Arlington Heights **BUSINESS DISTRICT PLAN**

Protecting and growing **space for business**, paired with **multi-family housing by right**

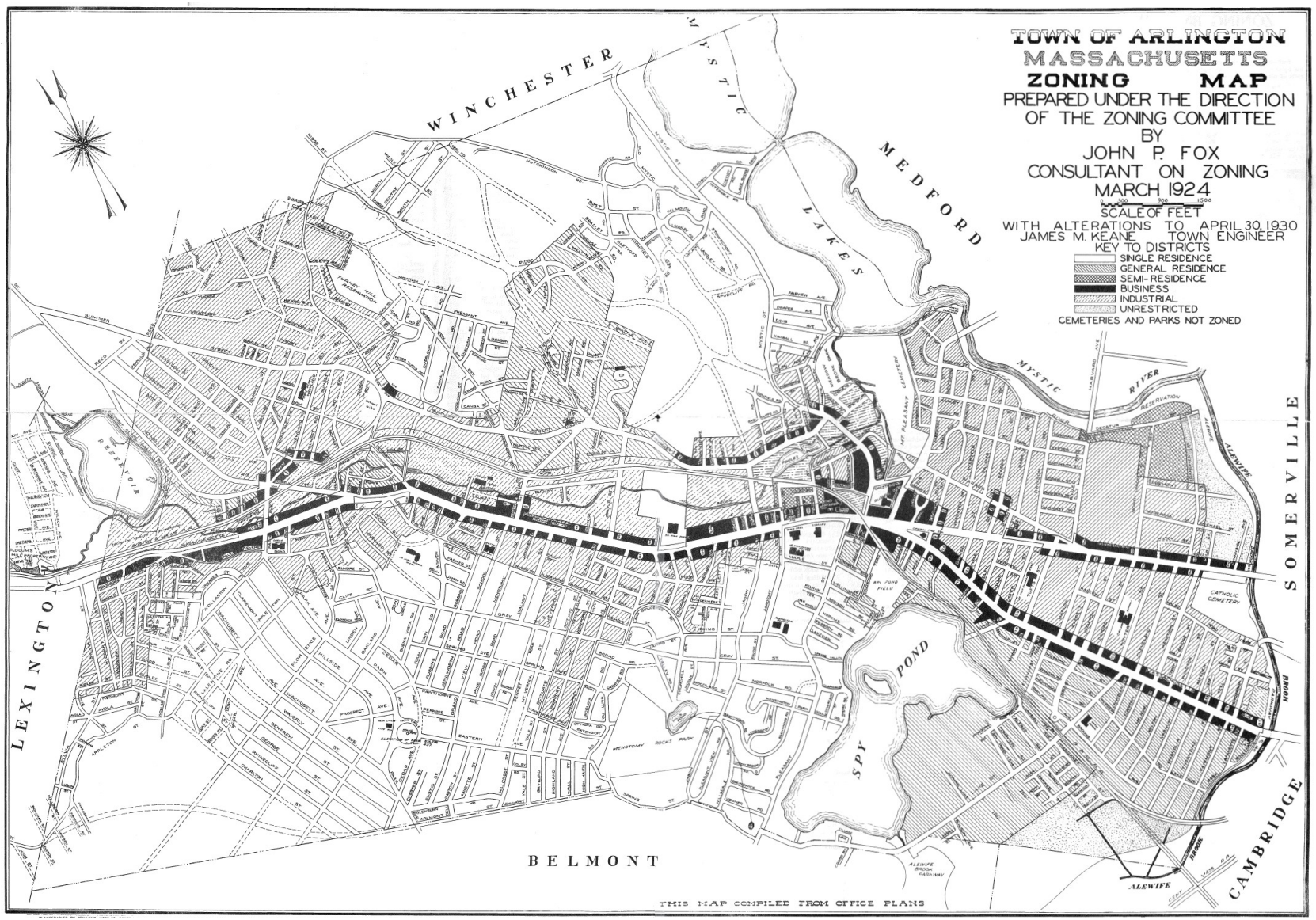


KRISTIN ANDERSON, TMM Pct 11 11/23/2026 AHNAP

Post Card circa 1954

THE 1924 ZONING MAP:

