

M-C News

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

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May, 2000

Commission Hears Knafel Proposal, Gives No Hint of Decision

For 16 hours in four evenings of hearings on Harvard University's proposed Knafel Center for government and international studies, the Mid-Cambridge Conservation District Commission gave University representatives every opportunity to state their case and University representatives used each of these opportunities. So far, none of the Commission members has indicated how they intend to vote on the application, which is the largest and most controversial to have come before the Commission.

Architect Harry Cobb, world-reknowned, a partner of I.M. Pei and known in Boston as the designer of the new Federal Court House, was the lead advocate for the university. He repeatedly stated his intention that the project should be a benefit to the community and the city as well as to the university and stated that "A lot of thought has gone into the buildings being proposed."

No one could doubt that a lot of thought had gone into Cobb's presentation, which was built around a dazzling computer slide show with multiple animated views of the proposed buildings. But most members of the public who spoke seemed unconvinced that the new twin buildings would in any way be an improvement over the two Cambridge Street buildings proposed to be demolished, Coolidge Hall (number 1737) and University Information Services (number 1730), or 96 Prescott Street, a frame building which would be moved to a lot at 20 Sumner Road.

There was back-and-forth discussion between public commentators and university representatives about traffic and parking impacts, design of the buildings' exterior, and the pair of 18-foot square windows facing each other across Cambridge Street at ground level.

The discussion about traffic centered on the effects of increased numbers of conferences. One commentator reported that members of the university had been told that a benefit of the new complex would be increased possibilities for conferences. University representatives countered that this would not or could not happen, and offered as evidence the current number of conferences

and the Interim Planning Overlay Permit (IPOP) traffic study, which is to be completed in June.

Two residents, Craig Whitaker and George Metzger, both architects, commented that the Center's windows are too wide. In response, Cobb showed new plans with slightly narrower windows on the 24th.

The sharpest disagreement came over the large
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Neighborhood Meeting

The Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association will hold its Annual Meeting
Wednesday, May 17, 7:00 to 9:00 PM
in the Longfellow School Cafeteria, corner of
Broadway and Fayette Street, courtyard entrance.

Agenda

Report of the Officers on the state of the Association.
Election of Coordinating Committee for 2000-01.
The nominees are Bill Craig (Greenough Ave.), Elizabeth Gombosi (Irving St., new candidate), Frankie Lieberman (Ellsworth Ave.), Paula Lovejoy (Clinton St.), Martha Osler (Irving Terr.), Joan Pickett (Ellery St., new candidate), John Pitkin (Fayette St.), Keren Schlomy (Irving Terr.), Rachael Solem (Ellsworth Ave.), Susan Twarog (Dana St.).
Guidelines for Development in the Prescott Street-Summer Road Area. Acting in response to the Association's vote in January, the Coordinating Committee has reviewed the Neighborhood Stewardship Task Force's draft guidelines. Both the Task Force and the Coordinating Committee are recommending revised guidelines to the Association. These will be discussed and voted on. (The text of the Guidelines is included as an insert to the *M-C News*.)

Harvard Square Historic District. A member of the Harvard Square Historic District Study Committee has been invited to speak about the proposal, which is before the City Council and has encountered opposition from commercial interests.

New Business. Proposals by members.

MCNA membership and meetings are open to all residents of Mid-Cambridge.

MCNA Fund Appeal Nets Generous Response

Our call for contributions this spring was answered with enthusiasm and generosity. Over 140 members, representing more than one-quarter of our membership, sent in checks between January and April. We thank you all. The newsletter, neighborhood signs, the Candidates' Night, and the winter and summer gatherings all thank you.

Below is a list of donors. Benefactors contributed over \$100, patrons contributed between \$50 and \$99, and friends contributed under \$50.

Donations are voluntary, as our association has no membership fee. Donations are still being accepted, and every dollar helps! If you have not sent in your donation yet, please mail it to the Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association, P.O. Box 907, Cambridge, MA 02238.

