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Why we need the City Council to become a "Special Permit Granting Authority"

Why have hundreds of residents lost confidence in the special permit granting process, especially that for large projects that can change the character of a neighborhood? Why on earth do we see the need to involve the City Council? The primary answer is that residents are disillusioned – there is no trust in a level playing field between developers and residents and there is no common agreement about the meaning of language in the Zoning Ordinance. Add to that a sense that the city administration has not been invested in the maintenance of this powerful Board or in the increasing atmosphere of frustration that has been growing visibly in the past two years. Some examples:

The Membership: full membership is 9 members (7 full and 2 associates); there has been one vacancy since last October that has gone unfilled; 5 members are serving terms that expired last March leaving only 3 members in good standing. The Planning Board has failed to achieve quorums twice in the first 5 months of this year. The actions of this Planning Board with so many expired terms could be questioned.

After a meeting with residents and receiving our concerns, the City Manager has issued an application for new members and we applaud this; however, we find the benign neglect of the Board's maintenance by the city's management and Community Development Department that staffs it have resulted in a serious undermining of transparent public process.

There are no term limits – the chair has been a member for 26 years.

The Resident Experience: The Planning Board's own rules stipulate a 30-minute time limit for developers' presentations, although they can at their discretion, extend that which is the norm. At one recent hearing, the development team was given 90 minutes; residents are allowed 3 minutes each. Tempers boiled over at the May 20th hearing on the 75 New Street proposal because the chair held up a memorandum specifying the topics on which we could speak, but did not make it available to the 40 to 50 people in the room questioning the special permit.

Developer presentations often include changes in their materials at the last minute that are not made available to the public, making it difficult or impossible for residents to examine and respond to them.

A Perceived Narrow Reading of the Zoning Ordinance: Here is an important place where trust has broken down with no agreement on how to interpret elements of the Zoning Ordinance or reference to specific area planning studies.

- The 2006 Concord Alewife Study urges mixed use development – a couple of thousands of residential units are built or coming online with no mixed use or “balanced growth” as urged in the study; people were discouraged from mentioning the study at the New Street hearing.
- Large buildings are being permitted one by one until an area is saturated with big box construction – there is no sense that “the public good” referenced in the zoning ordinance is being considered in the current process.
- Traffic studies in some cases are outdated or offered verbally; since traffic and transit are a key element of a sustainable community, the special permit process for large developments should be especially conscientious – the ordinance states: “traffic generated or patterns of access or egress would cause congestion, hazard or substantial change in established neighborhood character.” Would somebody listen to the residents of Concord Avenue?
- The Planning Board is established to grant special permits AND to offer planning advice to the city – it is only doing the former.
- In short, we believe the current process is creating large developments not consistent with the City’s overall goals – they are not transit-oriented, many are not pedestrian-friendly, they are not mixed use, there are no public amenities and little or no public open space.

The City Council needs to step in until we have a plan for the future that envisions balanced growth with shared values. It is your right and responsibility at this moment in Cambridge.