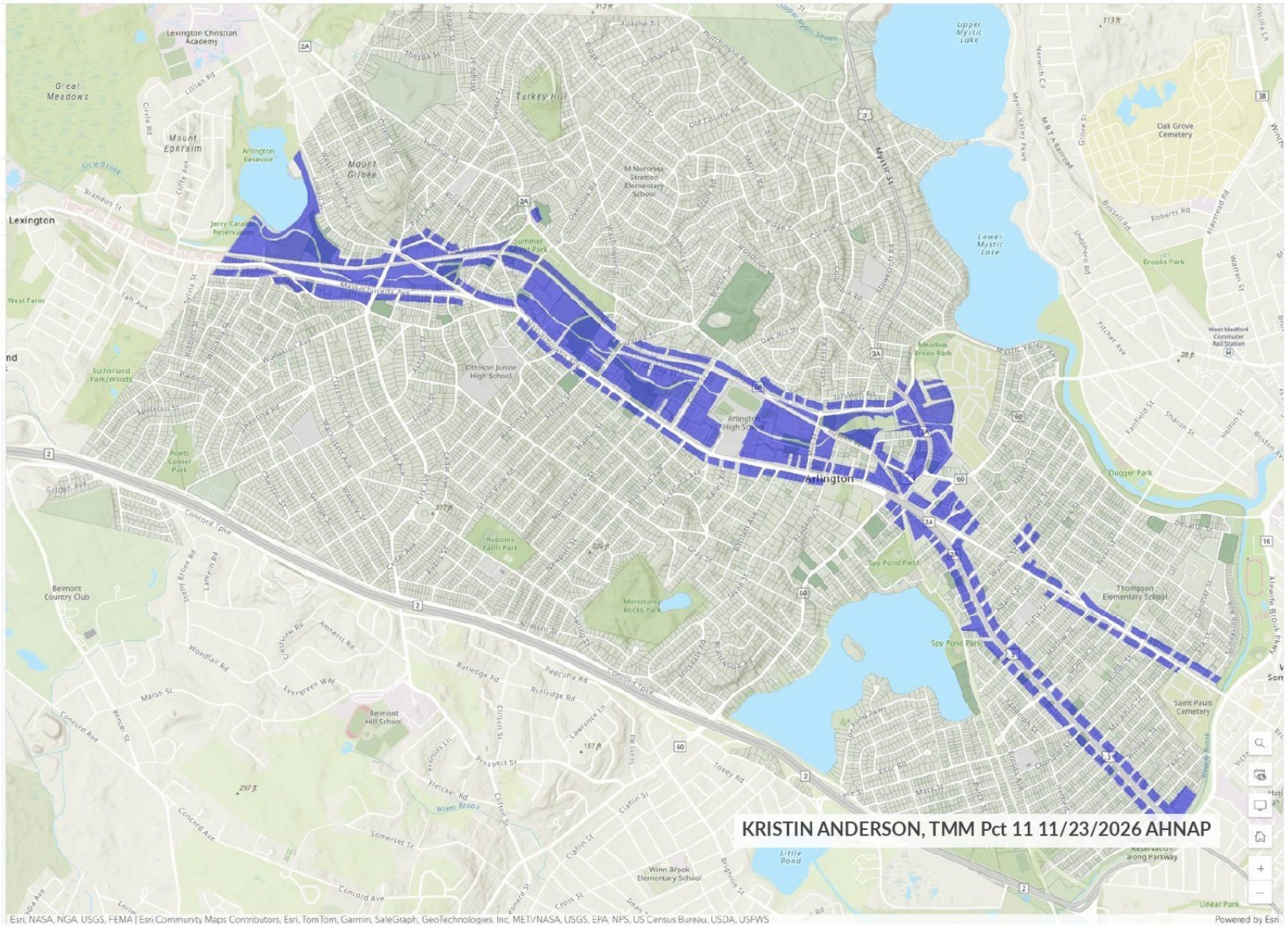
Businesses were
zoned along
the rail line,
the Mill Brook Corridor,
Mass Ave,
& Broadway.



THE 1924 ZONING MAP:
PARCELS ZONED FOR BUSINESS

Businesses were zoned along the Mill Brook Corridor, the Railroad, Mass Ave, & Broadway.

