

January 23, 2014

Ref: Sullivan Courthouse Redevelopment to 40 Thorndike Street

Dear Mr. Russell and Members of the Board,

The Sullivan Courthouse has a well known history as dark and long as the physical shadow it casts over East Cambridge. If the original 19th century buildings been left standing on the site, there is a strong chance today that they could have been renovated to contemporary uses with a scale and character in keeping with the neighborhood.

Instead, government corruption allowed for those old buildings to be torn down and an oppressive 22 story tower to be built. That grim project was intended to extend all the way to Cambridge Street, mowing down the historic Bulfinch courthouse, Registry of Deeds and Cambridge Multicultural Arts buildings which now gather around a beautiful urban park; exceptional highlights of this historic and important neighborhood. Cost over runs many times the official estimates finally and fortunately put a stop to the total destruction of those historic architectural urban landmarks.

Now that the Sullivan Courthouse tower is to be redeveloped, we are faced with the opportunity to improve things, but again this time, like when the tower was built, the will of Cambridge citizens has been thwarted at nearly every turn. A long process of design competition and community engagement took place to immense neighborhood participation, frequently covered in city news journals. Highly uncommon in the city of Cambridge, East Cambridge residents have shown themselves to be not against all new development 'in their backyard'. They support new projects which enhance the area and the city at large. They do not support nor do they deserve projects which degrade it. There was overwhelming support for the project proposed by HYM (developers of North Point) and their architects CBT. Major characteristics which won favor with the community were shortening the 22 story tower and placement of urban row houses along Spring Street. All of this was ignored by the Commonwealth which instead sold the property to Legatt McCall, who's proposal was *the least popular* with the Cambridge citizens who have been living in the shadow of the current monstrosity for 40 years and who will be living with the new development for many more years to come.

East Cambridge is a vital link between the two large and critical development areas of North Point and Kendall Square. It can also have a strong impact on revitalization of First Street. The Sullivan Courthouse is highly visible, and characterizes the skyline of Cambridge from many points in Cambridge, Boston, surrounding communities, and along the Charles River. What happens next will have a huge impact and is hugely important.

I offer my concerns and insights to you as someone who has worked for a number of this areas most notable architects of public and higher educational buildings, as a Cambridge citizen and an East Cambridge home owner. I also know that these concerns reflect the views of many of my friends and neighbors but who inevitably remain more silent and less able to participate in the review process. I have attended all of the meetings regarding the project and have reviewed documents describing Legatt McCall's proposal. There are many issues which concern me, but I will concentrate on

what I consider to be some of the major elements which I hope that my city officials will play a key role in achieving.

- Reduction of the height of the tower. The benefits are obvious: reduced visual bulk, less negative shadow impacts on the neighborhood, lessened high wind impact on surrounding streets.
- Reduction of night time “light pollution”. This needs to be studied and strategies incorporated into the tower to mitigate the problem.
- Reduction of mechanical equipment noise. This is a growing problem in the city in general and this neighborhood in particular as more large scale office and laboratory buildings are built. The accumulated continual noise has a negative impact on the standard of life for citizens who live here. Sound attenuation needs to be incorporated onto HVAC units, sound insulating screens need to be incorporated, and the City’s laws on noise pollution needs to be enforced.
- Tower Facades. The design should look to reduce the buildings massive visual bulk. I disagree with a reluctant, resigned comment made by a Planning Board member: A facade of uniform mirror glass will *not* make the tower appear go away nor offer any improvement from the massive precast concrete structure currently degrading the City of Cambridge.
- Housing along Spring Street. This is perhaps the easiest to achieve, and one of the most critical and important benefits:
 1. Creating a streetscape consistent with the neighborhood.
 2. Inclusion of row houses with on street entries will transition the urban scale of the large tower block to the adjacent residential context.
 3. Creating a program element (housing) which is in great demand in Cambridge.
 4. Lessening the impact of high winds at the street level by breaking up the shear vertical face and mass of the tower.

Again, low scale housing on Spring Street was proposed by HYM with CBT architects and this scheme was by far the most favored by the community. A similar design strategy for low scale housing on Spring Street was also proposed by DivcoWest in the review process for 40 Thorndike Street.

Legatt McCall’s own architects, Elkus Manfreddi, successfully designed and built new row housing which wrapped an existing high rise office tower at the Saltonstall building, at 100 Cambridge Street in Boston. There, apartment style housing is located above retail on Cambridge Street which seamlessly blends to row houses lining the more residential Bowdoin Street. This closely mirrors conditions at 40 Thorndike where the strategy already includes loft style apartments above retail on Third Street. 40 Thorndike needs the addition of row housing on Spring Street to be complete and successful. Finally, Legatt McCall’s built project for the nearby “1 Cambridge” also includes housing above retail and transitions to row houses on Second Street reflecting the scale and use of it’s adjacent context. The inclusion of row houses into the scheme is proven to be feasible, practical, viable and desirable.

East Cambridge contains a number of pleasant and viable public small parks, and will also host a new two acre park on Third Street in the near future. Legatt McCall's proposes what it calls a 'park' on Spring Street and has described it in public meetings as "a neighborhood amenity". However, the published Project Description describes the entrance on Spring Street as its *main entry*, with the sloped, planted and paved terrace described solely as an amenity for 'the building inhabitants and its visitors'. The intention to give the Spring Street entrance priority over the official Thorndike Street address is stated not once but *twice* in the body of the project description text stressing the ideals of the project developer team.

Therefore, the so called 'park' is really little more than a raised corporate entry plaza, in the manner of some of the most undesirable office towers from the 1960's and 70's. Renderings (*especially if they actually included the adjacent residential context*) show this, as well as describing how tremendously out of scale this monumental entrance is with it's surroundings. It's functional use as an entrance to a skyscraper is also completely at odds with it's adjacent low scale residential buildings. The 40 Thorndike projects own wind studies engineers furnished written statements in the project description attesting to the *higher than acceptable winds* in the proposed outdoor terrace spaces next to the Spring Street terrace's retail facilities, in the park and along Spring Street.

While I am generally in favor of the inclusion of retail, it must be proposed in areas where it will stand a chance of successful use in order to be viable. While it is encouraging that 40 Thorndike proposes retail along busy Third Street, and, hopefully at the base of the city owned First Street Parking Garage, it also locates retail facilities adjacent to the raised terrace along Spring Street. Separated from and raised above the street, these spaces are doomed to continued vacancy, not to mention that Spring Street itself has no retail at any point along its length. The only factor which may make this type of retail viable to the developer are the far higher rates paid by upstairs tenants.

Cambridge has seen far too much of this and it should not be an acceptable strategy for our town. If row houses are built along Spring Street, they represent a far more viable and needed use which *will* be occupied, and *not* left vacant.

I sincerely hope that you agree that these points are vitally important to the future of ensuring quality design and development for our city, and an enhanced quality of life for our citizens as well as for those who come here to work. I believe that everyone, citizens and the Planning Board members included, believes that the design of "40 Thorndike Street" can benefit from improvement. Please assist us by using the powers of your official role to define and enforce this set of clearly delineated conditions to the developer *before* approval is given to the Special Permit Request.

Regards,

John Paul
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