

M-C News

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

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Commission To Decide Fate of Knafel Project

The Cambridge Historical Commission and the Mid Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Commission will hold four public hearings over the next month to decide whether Harvard University's proposed Knafel Center complex will go forward as planned.

The current plan, which calls for two large new academic buildings on opposite sides of Cambridge Street at Prescott Street, must be approved by both commissions before construction can begin.

The joint hearings are scheduled for four nights:

- Thursday, March 30;
- Monday, April 3;
- Tuesday, April 4, and
- Monday, April 24.

All sessions will begin at 6 p.m. at the Cambridge Senior Center, 806 Mass Ave. (Central Square) in the ballroom. Meetings are expected to last until 10 p.m.

Please mark your calendar and plan to attend, listen, and be heard! The first session (March 30) will be largely devoted to Harvard's presentation of the project. Following the presentation there will be a question-and-answer session, then public comment. Residents unable to comment in person may write letters to the Commission which will be read at the meetings.

To make way for the new buildings, Harvard is requesting permission to demolish Coolidge Hall and the University Information Services building at 1730 Cambridge St. It also proposes to move a wood-frame house at 96 Prescott St. to 18 Sumner Road, and lift another wood-frame house at 1727/1737 Cambridge St. from its foundation, and rebuild it in the same location.

The Historical Commission must approve the razing of Coolidge Hall. The MCNDC must approve the demolition of 1730 Cambridge St. and the moving of the Prescott Street house (see related story on Page 2).

At our January meeting, members of the MCNA objected to basic features of the proposed design, including that the buildings are too massive in scale to fit in with the neighborhood. Members considered the exterior of the proposed buildings to be incompatible with the residential character that currently prevails in

the area, and also were concerned about potential traffic and parking problems.

"The Association insists on buildings that are excellent because they are as good a fit for neighborhood residents as they are for the University," MCNA President John Pitkin wrote in a letter to Harvard after our January meeting.

Harvard spokesperson Mary Power reaffirmed Harvard's openness to dialogue with the community. "Harvard University has been committed to engaging the community in discussions about the Knafel Center for Government and International Studies from the earliest planning stages," she stated. "Over the past few years, the project has taken various turns in response to community concerns. We look forward to continuing the community dialogue with the involvement of the Mid Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District and the Cambridge Historical Commission."

MCNA Takes Stand on Knafel, Other Development Issues

MCNA's membership adopted strong positions on the proposal for Harvard's Knafel complex and two other current development issues at our meeting in the Main Public Library on Jan. 19. The members also postponed action on the draft guidelines for development along the University-residential edge near Prescott Street until the next meeting of the membership. Over 50 residents participated in the two-hour session.

Knafel Process Praised, Proposal Criticized

MCNA president John Pitkin gave a short presentation of the Knafel design using architectural renderings provided by Harvard University. About twenty members had attended a full presentation of the design by architect Harry Cobb last December. After the presentation there was a vigorous discussion of the proposal. Many speakers raised specific objections and concerns. Several voiced strong opposition to any large academic center in the area, regardless of design, and another urged acceptance of the proposal because of the university's importance to the area's economy.

Vote on Knafel

By a vote of 34-2(no)-4(not voting), the meeting
(Continued on Page 3)

MCNA Takes Stand on Knafel, Other Development Issues

(Continued from Page 1)

adopted a position proposed by Alex Loud to thank the University for providing neighbors information about the project and for helping to preserve the Swedenborg Chapel/Gund Hall block's open space and frame houses and at the same time to object to important features of the proposed design, its massing and physical relationship to the neighborhood, the exterior treatment and traffic generation.

Since then...

The MCNA Coordinating Committee sent a copy of the motion to key Harvard officials and urged the university to modify its design to be compatible with the area's residential character before proceeding further with the project. Also, Mr. Pitkin has set up a working group of Knafel abutters and three design professionals to develop more detailed comments on the design proposal, and the Coordinating Committee is working to prepare a strong statement for the hearings of the Conservation District and Historic Commissions.

Opposition to Swiss House

William Schreiber presented the neighbors' court case to overturn the Zoning Board's special permit for a Swiss research center/consulate in the former Sage Jr. market on Broadway.

Vote on Swiss House

By a vote of 30-0(no)-6(not voting), the meeting adopted a motion proposed by Joan Pickett to try to keep neighborhood services on the site, tighten the city's institutional use regulations (which are intended to stop this kind of institutional encroachment), and to oppose the project.