7% LAND AREA

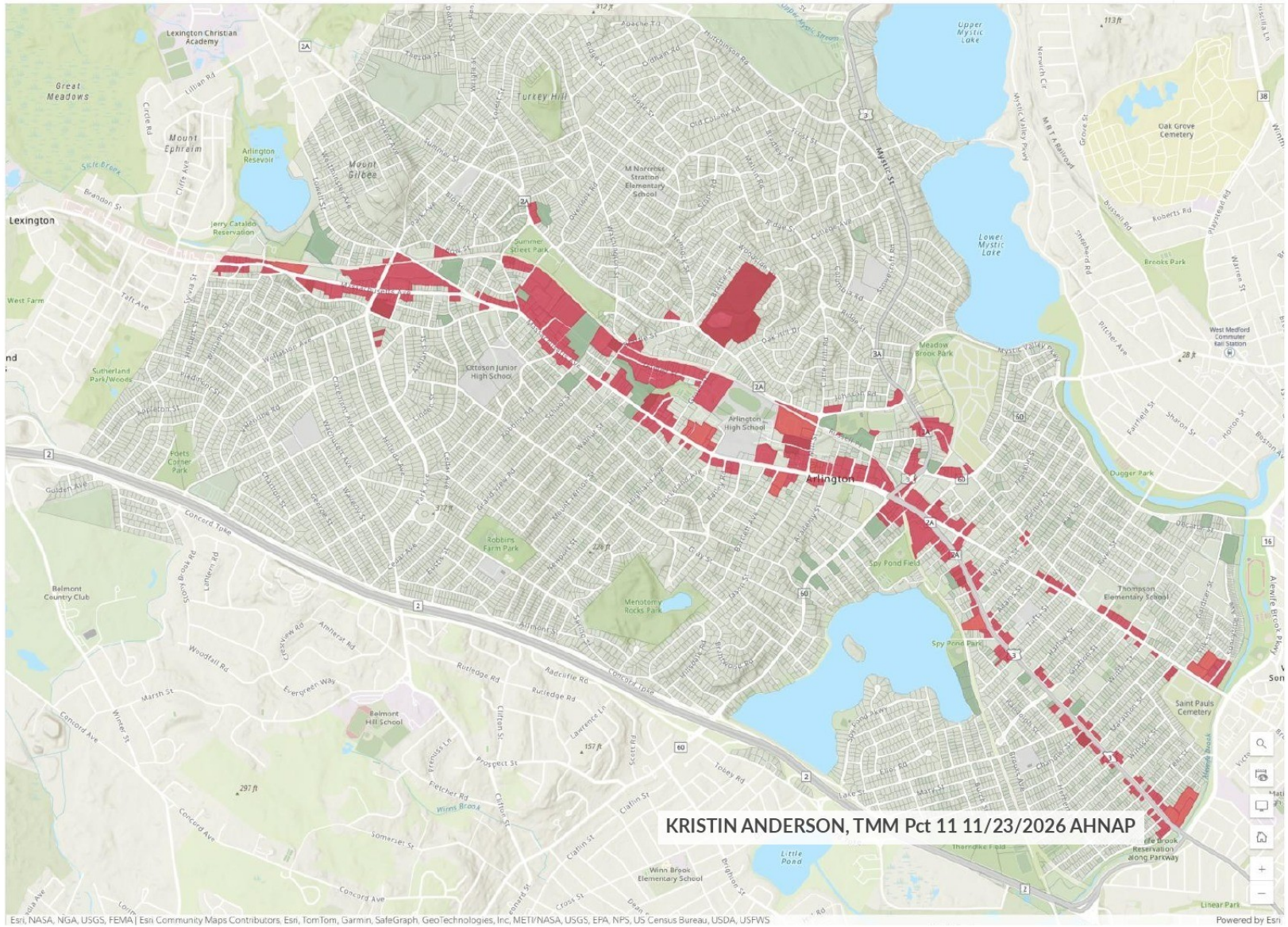


247 ACRES ZONED FOR BUSINESS IN 1924

THE 2024 ZONING MAP:

