



Neighborhood Association of East Cambridge

Tuesday July 15, 2014

To: Letter@globe.com
cc: cross@globe.com

Re: "Developer alters look of Middlesex Courthouse site" July 8, 2014

Dear Editor;

Thank you for your coverage of the Middlesex Courthouse redevelopment project in East Cambridge. ("Developer alters look of Middlesex Courthouse site," July 8 2014).

The neighborhood organization you reference in the article was named incorrectly. It is the Neighborhood Association of East Cambridge (NAEC) naeastcambridge.org. The position of the NAEC on the Courthouse redevelopment was also stated incorrectly.

After a year of refusing to reduce the impacts of their redevelopment proposal, the NAEC is pleased that the developer has finally agreed to some mitigation, however minor, of the height and impacts. In addition to the requests of a large number of residents, the Cambridge City Council unanimously passed a Policy Order asking the developer, Leggat McCall Properties, to "substantially reduce the height, traffic and environmental impacts of the developer's proposal."

Unfortunately, the changes proposed: reducing the building size from 510,000 sq. ft. to 470,000 sq. ft., and changing the curtain-wall material from glass to terra-cotta, does not qualify as a "substantial" reduction of the impacts to the neighborhood. The NAEC hopes that this is a first step in a continuing conversation with the developer with the goal of mitigating the building impacts to better match the infrastructure capacity of the neighborhood.

Our petition, which asks the developer and the City Planning Board to respect local zoning (here 80') is, realistically, a call for the developer to make their case to the community and the City for building beyond that. Instead of meting out inch-by-inch reductions from a 280-foot proposal, the developer should explain why they should be allowed to build beyond the established zoning. We take this position based on the legal premise that the out-sized and non-conforming Courthouse, built by County government under an immunity from zoning, either needs to come into compliance with underlying zoning or seek a variance from zoning when the building is sold to a private developer and repurposed as a mixed-use development.

The proposed redevelopment is projected to house over 2,000 employees and generate over 5,000 person trips to/from the building per day (about 2,200 via vehicles). This is far greater than the historical Courthouse building. Where will these vehicles park? How can the narrow residential road systems, already beyond capacity and experiencing grid-lock during commuter hours, handle 2,200 more



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vehicle trips? What will the impact of idling cars be on the neighborhood's air quality? Why can't the building have off-street truck loading? Over the last 12 months, the developer has lacked the will and creativity to realistically address these and other design issues.

The redeveloped Courthouse would be the largest stand-alone office building in Cambridge, and it deserves a thorough design-review and neighborhood vetting process. Instead, as the Globe's Paul McMorrow noted in an Opinion piece on March 18, "The state never bothered to ask what types of redevelopment proposals might play well with the courthouse tower's neighbors. Nor did it take neighborhood feedback into account when weighing bids for the tower. Neighbors rallied to the cause of a losing bidder who dealt openly with them; Leggat McCall made a calculated decision to focus on winning its bid with the state first, and only engaged the neighbors after it got the bid. These decisions have led to a politically toxic redevelopment proposal."

The process has been a fiasco and insult to the residents of East Cambridge, who after 40 years of living with this behemoth, deserve better from both the state and the developer.

So here's where the NAEC stands now: We are encouraged to finally see some design changes by the developer that genuinely improve the project; they are a step in the right direction. They are, however, far too minor and do not "substantially reduce" the negative impacts of the development on the quality of life of the residents. Indeed, at recent meetings of both the NAEC and the ECPT (East Cambridge Planning Team), votes clearly indicated that a majority of the attendees wanted further impact reductions. We believe that a vital and feasible redevelopment can be achieved that is appropriately sized for the neighborhood infrastructure, and we ask the developer (with help from the state) to return to the drawing board to achieve this end.

Sited between Kendall Square and NorthPoint, East Cambridge already supports a disproportionate share of large development and tax generation in the city; it should not be forced to bear a grossly non-conforming commercial office building within the residential boundaries of its small-scale, tight-knit neighborhood.

Respectfully,

Abigail Lewis-Bowen
President,
The Neighborhood Association of East Cambridge