

24

Lopez, Donna

From: Yoni Appelbaum [yaa4@brandeis.edu]
Sent: Monday, February 25, 2013 3:05 PM
To: City Council
Cc: Lopez, Donna
Subject: Forest City Petition
Attachments: ForestCityPetition.pdf

Feb. 25, 2012

Hon. Henrietta Davis, Mayor

Cambridge City Council

Re: Forest City Zoning Petition

(Communications and Reports from City Officers #4)

Dear Mayor Davis and Members of the Council:

I am writing to urge you to support and strengthen the communities of Central Square, enhance the quality of life for its residents, and enliven its street life by supporting the Forest City Zoning Petition.

This is not the first time the petition has advanced for your consideration, nor is it the first time I have written to urge your support. But as the petitioners have responded to questions and concerns, their proposal has evolved to offer an even more comprehensive package of benefits for Cambridge and its citizens. If the initial petition deserved a simple vote, and it did, then this revised proposal deserves your endorsement.

Forest City has proved unusually responsive to communal concerns. To take the most prominent example, after its initial proposal to erect new housing on a specific site encountered opposition from some members of the community, Forest City substituted a commitment to build such housing in the future. When that new commitment was criticized for providing too few additional units, it increased the number to 25. When the seven-year delay before any substitute payment would be made was questioned, by myself among others, Forest City revised its commitment to include a CPI-U escalator. None of these measures, of course, will be sufficient to ameliorate the critical shortage of affordable housing in our community to any meaningful extent. But that shortage is ultimately driven by a constrained supply that has not kept pace with escalating demand. And while approving this petition offers clear mechanisms for addressing the problem, however inadequate they may prove, denying it offers no possible path forward.

There is often an asymmetry of passions surrounding zoning debates such as these. It may be easier to stand in ardent opposition to an imperfect proposal – all proposals being imperfect – than to summon a similar degree of enthusiasm in support of such a proposal despite its inevitable flaws. But it is fundamentally undemocratic, not to mention inadvisable, to allow a small number of ardent opponents to exercise an effective veto over proposals that enjoy broad-based support. That is one reason why you and your colleagues were so wise to appoint the Central Square Advisory Committee, and to charge it with conducting a careful and comprehensive process of consultation with all elements of the local community.

24

The report of that committee, in anticipation of which you deferred action on this petition, makes clear the need for concentrated development of the Massachusetts Avenue corridor, in a manner that ties together residential, commercial, recreational, and retail uses of the space. The petition presently before you proposes to revitalize a moribund stretch of Massachusetts Avenue, allowing a responsible local employer to add jobs in our community while reserving the street-front for small, local retail businesses. Beyond the stipulated benefits and the general bounty of economic development, this proposal thus addresses the specific needs identified by the committee. If the point of delaying action was to respect its report, than the path forward should be perfectly clear.

You and your colleagues are often faced with unenviable choices that require you to sacrifice some sets of interests in the service of others. I do not envy you that responsibility. This, thankfully, is not such a choice. Supporting the petition addresses several pressing communal needs while actually increasing the availability of resources to address others. Denying it brings us no benefits in the short term, and no prospect of offsetting benefits in the long term. I join with my friends and neighbors in the adjoining neighborhoods to urge your support.

Sincerely,

Yoni Appelbaum

217 Harvard Street