PARCELS ZONED FOR BUSINESS

4% LAND AREA

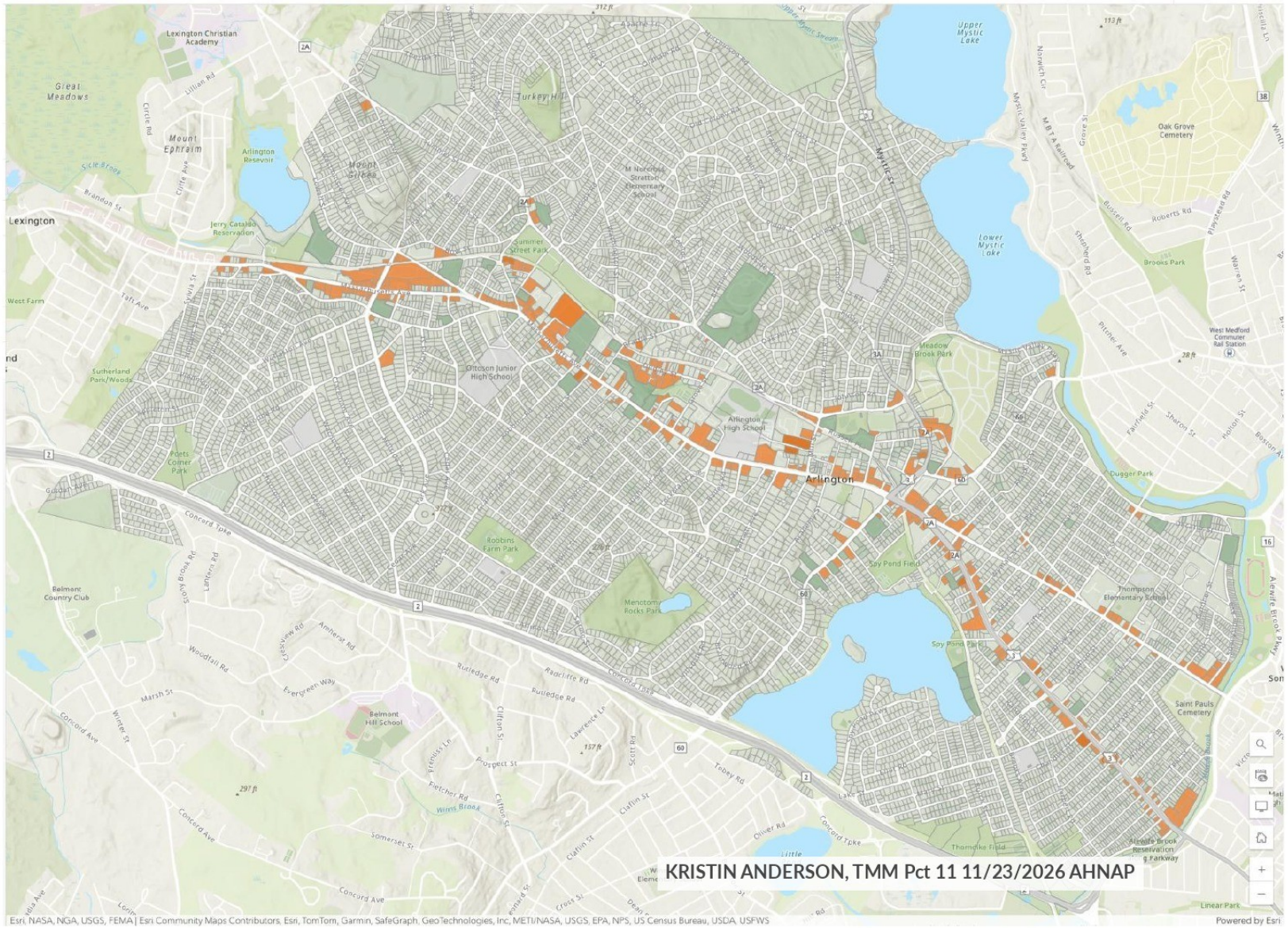


147 ACRES ZONED FOR BUSINESS IN 2024

2024 ASSESSOR'S DATA:

PARCELS USED FOR BUSINESS

3% LAND AREA



94 ACRES USED FOR BUSINESS IN 2024

1 THE TOWN IS LOSING SPACE FOR BUSINESS

ARLINGTON HAS LOST 100 ACRES OF BUSINESS ZONING
ONLY 3% OF THE LAND IS USED FOR BUSINESS

247 ACRES

Zoned for business in 1924
7% of the town

147 ACRES

Zoned for business in 2024
4% of the town

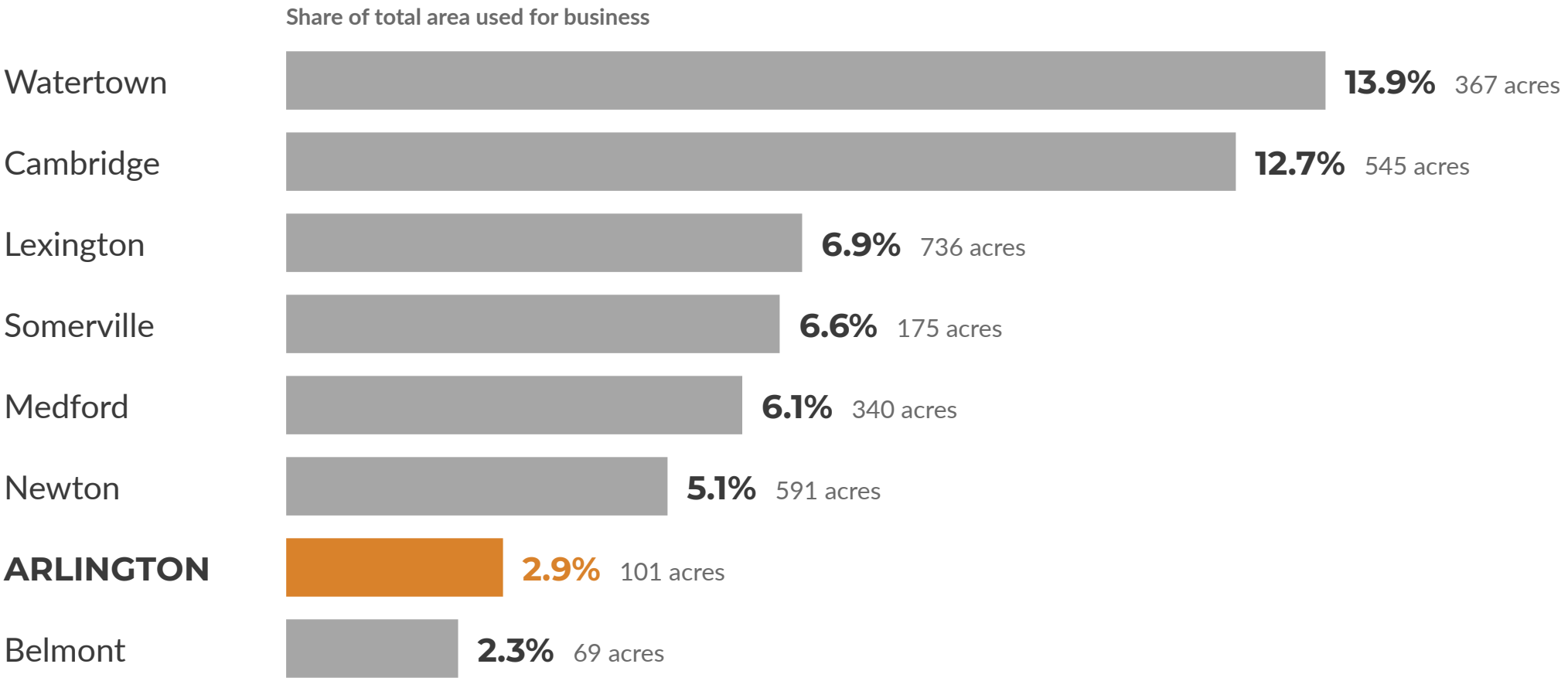
94 ACRES

Used for business in 2024
3% of the town

Source: 1924 and 2024 Arlington zoning maps and 2024 assessor's data, as mapped in Loss of Space for Local Businesses (K. Anderson, 10/21/2026)

