

February 24, 2014

Cambridge Planning Board
344 Broadway
Cambridge, MA 02141

Re: Petition #288, Legatt McCall, 40 Thorndike Street

Dear Members of the Cambridge Planning Board,

My family and I live at 88 Thorndike Street, Cambridge, one block from the Sullivan Courthouse at 40 Thorndike Street. We lived here when the Courthouse was functioning and remember well the infringement on our resident parking (often illegally), and traffic back-ups around the neighborhood, due to Courthouse commuter and visitor use. In recent years the building has been only partially occupied by a jail and ancillary uses, thus producing far fewer commuters speeding around our neighborhood streets. In “real-time” not via traffic studies, we have experienced a more reasonable use level for the capacity of our street infrastructure.

Now comes a proposal from a private developer, Legatt McCall, to redevelop and change the use of the Courthouse into commercial office space, plus 24 residences and ground-level retail. We are generally pro-development and welcome most of the changes occurring in our neighborhood, sandwiched between the Kendall Square and North Point development areas – which already are generating significantly more traffic through our neighborhood. But what greatly bothers us about this proposed redevelopment of the Courthouse, and falls under your authority to stop, is that the proposed office building will undoubtedly INCREASE traffic and parking (and wind and light pollution) impacts ABOVE AND BEYOND the previous Courthouse use – which was already a use far beyond the infrastructure capacity of our historic neighborhood, with narrow streets and mostly 19th Century homes of 2-3 stories. And it is unfathomable to us that the Planning Board could condone any use that increases the negative impacts of this massive pre-existing non-conforming building - and it is my understanding that the zoning code expressly prohibits such an increase.

We are also troubled by the fact that the radically out-of-context 22-story courthouse was originally allowed to be in non-conformance with the local zoning expressly because it was a municipal use. We, as citizens, could better tolerate such a gross abnormality and burden on our infrastructure because it served a public service. The change of use AND change of ownership to private, for-profit status compels us to ask that the building impacts be reduced to something more comparable to other new, privately developed buildings in the area. Why should the tax paying residents unduly sacrifice their quality of life so that the State and private developer can maximize profits from a non-conforming structure originally built for public use?

Both my wife and I deeply enjoy living in Cambridge and give many hours of volunteer time to the City by serving on various committees. We know how complicated it can be to find the right balance between economic, social and environmental concerns, but we are also convinced that, in this instance, the City of Cambridge can do better than facilitate the perpetuation of this gross building non-conformity and ask the Planning Board to DENY Special Permit #288 and send the developer, DCAMM, City and the residents back to the negotiating table to develop a more enlightened solution – a solution that evokes civic pride versus inequitable hardship and resentment.

Respectfully,
Peter A. Crawley
Wen-hao Tien