Since then...

The neighbors have decided not to appeal the Superior Court's decision to uphold the special permit.

Antrim Street Effort Against Project Violations

George Metzger described some of the numerous problems with a 3-unit housing development at 77-79 Antrim Street that a group of twenty residents have been trying to correct, including misrepresentations to the Board of Zoning Appeal and Conservation District Commission, substantial zoning code violations, including excessive floor area, and reluctance by the City to find violations and, when violations are found, to enforce the code.

Vote on Antrim Zoning Abuses

By a vote of 35-0(no)-1(not voting), the members adopted a motion by Robert Campbell to support the neighbors' position in upcoming hearings at the Board of Zoning Appeal, and to work to revise zoning lan-

guage to prevent future similar abuses.

Since then...

The Coordinating Committee sent a letter to the BZA on the project architect's appeal for non-enforcement. The letter asked the board to uphold the Building Inspector's enforcement and said, "The rewards for creative re-interpretation of the codes are great. The city's authority must be used to ensure that the temptation of these rewards is resisted."

At a hearing March 9, the BZA rejected the developer's appeal to approve some 200 square feet of excess floor area that had already been constructed. Just prior to the hearing, the developer withdrew his appeal of the building commissioner's decision that he was in violation.

Transition Area Development Guidelines

Due to a lack of time at the end of the meeting, Keren Schlomy's presentation of the proposed guidelines for Harvard campus development in transition areas (published in the January M-C News) was cut short.

By a vote of 20-5 (no)-10 (not voting), the meeting referred the guidelines to the Coordinating Committee for further review and presentation at the next meeting of the Association. The Coordinating Committee and Task Force have nearly completed their review, and a revised set of guidelines for development in the transitional area will be at the top of the agenda at our annual meeting on May 17.

If you would like an electronic copy of the revised Draft Guidelines or any motions or letters referred to in this article, please send a request by email to

Harvardology

(Continued from Page 2)

This could meet the "acute" need for more space which the dean sees in the Division of Engineering and Applied Sciences and many science departments, but not the also "acute" need of the departments in William James Hall.

Beyond that, there are few details other than that they are working on the problem in "a major analysis and planning effort to identify and formulate the opportunities for increasing the faculty's office, research, and classroom space over the next two decades."

The dean acknowledges that they "cannot continue merely to solve problems as they arise." If the university will share the results of its planning at an early stage, it will find it has better relations with the many residents who must live with the buildings it puts up to solve its problems.

What to Expect: The Commissions' Authority on Knafel

The Cambridge Historical Commission has the authority to delay demolition of buildings which are over fifty years old for up to six months to allow time for landmark protection if they are historically significant. On March 30 and April 3 it will review Harvard University's proposal to demolish Coolidge Hall (1737 Cambridge St., built in 1928).

The Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Commission has the authority to prevent demolition of any building in the District, to impose conditions on the design of new buildings and to reduce the size of new construction by up to one-third below what is otherwise allowed by zoning.

The ordinance specifies the criteria to be applied in this review, as follows:

"All applications shall be considered in terms of the impact...on the District as a whole, and in addition with regard to the potential adverse effects...on the surrounding properties and on the immediate streetscape and the economic assessment of the alternatives to the proposed action.

"General objectives shall be to:

1. Avoid excessive infill;
2. Encourage new construction which complements existing buildings;
3. Encourage preservation of neighborhood buildings;...
5. Enhance the economic vitality of the neighborhood.

"Review of the design of a proposed new building, relocated building, or applicable alteration... shall be ... with regard to the compatibility...with its surroundings, and the following elements of the project...:

1. site layout;
2. provisions for parking;
3. volume and dimensions of the building;
4. provisions for open space and landscaping;
5. the scale of the building in relation to its surroundings; and
6. the changes to existing buildings as related to new construction.

"...With regard to the ... demolition of a... building, [the Commission] shall consider the following factors:

1. the physical condition of the building;
2. a claim of substantial hardship, financial or otherwise,...and
3. the design of the proposed replacement structures...."