1 THE TOWN IS LOSING SPACE FOR BUSINESS

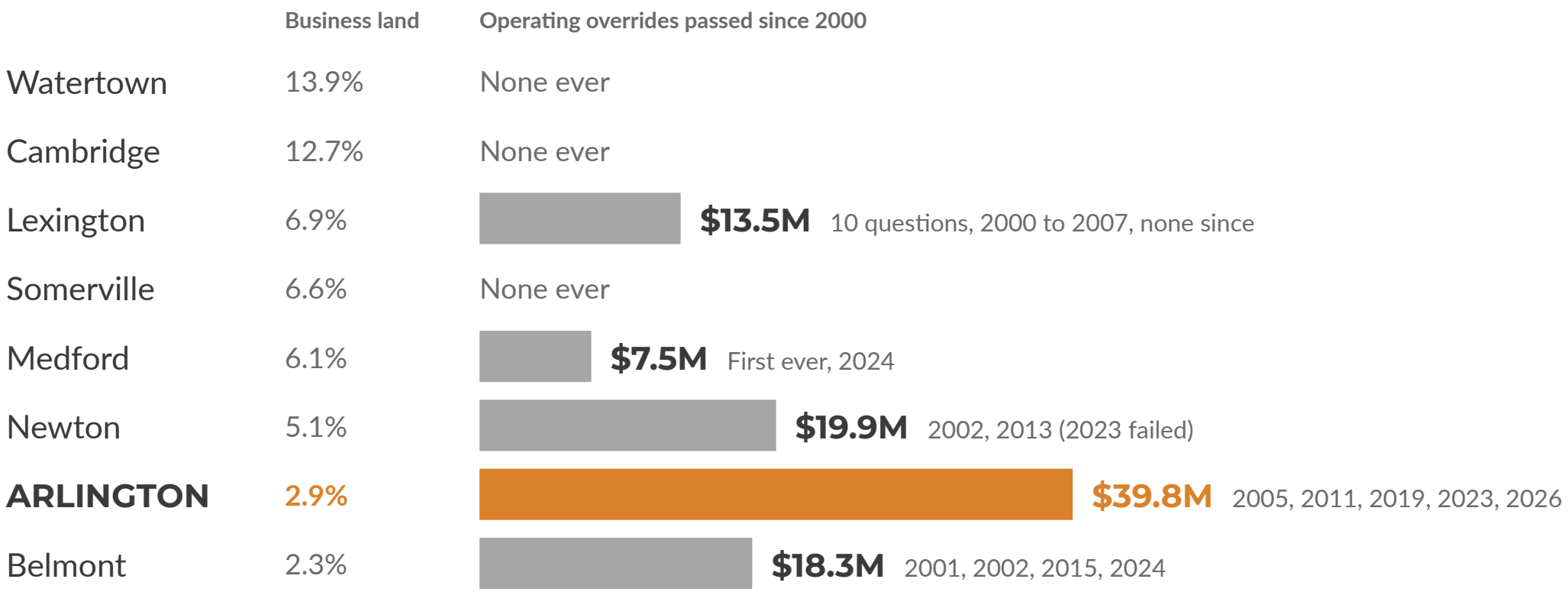
ARLINGTON USES LESS LAND FOR BUSINESS THAN MOST NEIGHBORING MUNICIPALITIES



Source: MassGIS standardized assessor parcels, FY2024 to FY2026, measured the same way for each municipality: commercial, industrial and primarily commercial mixed-use parcels, excluding golf courses and vacant land, as a share of total area.

1 THE TOWN IS LOSING SPACE FOR BUSINESS

ARLINGTON HAS PASSED MORE IN TAX OVERRIDES THAN ANY NEIGHBORING MUNICIPALITY



Totals add the ballot amounts of each operating override passed since 2000. Each override permanently raises the yearly tax limit by that amount. **Arlington:** 2005 $6.0M, 2011 $6.49M, 2019 $5.5M, 2023 $7.0M, 2026 $14.8M. **Newton:** 2002 $11.5M, 2013 $8.4M. **Belmont:** 2001 $3.0M, 2002 $2.4M, 2015 $4.5M, 2024 $8.4M. **Lexington:** 2000 $3.44M, 2004 $4.22M (6 questions), 2006 $1.86M (2 questions), 2007 $3.98M. **Medford:** 2024 $3.5M and $4.0M.

Source: Massachusetts Division of Local Services, Proposition 2½ override votes, through October 2026. Business land from the previous slide. Totals are not adjusted for population or inflation, and do not include debt exclusions.

1 THE TOWN IS LOSING SPACE FOR BUSINESS

THE SERIOUS IMPACTS OF LOSS OF LOCAL BUSINESSES

Arlington has a serious fiscal imbalance in its residential/commercial makeup. The town's financial problem is so deep, that it is referred to as "**a structural deficit**."

Businesses make Arlington a vibrant community worth living in. Local Businesses provide amenities and necessities that help residents stay local. Accessing our needs locally on foot or on bike leads to carbon reduction. Protecting and increasing space for local businesses helps us to meet our Climate Goals, by creating a walkable environment where residents can meet most needs locally, reducing our dependence on cars.

We have a lack of jobs in town. Only 1700 residents actually work in town. 93% of our working population have to commute out of town for their jobs. We should have more jobs that residents can walk to.

Source: Massachusetts Division of Local Services, FY2026 Tax Levies by Class. Commercial, industrial and personal property share of the levy: Arlington 5.2%, last of 82 municipalities with 25,000+ residents and last of the 17 Metro Mayors Coalition members (Cambridge 66.2%, Boston 53.9%, Watertown 49.0%, Somerville 32.6%, Medford 19.6%, Newton 13.6%).

2 THE SOLUTIONS: MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS & AN INCENTIVE

THE GOOD NEWS:
WE HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY NOW.

