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Cosgrove, Marybeth

From: Albano, Sandra
Sent: Tuesday, July 01, 2014 10:04 AM
To: Cosgrove, Marybeth
Subject: FW: Vote 'No' on Council Petition to make the Council the SPGA

From: lawrence bluestone [<mailto:lbluestone@verizon.net>]
Sent: Monday, June 30, 2014 9:15 AM
To: City Council
Subject: Vote 'No' on Council Petition to make the Council the SPGA

Dear City Councilors -

I am writing to strongly urge you to vote 'no' on the petition before you to make the City Council the Special Permit Granting Authority. Over the past 40 years, as an urban designer, architect and city planner, I have prepared master plans and development proposals for over 40 towns and cities throughout Massachusetts. These have included communities that have designated either their Planning Boards as their SPGA, or Councils or Select Boards as their SPGA. In my experience, without exception, those cities that have designated their Councils as the SPGA have been a disaster.

Cities with the Council as SPGA have highly politicized the approval process for development and building projects. Instead of weighing the merits of a project on objective criteria, the review of project proposals become a battlefield for individual Councilors' constituencies. In almost all cases, the expertise on the Council to address design, building, and site plan decisions for individual building proposals is insufficient to make good design and planning decisions, whereas Planning Boards tend to be populated by Board members with specific and relevant knowledge of the design and planning disciplines.

Here in Cambridge, we are fortunate to have talented City Council representatives, highly knowledgeable Planning Board members, and highly professional CDD staff. However, there is no doubt that the Planning Board has a deeper professional knowledge of design and planning issues than the more broadly diverse talents of Council members. Traditionally, and for good reason, the responsibilities of the City Council and the Planning Board differ and are kept distinct: the Council sets city policy; the Planning Board *implements* policy as objectively as possible in accordance with the special permit review criteria in the Zoning Ordinance. If the Council believes that the Zoning Ordinance needs modification, it is in their power to modify it. However, review of specific development proposals should be conducted objectively by the Planning Board and CDD staff in accordance with the specified review criteria in the Zoning Ordinance.

Additionally, there is the very practical issue of the time consumed in order to review development proposals. There simply are not enough hours in the week for Council members to involve themselves in the weeds of every significant development proposal. Doing so would detract from the most important mission of the Council: to make and set policy.

Therefore, once again, I urge you to strongly reject the premise of this Petition. If passed, it can only further politicize the discussion in our city about development policy. If you would like the names of Town Planners working under the Council/Select Board as the designated SPGA in other Massachusetts communities, I can gladly supply them to you. They can certainly pass on to you their own experiences with this setup better than I.

Sincerely,
Lawrence Bluestone,
18 Centre Street