In line with these powers, on March 30 and April 3, 4 and 24, the District Commission will review 1) 1730 Cambridge St. for demolition of the University Information Systems building and construction of Knafel Center

south building; 2) 1727 and 1737 Cambridge St. for renovation of wood frame building and "construction of the portion of the proposed Knafel Center north building that would be within the Mid Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District boundary;" and 3) moving of existing dwelling from 96 Prescott St. to 18 Sumner Rd. The Commission has no authority over the mass of the Knafel Center north building, which is outside the District's boundaries.

Harvardology

Does Harvard University intend the Knafel complex to finish its expansion in Mid-Cambridge--a plan that would ease many residents' concerns about the current proposal--or does the University intend the complex to be the beginning of a new wave of academic expansion along the Prescott-St. - Sumner Road corridor?

Those who know aren't talking, and those who talk probably don't know. Jeremy Knowles, Dean of the Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, undoubtedly knows as much as anyone, and his January Letter to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences makes interesting reading.

According to Dean Knowles, times are changing. The last decade began with financial deficits as the dean's top concern, it ended with \$1.1 billion in the Campaign for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. During the decade, the number of professors in the faculty remained level, but now the dean's single goal for the coming years is to "increase the number of professors in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences [Dean's italics]."

The dean's plan to add 60 new professors and, we assume, the usual support staff, will create "severe space problems." Two of the eight projects in the faculty's current building program (Knafel and the creation of the Barker Center in the former Freshman Union building) are in Mid-Cambridge, as are the Inn at Harvard, which is slated for conversion to faculty use "sometime after 2010" and the Sackler Museum, which could become available for a new use if the Art Museums' effort to build on the Mahoney's Garden Center site is successful. Because the faculty controls most of the University's property in Mid-Cambridge, it may seek to meet more of its need for new space here.

The one specific development area mentioned in the dean's letter, the science museums and the space south of Hammond Street, is in the Agassiz neighborhood.

(Continued on Page 3)

Timeline: The Road to Knafel 2000

The public Knafel project is now three years old.

In early 1997, Harvard University announced Sidney Knafel's gift of \$14 million for a "Center for Government and International Studies" and held a meeting with residents to present ideas for a building on the Swedenborg Chapel block (bounded by Quincy, Cambridge and Kirkland Streets and Sumner Road). By the time of a public presentation of options for renovation of Coolidge Hall and a new 55,000 square foot building in October, 1997, Michael Charney had organized the Campaign to Stop the Knafel Center to save the green space and historic wood frame buildings on the block.

In April, 1998, Harvard brought in a new architect, Harry Cobb, and after six months of study he came to the same conclusions as the Campaign about the green and houses: He recommended that these should be preserved. To meet the university's desire for more space, he instead proposed the current scheme of demolishing both the red-brick Coolidge Hall and the blue-steel-and-glass Information Services building across Cambridge Street and replacing them

with matched buildings of approximately 80,000 square feet, connected by a tunnel under the street.

Mr. Cobb showed the first plans for the new buildings to neighbors last June and much more detailed plans at a public meeting in December.

Meanwhile, residents successfully petitioned the city to protect the houses at 34 and 38 Kirkland and the Swedenborg Chapel by designating them historic landmarks. They further protected these properties by downzoning from high-density (C-3) to lower density (C-1). Despite reservations about its loss of development potential, the University accepted these measures.

Fund-Raising Results

Many thanks to the 128 people who have contributed a total of \$3,725 so far in the MCNA's recent fund-raising drive. If you haven't sent in your contribution yet, there's still time to send a donation to the MCNA at P.O. Box 907, Cambridge, MA 02238.

NEIGHBORHOOD CALENDAR

Thursday, March 30, 6 PM Hearing on Harvard University Knafel Center Proposal, Cambridge Senior Center, 806 Mass. Ave., Central Square. Presentation of plan by Harvard officials. See story on Page 1 for details.

Monday, April 3, 6 PM Second hearing on Knafel Center Proposal. Public comment.

Tuesday, April 4, 6 PM Third hearing on Knafel Center Proposal. Public comment.

Monday, April 24, 6 PM Fourth hearing on Knafel Center Proposal. Public comment.

Saturday, May 6, 9-11 AM Arbor Day Tree Walk led by Bill Shutkin. Meet at Joan Lorentz Park, corner of Ellery Street and Broadway, by the gate.

Wednesday, May 17, 7 PM Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association annual meeting, location to be announced.

M-C NEWS

P.O. Box 907
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NOTICE OF MEETINGS