2 THE SOLUTIONS: MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS & AN INCENTIVE

MULTI-FAMILY BY RIGHT: YES.
NO NET LOSS COMMERCIAL REQUIREMENT: YES.

1. The town is losing space for business use.
2. It is losing space for business because zoning allows it.
3. Commercial space minimums should be required in the Business Districts.



2 THE SOLUTION: REQUIRE A MINIMUM AMOUNT OF SPACE FOR BUSINESS USE

IT WORKS: WHEN ZONING REQUIRES BUSINESS USE, DEVELOPERS WILL BUILD COMMERCIAL SPACE

0 sf → 6,938 sf

of new commercial space where no previous commercial development has been approved by the Arlington Redevelopment Board, from 8 MBTA Communities Overlay projects approved since 2023

1. Emma's Court, 840 Mass Ave: 3,375 sf
2. 126-128 Broadway: 3,563 sf

MBTA OVERLAY BUSINESS USE

Under the bylaw, a qualifying mixed-use building must have:

1. At least 60% of the ground floor occupied by eating and drinking establishments, business services, childcare, or retail uses.
2. No residential units on the ground floor at street level.
3. At least 80% of the frontage occupied by those non-residential uses.

The 60% standard was recommended by the town's consultant, Matthew Littell, Principal, Utile.

Bylaw text, §5.8.4.E(1): "ground floor at street level will be at least 60% occupied by eating and drinking establishments, businesses services, childcare, or retail uses, there are no residential units on the ground floor at street level, the second floor may be at least 40% occupied by eating and drinking establishments, businesses services, childcare, health, business, professional, or medical services, and the frontage is at least 80% occupied by said non-residential uses"

Source: Arlington Redevelopment Board presentation, Nov 16, 2026 (slide 71); Arlington Zoning Bylaw §5.8.4.E(1); 60% standard: MBTA Communities Working Group, July 11, 2023 and consultant Matthew Littell, Utile

2 THE SOLUTION: REQUIRE A MINIMUM AMOUNT OF SPACE FOR BUSINESS USE

CAMBRIDGE GREW ITS BUSINESS SPACE WHILE ARLINGTON LOST IT

CAMBRIDGE

+19.5%

increase in space for businesses in the 10 years between 2005 and 2015

Cambridge has been experiencing SMART GROWTH, which allows the city to provide generous residential tax exemptions, as well as funding for affordable housing & infrastructure improvements. Cambridge's Commercial Land Use Classification Study shows total commercial space growing from 33.2 million to 39.6 million sf between 2005 and 2015, a 19.5% increase. The main thing Cambridge did was zone more land for business and let it grow taller and denser. In return, developers had to pay into affordable housing and public improvements.

2 THE SOLUTION: REQUIRE A MINIMUM AMOUNT OF SPACE FOR BUSINESS USE

NEIGHBORING MUNICIPALITIES PROTECT SPACE FOR BUSINESS



SOMERVILLE

"Apartment Buildings are prohibited on any lot fronting a pedestrian street."



BELMONT

100% Mandatory Mixed-Use - all buildings must be mixed-use, ground floor must be all commercial with the exception of mechanicals, common areas, and the like



WATERTOWN

Multifamily allowed as of right only if at least the first floor is retail or other business use.



LEXINGTON

Ground-floor nonresidential use required in Lexington Center.

Sources: Somerville Zoning Ordinance, Belmont Zoning Bylaw §10, Watertown Zoning Ordinance, EOHLC letter to Lexington. Photos: 4300streetcar, CC BY 4.0, John Phelan, CC BY 3.0, 4300streetcar, CC BY 4.0, John Phelan, CC BY 3.0

2 THE SOLUTION: REQUIRE A MINIMUM AMOUNT OF SPACE FOR BUSINESS USE

MINIMUM COMMERCIAL REQUIREMENTS ON MAIN STREETS

Community	Where	Minimum commercial requirement
Arlington, Heights Business District	B districts on Mass Ave	No minimum. Apartment buildings with no business space allowed by special permit
Arlington, MBTA Communities Overlay	Mass Ave and Broadway	60% of ground floor, 80% of frontage. No ground-floor units
Belmont Center	Belmont Center Overlay	Two floors of commercial. Active use on 70% of ground-floor facade
Belmont, Cushing Square	Cushing Square district	Ground floor reserved for business uses. Residential only off Trapelo Rd and Common St, if it does not hurt continuity
Cambridge	Mass Ave, BA-2 district	Non-residential use on 75% of Mass Ave frontage, 40 ft deep
Newton	Village Center Overlay, priority streets	Active use on 100% of building width, 25 ft deep
Somerville	Mid-Rise districts, pedestrian streets	Apartment buildings prohibited. Ground floor limited to retail, food, arts and civic uses
Watertown	Central Business district	First floor business use required for multifamily by right
Medford	Medford Square	60% active ground floor (residential lobbies count)
Lexington	Lexington Center	Ground-floor nonresidential use required

Sources: Arlington, Belmont Center, Cushing Sq, Cambridge, Newton, Somerville, Watertown, Medford, Lexington

2 THE SOLUTION: REQUIRE A MINIMUM AMOUNT OF SPACE FOR BUSINESS USE

MIXED-USE REDEVELOPMENT IS SHRINKING BUSINESS SPACE BECAUSE THERE IS NO MINIMUM REQUIREMENT



The Toraya block, 882 Massachusetts Avenue, after redevelopment. The developer put an apartment on the ground floor, rather than putting a business there because there is **no minimum business use requirement**.