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Knafel Hearings

(Continued from Page 1)

square windows. Cobb described them as “inviting” the public in, while commentators countered that the buildings will in fact be private, so any invitation is only apparent.

The questions of Commission members, to a greater degree than public commentators, concerned the impacts on the street, such as views of Memorial Hall, and on the Swedenborg-Gund Hall block rather than on the Foxcroft Manor-Bromley Court block.

A dramatic high point occurred in the April 4 hearing, when City Councilor Kathy Born, who is an architect, addressed the Commission about the project as a whole. After praising Cobb’s abilities, she expressed her desire for an “extraordinary” building, and concluded “This is not a building Cambridge can embrace and love, and it should be.”

With several important issues yet to be addressed, the Commission has scheduled additional meetings on the project for Monday, May 15 and Tuesday, May 30 at 6 PM the Cambridge Senior Center, across from City Hall. Outstanding issues include the shape of the south building, traffic and parking impacts, and the appropriateness of the project. Commission Chair John Moos

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voiced his intention that the commission would begin its deliberations on the 15th and that the university should respond to the commissions’ concerns on the 30th.

In addition to Chairman Moos, it seems likely that the commission members who will decide the case are Vice Chair Steven Cohen, Martha Osler, Mary Berg and Nancy Goodwin. All members of the Commission are neighborhood residents. Goodwin and Tony Hsaio, who is not sitting on the case, are both architects.

Despite the limited opportunities for public comment, over forty residents attended each of the four sessions in the Cambridge Senior Center. Their questions and comments were invariably respectful. This tone was strongly encouraged by Chairman Moos, who ran the proceedings with a firm hand and confined the questions and testimony from the public to a sequence of specific topics in each session.

The March 30 session was held jointly with the Cambridge Historical Commission and focused on the demolition of Coolidge Hall (1737 Cambridge Street) and its replacement, Knafel North. There were presentations on the history of the affected sites, particularly those on the Swedenborg-Gund Hall block, by Charles Sullivan, Executive Director of the Historical Commission, and on the entire Knafel project, by architect Cobb, Harvard VP Kathy Spiegelman, Associate Dean Nancy Maull and other university spokespeople. Following a recommendation by staff, the Historical Commission voted to cede its authority over the demolition of Coolidge Hall to the Conservation District Commission.

Reliable sources have reported to M-C News that the occupants of Coolidge Hall have just been told that the date of their move to another location has been pushed back by a year, from January 1, 2000, to January 1, 2002.

Sculptor Seeks Input From Lee St. Residents

Mitch Ryerson, a local artist and furniture-maker hired by the city to carve city tree stumps into public seating, wants to hear from Lee Street neighbors. His newest project is sculpting the stump of the street’s huge old elm tree, which was killed by Dutch elm disease last year.

Ryerson would like to meet with any and all neighbors who have concerns or who would like to know more about what he proposes to do. He may be contacted at 781-391-1231.

Principles and Guidelines for Development for the Mid-Cambridge/Harvard Edge

Comprehensive Planning

Principle: Institutions should produce comprehensive plans for their neighborhood edges with participation by all stakeholders, including university and other institutions; business; and residents, both owners and renters.

- Comprehensive plans should define the long term limits on expansion into the existing residential neighborhoods and serve as a definition of the neighborhood edge.
- Zoning expresses the maximum allowed building potential, not the optimal, or even desirable use.
- All planning should be based on compliance with existing and future zoning regulation without any variances and special permits.
- Historic, unique sites and structures that enhance the beauty of the institutional and residential neighborhood should be preserved.
- All long-term planning information that bears on a given neighborhood should be shared as early as possible with the relevant group of residents and other stakeholders.
- Comprehensive plans should maintain a livable neighborhood sustaining its human scale.
- Comprehensive planning should eliminate piecemeal development.
- Each development project should be evaluated in the context of the cumulative impact of recent, proposed, and planned projects.

