

M-C News

A PUBLICATION OF THE MID-CAMBRIDGE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION
AND THE LONGFELLOW NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL

Vol. 15, No. 1

January, 2006

Library, bus shelters, trash on agenda for January 31 meeting

A full agenda is on tap for the winter Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association neighborhood meeting, slated for Tuesday, January 31, from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Real Colegio Complutense, 26 Trowbridge Street (corner of Harvard Street).

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss current issues and make plans for solutions to the follow topics. Each session will include time for neighbors' comments, questions and answers.

--**Main Library construction:** Alan Burne, director of the library expansion project, will speak to residents (see related article at left).

--**Trash and recycle update:** City recycling director Randi Mail and John Nardone, assistant commissioner for operations of the DPW, will discuss trash

Library project director to update neighbors on construction progress

Construction work continues at the Main Library site on Broadway as workmen remove the existing tot lot to ready the site for the construction of a new 102,000-square-foot addition and a 70-car underground parking garage.

This is another separate contract outside the scope of the work of the general contractor, who has yet to be selected, according to Alan Burne, the city's project director for the overall construction. He plans to attend MCNA's January 31 membership meeting to give residents further updates and to explain how communications will be handled over the course of the project.

Bids from pre-qualified subcontractors such as electricians and plumbers were due Jan. 12. Bids from the general contractors (GC) are due Feb. 9. Three pre-qualified, well-respected construction companies will be bidding to be GC: Daniel O'Connell Sons, Consigli, and
(Continued on Page 2)

pickup changes and recycling priorities.

--**Neighborhood community oversight:** A resolution against curb cuts for front yard parking will be considered. (For info, see story, Page 4).

--**CCTV Programming;**

--**Longfellow School:** Guidelines for use.

--**Swiss House** second-floor expansion plan (for info, see article below).

--**Bus stop shelters:** Blocking sidewalks and advertising;

--**Municipal energy** initiatives and options;

--**Membership:** MCNA has 624 members. How shall we attract more?

Swiss House consulate unveils plan to expand

In December the Swiss Consulate, or Swiss House, informed some of its immediate neighbors of its plan to add a second floor to its building on the corner of Broadway and Ellery Street.

The plan will require a change to the 1999 special permit that allowed the consulate to occupy the building as well as a zoning variance, because the structure does not conform to current zoning.

At a December 8 meeting with an invited group of neighbors, Consul General Christoph von Arb said that "on a continuing basis, we are making efforts to be good neighbors," and stated that the project would not involve any increase in staffing or impact on public safety or street parking.

Also, architect Muriel Waldvogel presented a design for the second story that includes four offices, a bathroom, and two foyers, along with a rooftop garden and a staircase from the driveway to the second floor. The second story would be 10 feet high.

In response to Ellery Square residents' concerns about how the new construction would affect their view of Joan Lorentz Park on Broadway, the architect agreed to a suggestion to build a rudimentary massing structure, such as with two-by-fours and plastic sheeting, so the neighbors could see the impact. Ms. Waldvogel also offered to take pictures from some condos in the courtyard to produce a visual rendering
(Continued on Page 2)

For the record: Knafel controversy revisited

On November 20, *The Boston Globe* published a critique of Harvard's new Center for Government and International Affairs buildings titled "At Harvard a road runs through it: Knafel Center halves make an elegant whole." The writer was architect Robert Campbell, who happens to be a Mid-Cambridge resident.

Commenting on a proposed tunnel connecting the two buildings that failed to win city approval because of opposition from neighbors, Campbell wrote: "The tunnel is a case where popular government killed a good idea. Knafel would be infinitely improved by a tunnel. It could

Library update

(Continued from Page 1)

Suffolk Construction.

Barring any legal or budgetary problems with the bids, the city hopes that a bid award, signed contract and "Notice to proceed" might be possible by the end of February. One of the GC's first tasks will be to review with the city the contractor's proposed schedule, phasing plan and mitigation measures. Shortly thereafter, Alan Burne and a representative of the GC team plan to meet with the community.

There has been a lot of dialog about the mitigation measures. Specific ones that have the greatest impact on the community are specified in a contract document titled "Supplementary General Conditions with Phasing and Construction Mitigation." This document is contained in the project bid documents and has been posted on the library's website at: www.cambridgema.gov/~CPL

This website will be the source for information on construction as it progresses. There will also be at least one bulletin board on site, where progress reports and planned construction activities will be posted. These will be updated monthly with any special bulletins posted as needed on the board as well as on the website.