-71%

Toraya block: five storefronts with 4,458 sf became 1,300 sf

-45%

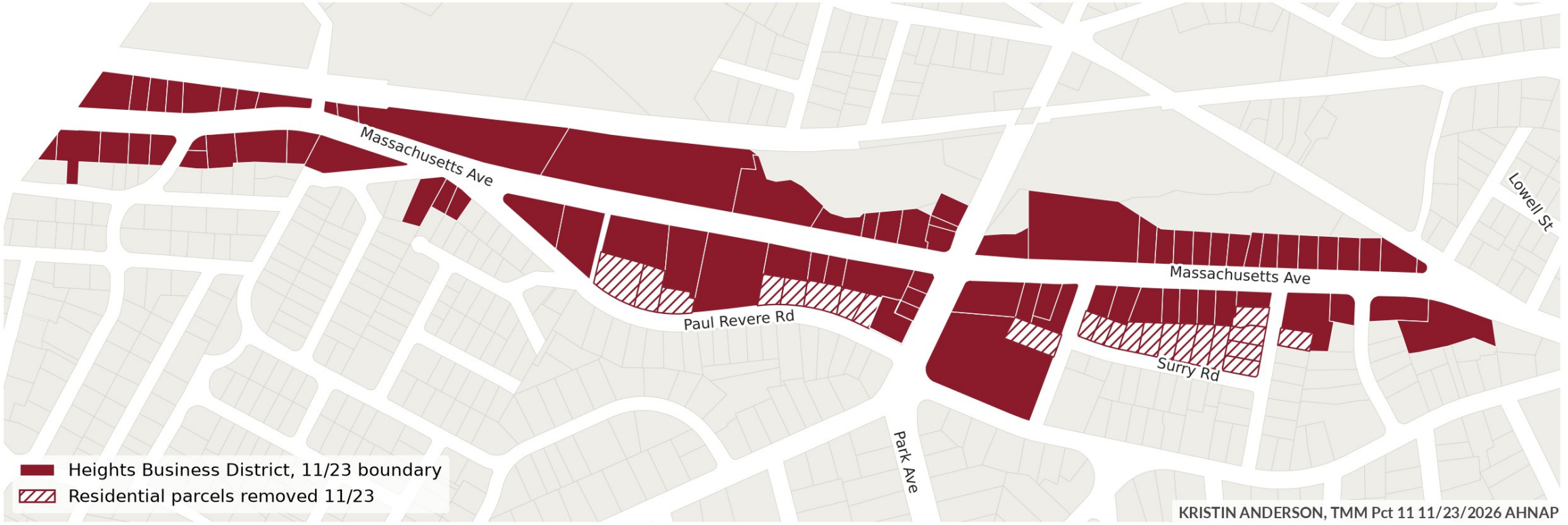
Mass Ave and Medford St, recently redeveloped

-50%

Mass Ave and Lake St, proposed

NOVEMBER 23, 2026

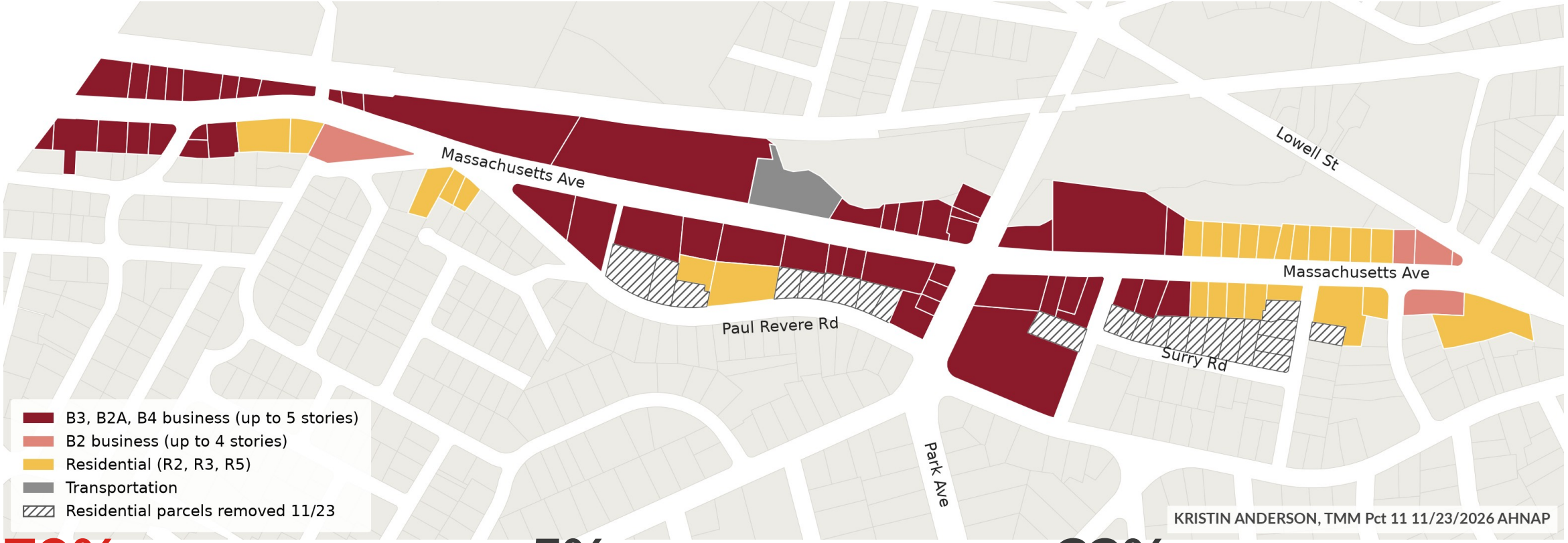
THE LATEST MAP



Sources: Heights Action Plan Implementation Committee, Heights Business District Draft Zoning v7, Nov 23, 2026, slides 7 and 8; Town of Arlington GIS parcel layer.

