

# M-C News

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

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## M-C property taxes escalate most for 2- and 3-family homes

The city's new property tax assessments brought unwelcome surprises to many Mid-Cambridge homeowners in the form of November tax bills that were sharply up from last year. Some assessments more than doubled, and increases of 50 % were the rule for two and three-family houses.

Overall, taxes on existing residential property in Cambridge rose 12.4% from last year. There was a 6.4% increase in the total needed to meet the city budget and no appreciable growth in taxes on commercial

## Tot lot to get central location in library/park complex

A neighborhood playground advocacy group, concerned that the proposed Broadway tot lot was too close to the street, reached a compromise agreement with Deputy City Manager Rich Rossi and library Project Director Alan Burne on Oct. 29. City officials agreed to move the playground to a location no less than 80 feet from the underground parking garage ramp and no less than 50 feet from Broadway, almost midway between the proposed site and the current site.

Currently adjacent to the main library, the tot lot is slated to be rebuilt when the library complex is redesigned to accommodate a new library building.

Mayor Michael Sullivan and State Rep. Alice Wolf assisted the local group, which consisted mainly of parents of toddlers, in the campaign to keep the tot lot centrally located within Joan Lorentz Green, west of Trowbridge Street. But it wasn't until a group of 12 registered Cambridge voters prepared an extensive appeal of the Oct. 4 Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Commission (MCNCD) decision allowing the tot lot to be placed adjacent to Broadway and the parking garage entrance, that Burne responded with an alternative site for the tot lot location.

*(Continued on Page 3)*

properties, which were already at the maximum allowed by law.

If the new assessments are accurate, Mid-Cambridge is still far from the priciest neighborhood in the city, but values here have gained on those in traditionally more expensive neighborhoods to the west and are now much higher on average than in the neighboring areas of Riverside south of Massachusetts Avenue, and Area 4 to the east of Prospect Street.

In all four residential categories for which the city has published summaries, values in Mid-Cambridge rose faster than the citywide averages.

One-family homes were up 12% citywide and 15% in Mid-Cambridge. Two-family valuations jumped 24% citywide and 37% in Mid-Cambridge. Three-family houses rose 30% citywide and 40% in Mid-Cambridge. Condos edged up 3% citywide and 6% in Mid-Cambridge.

The assessors developed the new assessments using a new, computer-assisted appraisal system that was developed by consultants. They are based on the prices of properties that were sold in 2003.

*(Continued on Page 2)*

## Park design, taxes on MCNA meeting agenda

The Mid-Cambridge neighborhood will have a chance to review and discuss important elements of the Joan Lorentz Park redesign with Project Director Alan Burne at a neighborhood meeting from 7 to 9 p.m. on Tuesday, December 7, in the Sakey Room of the main public library at 449 Broadway.

The second item on the agenda is the recent property tax increases. The Board of Assessors is being invited to send a representative to explain the basis for the unusually large increase in assessments in Mid-Cambridge.

All residents are welcome to attend.

# M-C home values rise faster than average

(Continued from Page 1)

These values compound the general rise in residential taxes and translate into average increases in property taxes of 50% and 51% for owners of two- and three-family houses in Mid-Cambridge, 18% for owners of single-family homes, and 2% for condo owners. Since these are averages, many owners are seeing even larger increases.

**Owners who feel their assessment is too high or unfair can request an abatement of taxes from the assessor.** Applications for abatement must be filed **by December 1.**

## MCNA Taxpayer Survey

The attitudes of Association members who responded to an informal email survey very much depended on the type of property they own. Most owners of condos and one-families reported modest increases or decreases, and feel their assessments are fair.

Owners of multi-family dwellings reported much larger increases. Most feel their assessments are not fair and said they either have filed or plan to file for abatements.

Several respondents feel that their assessments "might" be fair, but that a sudden, large increase was not. One said, "They should have phased in the new assessments instead of surprising everyone with a huge tax bill due in a matter of weeks."

Another wrote, "Volatile adjustments due to revaluation ... should not be the burden of the individual owner."

Others voiced concerns about the impacts on their

## Make the season merry at the M-C holiday party

All members of MCNA are cordially invited to share some holiday cheer at our annual Holiday Celebration, to be held Sunday, December 5, from 4 to 7 p.m., at the home of this year's hosts, Kate and John Vrijmoet of 63 Ellery Street.

Besides the usual merriment, please come thank outgoing MCNA president Joan Pickett for her excellent service to the Association.

Please bring a pot-luck snack to share, such as cookies, dips, veggies, etc. A donation of \$3 for adults would be appreciated; kids and seniors are free. There will be a cash bar with wine and beer available.

If you need more information, contact Doane Perry at 617-547-1413.

neighbors, "the old timers who have lived here for decades, whose taxes have gone up astronomically."

One pointed out that this is due to "the large number of condos that each have a residential exemption (\$213,150) which is disproportionately high compared to the value. It's possible to own a small condo where you pay little or no tax because of this." He suggested ways that the exemptions might be made more equitable to owners of multi-family houses.

Others want to scale back the city budget, suggesting areas to start, "the 63% of the budget that is salary and benefits" and expenditures for the new library construction and other capital projects. Another remedy proposed would be to raise the paltry 1.5% of the tax burden that is offset by non-tax payments from Harvard and M.I.T.

Finally, there was this plea from Robert Winters: "It is VERY important that people who were assessed unfairly file for an abatement. This is the ONLY way that the city can fix their new assessment model," and *it may be the new assessment model, not the housing market, that caused the sharpest increases.* The deadline to file is Wednesday, December 1.

--John Pitkin wrote this article. He can be reached at [john\\_pitkin@earthlink.net](mailto:john_pitkin@earthlink.net).