Involvement in Decision Making

Principle: Residents, businesses and institutions are stakeholders in development of project plans in their neighborhood and, therefore, should participate as equals in deliberations and decision making which have an impact on the neighborhood.

- `Stakeholders' include abutters and other affected community members.
- All stakeholders should have a voice in project plans, particularly those which have an impact on daily life and property such as schedule, timing, terms of construction, ongoing oversight, and mitigation measures.
- All stakeholders should be notified in a timely manner of all development proposals and plans for construction, alterations, or changes in property use which have an impact on the neighborhood, so that they may be part of the discussions and decision-making.

- Open meetings should be held to inform all stakeholders of proposed changes affecting the neighborhood.

Transition Areas

Principle: The nature and stability of the transition from institutional to residential use is particularly critical to retaining the human and architectural character of this edge.

- The term "transition area" is defined by the impacts of buildings and spaces on the neighborhood's quality of life. A transitional area is a mixed-use area lying between an institution's core campus and a predominantly residential neighborhood.
- A transitional area should serve as a buffer between the institution's intense uses and residential uses.
- Long-term plans affecting a transitional area should preserve the stability of residential uses in the transition area.
- The transition between the university and the neighborhood should be a permeable edge, including buildings and green space which are of the scale, architectural vocabulary, and massing of the neighboring residences.
- Harvard University should create a legal agreement to continue to observe the previously agreed upon limits to their acquisition of property in the neighborhood ("the red line").

Use

Principle: The uses of institutional buildings should be compatible with the residential quality of the neighborhood.

- Intensity of institutional use should decline as the university approaches its edge, easing the transition to the neighborhood.
- Intensive evening and weekend use of buildings should be planned and implemented to be sensitive to neighborhood impacts and preferably restricted to buildings that do not abut residences.
- There should be no loss of residential units to non-residential uses.

Density and Scale

Principle: Development should be compatible with and respect the scale and character of the residential areas adjacent to the university.

- Avoid "canyonization" of streets by new or renovated buildings by stepping back buildings.
- Create structures and open spaces that make people feel comfortable when they view, walk, or live in or near them.

-Streets, sidewalks, and setbacks to buildings should be designed and maintained in ways that promote neighborhood safety, sociability, and attractiveness.

-Any building which replaces an existing building should be sensitive to the scale and character of abutting residences and be preferably smaller than the building it replaces. If it is not smaller then it should “step” away from the residences.

-Buildings should be smaller of mass along the street and sidewalk and as they abut or face residential buildings.

Institutional-Community Partnership

Principle: Institutions and residents should be good neighbors to each other.

-Residents should have access to institutional buildings and facilities as appropriate.

Construction Mitigation

Principle: Construction should have minimal impact on the daily life of the neighborhood.

-Mitigation efforts should include noise, dust, dirt, vibration, traffic, parking, disruption, protection from damage to property, starting time and overtime, safety, and compensation for loss due to construction or accidents.

-There should be enforceable agreements between the owner responsible for development and the neighbors for mitigation efforts.

-Multiple construction projects should be planned and coordinated to minimize adverse neighborhood impacts. For example, the timing of projects should take into account ongoing and recent construction projects in the neighborhood so as not to overburden residents.

Design

Principle: New construction should be compatible with prevalent building materials and design in the immediate neighborhood.

-New construction should be based on excellent architectural design that places the building in the appropriate relationship to its surroundings. Renovation should be of such quality as to preserve or enhance existing architectural features. Additions should carry existing architectural themes.

-Development should proceed with a preference for materials and construction techniques which are environmentally responsible and support local businesses.

-Buildings should not turn their backs on their neighbors; designs should be consistently attractive on all sides.

-Buildings should be designed so that their use is compatible with their residential neighbors.

-New construction and renovation should be designed in a manner that is sympathetic to residential abutters’ desire to

preserve their quiet enjoyment.

-Placement of mechanical systems should take into account their visibility and impacts on the surrounding properties.

