability to maintain its vibrancy.
- c. The new zoning rules help to:
  - i. Optimize land use - underutilized parking lots can become spaces for businesses, housing, or parks.
  - ii. Stay relevant - modern, walkable areas attract people who want to live and work nearby.
  - iii. Attract investment - updated zoning encourages private developers to bring fresh ideas and improvements.

#### **10. What are the benefits to Burlington?**

- a. Adapting to change: Creating more vibrant places will help reduce office vacancies
- b. Boosting livability: Creating "live, work, play" areas for residents, workers, and visitors.
- c. Driving economic growth: Supporting new jobs, increased tax revenue, and thriving local businesses.
- d. Sustainable land use: Promoting efficient development while revitalizing underutilized spaces.
- e. Attracting talent: Appealing to young professionals through vibrant mixed-use districts.
- f. Environmental enhancements: More green spaces, better stormwater management, and reduced car reliance.



## MALL ROAD'S MIXED-USE INNOVATION DISTRICT PROPOSAL

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

#### **11. What is the height of buildings allowed in this district?**

- a. The proposed zoning aligns with existing developments like 3rd Ave and The District. Building heights would be:
  - i. Residential buildings: Up to 70 feet
  - ii. Commercial buildings: Up to 120 feet

#### **12. Why are we including residential in a commercial area?**

- a. Combining residential and commercial uses offers several advantages:
  - i. Proven Values: Data analysis by CBRE, Coldwell Banker Richard Ellis, a commercial real estate investment firm, has shown areas with a mix of use have higher values, reduced vacancy<sup>3</sup>.
  - ii. Economic support: Nearby residents increase business activity for shops and restaurants.
  - iii. Convenience: Residents live closer to work, shopping, and dining.
  - iv. Revitalization: Repurposing parking lots into housing, parks, or workplaces makes the area more dynamic and valuable.

#### **13. What if residential is the only thing developed, like what happened with the Town Center Overlay?**

- a. The Town Center Overlay wanted to encourage the teardown of older strip malls; in this proposal, our strategy is to allow both residential and commercial buildings in mostly surface parking lots so that we enhance the function and desirability of the existing commercial spaces.
- b. Currently, office-to-residential projects are not permitted. Again, we want to strengthen our existing commercial, not convert it.
- c. Another safeguard is that the proposed zoning includes a provision limiting infill residential development to no more than 40% of the existing commercial square footage on site. The Planning Board will still need to review and approve the projects. These provisions are in place to keep the area commercially focused while allowing for strategic residential growth.

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<sup>3</sup> ["Shaping Tomorrow's Cities Report" by CBRE, May 29, 2024](#)



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#### **14. How much residential is allowed?**

- a. The Burlington Mall site presents the most significant infill opportunity. Under the new zoning, the maximum permitted area would be approximately 528,000 square feet—or about 528 units. Based on estimates for our school district and regional trends, this would result in approximately 792 residents and 42 school-age students, when/if fully developed.
- b. Property owners have been actively involved in the process and are exploring potential opportunities that they have shared:
  - i. Burlington Mall - Evaluating a hotel and future residential development on Macy's side.
  - ii. Kohl's site is expected to maintain its current long-term lease, with no significant changes anticipated.
  - iii. Other sites, such as Linear Retail and Burlington Square, have supported the proposal because it offers more commercial tenancing options, but no current redevelopment plans exist.
  - iv. The three smaller sites in The District do not currently plan to undergo significant changes.

#### **15. Can Burlington afford the services required by this development?**

- a. Yes. The Fiscal Impact Analysis by Landwise, presented in November 2024, indicates that the proposed development will generate more tax revenue than the cost of providing services.
- b. Key findings include:
  - i. There is greater net positive revenue under the mixed-use zoning scenario-density projects compared to the scenarios examined.
  - ii. Value is increased to existing commercial surrounding the area
  - iii. On average, multi-family units have a household size of 1.5 persons
  - iv. Minimal impact on schools due to low numbers of school-aged children from multi-family housing. Approximately .08 students are generated from units in multi-family housing.