REVISED DISTRICT, ABOUT 19 ACRES

MOST OF THE DISTRICT ALREADY ALLOWS 5 STORIES



70%

B3, B2A, B4 business, up to 5 stories

5%

B2 business, up to 4 stories

22%

Residential, 2½ to 3 stories

Source: Town of Arlington GIS zoning and parcel layers, measured for the 11/23 boundary; heights from the Zoning Bylaw §5.4.2, §5.5.2.

THE GAP

NO COMMERCIAL REQUIREMENT IN THE PLAN

0%

required business space in a 5-story building

Allowed

apartment buildings with no business space, by special permit

"we're not at least from the planning department perspective comfortable removing it."

Planning staff on apartment buildings, ARB, Nov 16, 2026, 1:02:10



Sources: Heights Action Plan Implementation Committee, Heights Business District Draft Zoning v7, Nov 23, 2026, slide 6; ARB meeting video, Nov 16, 2026. Photo: Daderot, CC0

2 THE SOLUTION: REQUIRE A MINIMUM AMOUNT OF SPACE FOR BUSINESS USE

APARTMENT BUILDINGS BREAK THE CONTINUITY OF THE COMMERCIAL STREET-FRONT



Massachusetts Avenue, Arlington Heights

The problem with allowing apartment buildings is that it exacerbates the discontinuity in the commercial street-front that we are specifically looking to address.

Rachel Zsembery, Heights Action Plan committee member and former Arlington Redevelopment Board Chair

Arlington's bylaw says business districts should "maintain an active street."

Source: Arlington Zoning Bylaw §5.5.2. Photo: Daderot, CC0

2 THE SOLUTION: REQUIRE A MINIMUM AMOUNT OF SPACE FOR BUSINESS USE

LIKE THE REST OF ARLINGTON, THE HEIGHTS NEEDS MORE SPACE FOR BUSINESSES

243,128 sf

existing active commercial space in the Heights Business District

4.5% vacancy

A healthy shopping district has about 5% to 7% vacancy, to allow normal turnover. Greater Boston retail vacancy is 2.7%, one of the tightest markets in the country. That shows area demand for business space, and an opportunity for Arlington to attract more businesses.

Some of the open spaces are being renovated right now and will lease when the buildout is complete.

Source: Heights Action Plan Implementation Committee presentations: Oct 26, 2026 (slide 11), 243,128 sf of existing active commercial space; Nov 16, 2026, 10,877 sf of vacant space. **Vacancy: 10,877 sf ÷ 243,128 sf = 4.47%, rounded to 4.5%.**

2 THE SOLUTIONS: MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS & AN INCENTIVE

DEVELOPERS WILL ADD COMMERCIAL SPACE WHEN THE ZONING BYLAW REQUIRES IT

WHAT A REDEVELOPMENT BOARD MEMBER SAID

"ground floor commercial is not necessarily something we should incentivize because it's a business district. People should be doing it anyway."

Shaina Korman-Houston, Arlington Redevelopment Board, November 16, 2026

If developers should be adding commercial space anyway, the bylaw should require it.

Source: Arlington Redevelopment Board meeting video, 57:33 (automatic captions)

2 THE SOLUTIONS: MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS & AN INCENTIVE

HOUSING ABOVE, BUSINESS BELOW



80 Broadway, 2 stories of commercial

"

if we really want new businesses they have to have apartments above them if they're going to pencil in

Michelle Shortsleeve, Arlington Redevelopment Board, November 16, 2026

Mixed-use buildings with housing above businesses get new business space built.

Source: Arlington Redevelopment Board meeting video, 1:07:32 (automatic captions)

SIDE BY SIDE

THE PLAN, IMPROVED: NO NET LOSS OF COMMERCIAL SPACE WITH MULTI FAMILY BY RIGHT

	Version 7	Improved
5 stories	No business space required	60% ground-floor commercial, 40% 2nd Floor
6 stories	75% on 1st and 2nd floors	Incentivize commercial space on Minuteman Trail side of Mass Ave.
Redevelopment	Business space can shrink	No net loss
Apartment buildings	Special permit anywhere	Allowed outside the Business District

1. Support mixed-use buildings with multi-family housing by right above businesses.

2. Require 60% commercial space ground floor minimums, and 40% minimum on the 2nd floor, to achieve no net loss of commercial space in the Heights Business District.

3. Incentivize creation total of 150% commercial space by offering a 6th story on the Minuteman Trail side of Mass Ave.

Source: Heights Action Plan Implementation Committee, Heights Business District Draft Zoning v7, Nov 23, 2026.