Preservation and Conservation

Principle: Existing wood frame and historic structures should be preserved on site, maintaining their scale and integrity

-Historic structures are valued by neighbors. Their preservation on site and restoration should be emphasized in any development projects.

-Buildings deemed to have “value” by the historic commission or that are otherwise especially important in their context should be preserved on site.

-If wood frame and historic structures must be disturbed, they should be relocated as close as possible to their original site.

Traffic and Parking

Principle: Streets should be quieter, less congested and safe, with no net loss of current residential parking.

-Each change in use, rehabilitation, expansion or new building should have pedestrian, traffic and parking studies performed for all development that has more than 50 occupants.

-Surface parking lots have value to abutters in providing open space and light to those properties. Developers of these lots should take into account and protect to the greatest extent possible these values. New and existing surface parking lots should be landscaped to enhance their environmental value.

Green Space

Principle: Green open space should be located to maximize neighborhood and institutional benefits

-Existing building sites and open spaces should be landscaped as appropriate to the site and surrounding neighborhood areas.

-Green space should be maintained in good condition.

-Trees on site should be preserved to the greatest extent possible.

-New trees, as well as bushes and other plants and flowers, should be planted as part of new development to buffer and enhance the attractiveness of buildings.

Open Space

Principle: Open space is desired in dense neighborhoods for the light and privacy it affords, and should be preserved and created.

Plazas and other open spaces should be preserved to enhance neighborhood quality of life.

Historic District Proposal Is Before City Council

A proposal to establish a Harvard Square Historic District has been resubmitted to the City Council, after a vote on the matter was tabled at the council's final meeting of 1999.

The Harvard Square Historic District Study Committee, after a thorough three-year st

udy, published its proposal for a Harvard Square Historic District and related zoning amendment in a Preliminary Study Report in August 1999. It received unanimous endorsement from the Cambridge Historical Commission after a public hearing last October.

The proposal calls for an historic district established under Chapter 40C of the General Laws and administered by the Cambridge Historical Commission, in conjunction with zoning amendments that would maintain current FAR provisions in Harvard Square.

Under the current proposal, the Historical Commission would have binding review over demolition, new construction, and publicly-visible exterior alterations to existing buildings, and could, in appropriate cases,

impose dimensional and set-back requirements in addition to those required by zoning. A summary of the Final Study Report is available online at <http://www.ci.cambridge.ma.us/~Historic/> or a full-length copy of the report can be obtained by calling the Historical Commission at (617) 349-4683.

The historic district proposal has been presented at a series of public meetings and was reviewed by state and local agencies, local property and business owners, and grass-roots preservation organizations. While opponents have brought up concerns about added costs, excessive regulation, and the potential of additional litigation, the Cambridge Planning Board, Harvard Square Business Association, Harvard Square Defense Fund, Harvard University, and the Massachusetts Historical Commission have all voiced support for the proposal.

For further information and ways to get involved, please contact John Altobello, point person for the community, at 492-1278 or jaltobello@civicnet.org.

NEIGHBORHOOD CALENDAR

April 24 - June 9 The Longfellow Community School is sponsoring music, sports, and arts and crafts classes for children and adults, afternoons and evenings at the school. For registration and information, please call 349-6260.

Monday, May 15, and Tuesday, May 30, 6 PM
Hearing on Harvard University Knafel Center Proposal, Cambridge Senior Center, 806 Mass. Ave., Central Square. See story on Page 1 for details.

Wednesday, May 17, 7 PM to 9 PM Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association annual meeting, Longfellow School Cafeteria, corner of Broadway and Fayette Street. Please enter from the courtyard.

The M-C News is published by the Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association and the Longfellow Neighborhood Council. *Editors:* Paula Lovejoy, John Pitkin. *Reporters:* Keren Schlomy, Rachael Solem, John Altobello, Frankie Lieberman.

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ANNUAL MEETING
WEDNESDAY, MAY 17