Current thinking is that we are looking at a construction duration of between 25 and 30 months. The first activity will probably be the erection of the slurry wall for the new construction. The 1967 wing that faces Cambridge Rindge and Latin School will not be demolished during the school year, but rather in the summer. Until the successful contractor has been selected and their schedule reviewed, we will not know whether they will utilize this building in lieu of construction trailers and perhaps take down the old wing in summer of 2007 or whether they will demolish it during summer of 2006.

The date, time and place of the March neighborhood meeting with the successful GC will be announced as soon as it is known. Watch the MCNA website (www.mcna.org) for more details.

have been built without pain..."

He also asked: "Why would neighbors object to an invisible tunnel? Wouldn't it be a win for both sides, reducing the number of pedestrians crossing Cambridge Street? John Moos chairs the Mid-Cambridge Conservation District Commission, which reviewed the project many times. He says there is no rational explanation. The anti-tunnel faction was motivated by simple animus toward Harvard."

On November 28, *The Globe* published a letter of response from M-C residents Joan Pickett and John Pitkin stating that the article misrepresented the neighborhood's opposition to the tunnel. They wrote:

"Residents objected to the disruption that would have been caused by the relocation of major utility systems to make way for a tunnel that they believed would provide little or no public benefit.

"The lengthy review and negotiations that ended in disagreement about the tunnel resulted in hard feelings on both sides. Campbell's idea that residents objected to the tunnel because they disliked Harvard makes no more sense than the opposite notion that Harvard sought permission to build the tunnel because it wanted to annoy its neighbors."

Editor's Note: Moos has moved out of the neighborhood and no longer chairs the M-C Conservation District. His successor is Steven Cohen.

Swiss House: Back to BZA?

(Continued from Page 1)

which would more accurately show the future view.

In order to obtain a special permit and a variance for the plan, the Swiss House would have to go before the Board of Zoning Appeal for the third time since 1999, when it obtained a special permit that allowed it to occupy the site of the former Sage convenience store and laundromat. The lot is zoned C-1 (residential), so both the store and consulate are non-conforming uses. In April 2004, the BZA lifted a 5-year sunset provision that was part of the 1999 special permit.

A group of neighbors unsuccessfully opposed the 1999 special permit, both before the BZA and in an appeal to Middlesex Superior Court, on the grounds that the consulate would deprive the neighborhood of useful amenities and lead to further institutional encroachment. More information on Swiss House is available on their website, www.shareboston.org.

MCNA will notify neighbors when more meetings with Swiss House are scheduled.

(Kate Vrijmoet, Cathy Edgerly, John Pitkin and Joan Pickett contributed to this article.)

Neighborhood Notes: M-C happenings

Good Neighbor Award

The Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association is establishing a Good Neighbor Awards program to recognize those organizations, institutions and individuals that have contributed to the welfare and general improvement of the Mid-Cambridge area.

Nominations for these awards can be contributed by any MCNA member, and the ultimate recipients will be chosen by the Coordinating Committee on an annual basis using CC meeting rules. It will be presented at the annual May meeting of the Association.

The award will be a certificate, plaque or emblem to be chosen by the Coordinating Committee, which welcomes design suggestions from members of the Association.

By instituting these awards the MCNA hopes to encourage activities that realize our goals for improving the quality of life and environment in the Mid-Cambridge neighborhood.

Thanks to MCNA donors

Treasurer Frankie Lieberman reported we have received contributions from 57 MCNA members so far, totaling \$2,520 in response to our recent fundraising drive. Many thanks to all for their generosity.

Holiday Party

The annual MCNA Holiday Party, held Dec. 4 at the Cambridge Street home of Laura Roberts and Ed Belove, was a huge hit. About 100 people attended throughout the evening. We took in about \$127 at the door and about \$50 at the bar. Expenses for the event were in excess of the revenue.

Joan Lorentz Park: Time to make it official

Joan Lorentz Park is a city park but it is not legally designated as a park. This designation takes a vote by the state legislature and means that the park is forever protected from encroachment. The only two other parks in Cambridge that are state protected are Cambridge Common and Sennott Park.