## MALL ROAD'S MIXED-USE INNOVATION DISTRICT PROPOSAL

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

#### **16. Will this lead to too much development?**

- a. Development will be gradual based on real estate cycles, market conditions, and property owners' timelines. Some properties may undergo minor updates, while others may not change at all. The proposal is a template that supports thoughtful, incremental growth over the next 20-30 years.

#### **17. What about traffic?**

- a. Traffic is always a concern, and all development projects will continue to be reviewed by Town staff and the Planning Board to evaluate and mitigate potential impacts.
- b. Our Engineering Division reports that we, in partnership with MassDOT, have existing tools and forthcoming improvements to managing traffic effectively:
  - i. Adaptive traffic signal system: Already in use along Cambridge St., Mall Road and Middlesex Turnpike, these systems improve traffic flow by optimizing it with software that adjusts traffic levels and synchronizes the lights.
  - ii. MassDOT improvements: Starting in 2026, planned upgrades to the I-95 southbound on-ramp will help address traffic flow and safety in the area.
  - iii. Route 3/Cambridge Street intersection improvement project
- c. Burlington is also actively engaged in long-term planning to improve mobility in the Mall Road and Middlesex Turnpike corridors with or without the approval of the zoning; these efforts include:
  - i. Mobility Action Plan: Burlington is developing a comprehensive plan to expand alternatives for getting around the area without relying on cars. For example, residents and visitors should be able to move between Barnes & Noble and the Mall needing to drive.
  - ii. State funding for pedestrian safety: Burlington has secured \$1 million from the state to study and improve pedestrian safety between Trader Joe's and 3rd Ave.





## MALL ROAD'S MIXED-USE INNOVATION DISTRICT PROPOSAL

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- d. By integrating zoning changes with these long-term planning efforts, Burlington is preparing for a future where getting around the area is safer, more convenient, and less car-dependent.
  - i. Reduced car trips: Mixed-use developments encourage walking and biking and reduce vehicle reliance. For example, Nordblom reports that 40% of residents in its three Burlington apartment buildings work in the Burlington area, creating options for getting around the area, and decreasing the need using a car for every reason outside a residence.

#### **18. Have property owners been involved?**

- a. Yes. We have kept Property owners informed and most actively engaged, sharing priorities and test-fitting the zoning.

#### **19. Why include the Macy's portion of the Mall? Aren't they filing tax abatements?**

- a. The zoning proposal aims to shape the future of Burlington's commercial district, regardless of ownership. While the property owners may change, our vision remains the same.
- b. The Mall site has a significant amount of asphalt parking, which has the opportunity to evolve and add more value to our community. Including Macy's portion in the zoning proposal is forward-thinking. If the zoning is approved, it could benefit the business and the Town of Burlington through enhanced development opportunities and higher tax revenue.
- c. While Macy's has filed tax abatement requests, based on our research, this is part of a broader corporate approach implemented nationwide to reduce costs. They have followed all legal protocols for paying taxes and filing abatements as allowed by law.

#### **20. How was this proposal developed?**

- a. 2022-2023: Drafting the Concept Plan for the MIX Zoning District.
- b. 2024: Collaboration with residents, planners, and fiscal experts refined the proposal.
- c. Advisory group meetings
- d. Public design workshops, including area tours.
- e. Presentations and feedback sessions with town boards and committees



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#### **21. How will the Town ensure responsible development?**

- a. The Town will continue to maintain control through the project process:
  - i. Interdepartmental staff review
  - ii. Clear zoning and supplemental design guidelines emphasize quality and sustainability.
  - iii. The Site Plan Review process has rules for every project, including staff and the Planning Board reviews.
  - iv. A provision in the proposal includes an architect reviewing the project according to our guidelines and providing recommendations to the Planning Board.
  - v. Certain developments will still require special permits from Planning Board

#### **22. Can the zoning be adjusted if needed?**

- a. Yes! Zoning is a flexible tool. It can and should be updated to meet Burlington's evolving needs. Similar to modifying PDDs.