## Email list keeps you in touch with neighborhood happenings

There were 18 responses to a recent survey of the Association's email list regarding the impact of the recent property tax hikes.

If you have email and didn't receive the survey, now would be a good time to put your name on our list. It's a great way to stay in touch with what's going on our neighborhood.

Just email the MCNA secretary, [elizabeth\\_gombosi@harvard.edu](mailto:elizabeth_gombosi@harvard.edu), and ask to be added to the list.

You can also receive your copy of the *M-C News* via e-mail. Just send a message to that effect to [elizabeth\\_gombosi@harvard.edu](mailto:elizabeth_gombosi@harvard.edu). The header should read "MCNA NEWSLETTER BY EMAIL". Many thanks!

## Doane Perry elected MCNA president

Newly elected to the position of MCNA President is Doane Perry, a longtime member of the Coordinating Committee and Cambridge Street resident. The election took place at a meeting of the Coordinating Committee on Nov. 16.

Perry replaces Joan Pickett, who recently stepped down as president after 2.5 years due to work commitments and the need to care for an elderly parent. She will remain with the Association as a member of the Coordinating Committee.

Perry and his wife, “tree lady” Karen Carmean, have lived in Cambridge for about 25 years. He also serves on several community organizations and boards.



Doane Perry

You can contact him at home at 617-547-1413, by cell phone at 617-240-9883, or by email at [DoanePerry@yahoo.com](mailto:DoanePerry@yahoo.com).

Holders of other key MCNA coordinating committee positions include: Elizabeth Gombosi, membership secretary, Frankie Lieberman, treasurer, and Laura Roberts, secretary. The remaining members of the 11-person committee include George Bossarte, Alex Loud, Margaret McMahon, John Pitkin, Sam Seidel, and Kate Vrijmoet.

## Pizza, convenience stores open on Skendarian block

As you may have noticed, two new stores on the Skenderian Apothecary block on Cambridge Street have opened and workers have started construction on the Darwin’s space. The store is expected to offer similar items as the existing Darwin’s location on Mount Auburn Street near Harvard Square—coffees of all types, soups, gourmet sandwiches, prepared salads, and heavenly cookies for eat-in or takeout.

Mona Lisa the Pizza Restaurant, owned by Tony D’Alessio, is fast becoming a neighborhood favorite. Its mix of open-furnace pizzas, authentic Italian pastas, and evening dinner specials is a varied menu that should make everyone happy, said Tony’s daughter, Annalisa. They will soon be introducing a new dinner menu featuring a group of chef’s specials, vegetarian entrees, and low-carb dishes.

The Harvard Market convenience store is another welcome addition. Naturally there is much in this store to appeal to Rindge and Latin high-school students, with lots of packaged goods and soft drinks, but there is plenty for the live-in-the-neighborhood crowd, too. Canned goods, cereals, and ice cream share space with fireplace wood, ice, rock salt and a deli bar. Joe Aovid, manager, says they are open to suggestions for stock items, so if you have any ideas for “must haves,” please let him know.

If you have not had a chance to drop by, we encourage you to check them both out and welcome these new stores to the neighborhood. The Skendarian block includes the apothecary at 1613 Cambridge St. and three retail establishments alongside it.

## Tot lot location decided

*(Continued from Page 1)*

Although the new location is not under the beech trees, as a petition of almost 350 signatures sought to achieve, it did satisfy two of the other goals of the petition because it is centrally located within Joan Lorentz Green and closer to the entrance of the new library. In addition, it is now safely away from the ramp and Broadway.

According to Burne, the tot lot will have immediate and adequate shade. While the details are still being worked out, this may be accomplished by planting specimen trees, which will be larger than many of the other new plantings, within the tot lot as well as closely planted along the southern border. When asked to comment, Rossi stated, “I am in full support of this compromise. If I were not, you would’ve have heard that from me. As long as the neighbors and parents continue to show support for this compromise, I will make sure it happens.”

Kate Vrijmoet, who led the parent group, responded, “I understand that this has been a strain at this late stage of the project and I thank Rossi and Burne for their willingness to work with us under these strained circumstances. Appreciation must also be extended to Bridget Dinsmore and Robert Skenderain, whose work created the groundswell of support we witnessed in our campaign to provide a safe Mid-Cambridge location for children to play.”

The neighborhood will have a chance to review and discuss other important elements of the Joan Lorentz Park redesign process at a neighborhood meeting set for Dec. 7 at 7 p.m. in the library’s Sakey room (see box on Page 1 for details).

The construction bid date has not yet been established for the overall library expansion project, which is subject to a final review of the approved site plan by the MCNCDC.

## NEIGHBORHOOD CALENDAR

**Wednesday, December 1, Deadline** for filing tax abatement requests with the city Assessors Office (see Story, Page 1).

**Monday, December 5, Annual MCNA Holiday Party**, 4 to 7 p.m., 63 Ellery St., home of Kate and John Vrijmoet. Please bring a pot-luck snack to share. For further info, please contact Doane Perry at 617-547-1413.

**Tuesday, December 7, MCNA Neighborhood Meeting**, 7 to 9 p.m., Sakey Room, Cambridge Public Library main branch, 449 Broadway. Agenda: property tax increases and design of Joan Lorentz Park. See box on Page 1 for details.

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The M-C News is published by the Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association and the Longfellow Neighborhood Council. *Editor:* Paula Lovejoy. *Reporters:* John Pitkin, Kate Vrijmoet, Margaret Tuny McMahon, Joan Pickett, Sara Mae Berman, Paula Lovejoy. The MCNA does not discriminate on the basis of disability.

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**Meeting Notice**  
**Tuesday, Dec. 7**