It was suggested that we approach State Representatives Alice Wolf or Tim Toomey to ask their advice about how to get JL this coveted designation. Sam Seidel volunteered to look into the situation and work with Kate Vrijmoet, who had been spearheading the investigation, to figure out our best strategy.

Have you noticed the new bus shelters recently erected? Do you use them? If you have comments or concerns, please post them on our website at www.mcna.org

Sign of the times?



The bus shelter by City Hall cuts pedestrian space to single file and showcases a large McDonald's ad.

Recently the city has erected new bus shelters along Mass. Ave. and Cambridge Street with large commercial ads on their walls. Many neighbors have expressed concern about the placement of these new shelters in the center of the sidewalk, displacing pedestrian traffic, as well as dismay at the commercial advertising messages they prominently display.

According to Cathy Watkins of Community Development, the city staffer coordinating this project for the city, the contractors building the shelters, Cemusa, install and maintain the enclosures in exchange for revenues generated by advertising on the shelter panels. The city will not approve the ads individually but they are required to meet the city's guidelines for public advertising.

A total of 30 shelters are planned in Cambridge. Ten have already been completed: three in Central Square, four or five on Mass. Avenue, three on Cambridge street (Youville, the Pumpkins, and the high school, the latter at the bus stop). The shelter at R&L was approved by the Mid-Cambridge Conservation district.

According to Watkins, the Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Commission, which oversees new construction in the neighborhood, has reviewed the proposal for the new bus stop shelters and approved the project. It was also approved by the Board of Zoning Appeals.

MCNA Coordinating Committee members Tuny McMahon and David Szlag are planning to draft a letter to the city explaining misgivings about the shelters.

Should curb cuts for front yard parking be banned?

A recent curb cut request from a Roberts Road homeowner whose front yard was covered with pebbles and subsequently turned into a parking lot has prompted a look into city rules regarding curb cuts and whether the growing practice of gravelling or paving over front yards in order to create parking spaces is allowed by current zoning bylaws.

Though curb cuts require City Council approval before they can be approved, property owners cannot be denied access to a public way, according to Les Barber, a planner for the city. This means that by the time a request for a curb cut has made it to the City Council for a vote, it has already been approved or granted a variance by all the city departments that ensure compliance with local regulations.

According to Barber, the council gives public notice of the process as a courtesy to neighbors, but it is a mistake for neighbors to assume that they have

veto power over the curb cuts. The only instance where a neighbor might be able to change an outcome is if they identify some requirement or hazard that has not been considered, Barber said.

Nevertheless, all curb cuts and off-street parking must conform to city rules and regulations. According to Barber, houses in Mid-Cambridge must have a 10-foot setback from the street, and that setback usually takes the form of a front yard.

The city's zoning code prohibits that front yard from becoming a parking space for an automobile unless the homeowner has received a variance, Barber said, adding that potential zoning violations should be reported to the city's Inspectional Services Department.

A motion expressing the MCNA's opposition to both variances and curb cuts for parking within front yard setbacks will be presented for consideration by the members at the Jan. 31 meeting.

NEIGHBORHOOD CALENDAR

Tuesday, Jan. 31, 7-9 p.m., Neighborhood Meeting, at Real Colegio Complutense, 26 Trowbridge Street (corner of Harvard Street). See Agenda on page 1 of this newsletter.

Wednesday, Feb. 15, 7 p.m., Flat Night with Amy Meltzer and the Gardeners. Now is the time to start new plants in flats. Held at the Longfellow Council Office, 59 Broadway, upstairs from the library in the Longfellow School building. For more info call 617-349-6260.

Monday, March 13, 7 p.m., Beekeeping and Gardens. Author Birgit deWeerd will discuss beekeeping and gardening at the Longfellow Council Office, 359 Broadway, upstairs from the library in the Longfellow School building. For more info call 617-349-6260.

The M-C News is published by the Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association and the Longfellow Neighborhood Council. *Editor:* Paula Lovejoy. *Reporters:* George Bossarte, Cathy Edgerly, Joan Pickett, Doane Perry, John Pitkin, Sam Seidel, David Szlag, Kate Vrijmoet. The MCNA does not discriminate on the basis of disability.

M-C NEWS
P.O. Box 907
Cambridge, MA 02238
www.mcna.org

Neighborhood
Meeting
Tuesday, Jan. 31