

## Cosgrove, Marybeth

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**From:** Albano, Sandra  
**Sent:** Tuesday, July 01, 2014 10:06 AM  
**To:** Cosgrove, Marybeth  
**Subject:** FW: Don't make City Council the SPGA

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**From:** Seth Zeren [<mailto:seth.zeren@gmail.com>]  
**Sent:** Saturday, June 28, 2014 10:12 AM  
**To:** City Council  
**Subject:** Don't make City Council the SPGA

Making the City Council the special permit granting authority (SPGA) for large projects is a bad idea. I understand that there is frustration from some about the way that the current planning board work. Haven't not attended many planning board meetings in Cambridge, I cannot judge how much of this is because the board doesn't work well or because their detractors aren't getting what they want (which are not the same thing).

As someone with experience as both a municipal planner and a development project manager, I would be the first to agree that the typical Planning Board process is not ideal. For example, by statute, an applicant is required to have nearly fully designed and engineered plan before applying for a public hearing. Having already spent hundreds of thousands of dollars developing a design, you can understand why a developer (or review body) would be loath to start over again from scratch. There are a range of innovative approaches being used around the country to address the problem. In particular, requiring pre-design community meetings and design charrettes in the community can allow a more productive and congenial working relationship between neighbor and developer. Professional facilitation can help participants are working in good faith--and occasionally the broader good of the community is going to overrule the special interest of a neighbor. I think that this or similar ideas that create a more inclusive process for shared design and development visioning would be a better solution that inserting the City Council into large projects.

I have actually worked in a municipality where the legislative branch had taken on the power of granting special permits. The system was so problematic that there were active attempts, including in the Comprehensive Plan, to move away from it. The underlying problems are:

1. It increases the politicization of development. I've heard many complaints that developers are politically connected or that individuals or small groups are able to influence decisions about development. This would make that trend worse. I would also worry about the increased leverage of campaign contributions from developers.
2. As the saying goes: a politician's vision is as far as the next election. Long-range planning and development decisions would be harder to make in a disciplined fashion. You can't make everyone happy and a politicians are more likely to try to please the upset constituents in front of him or her that evening.
3. City Councilors are not experts in development or zoning or planning. That is not a criteria for joining the committee. How are we to believe that their decisions will be less arbitrary than those of an appointed group of experienced professionals?

4. It draws councilors into the weeds of development. There are a lot of details in reviewing a special permit—everything from the functionality of mechanical systems, to turning radii, to species of plantings. The City Council already has the ability of to guide development by writing the zoning ordinance and setting the city’s policy vision. Let others do the technical work of resolving it.
5. The overall process of large development would become less certain. Uncertainty increases costs and weeds out many developers who won’t work in your community. Ultimately, uncertainty pushes projects to be larger because only a large project can cover the overhead of years of wrangling over permits. If we want to unlock smaller, more contextual development, we should focus on more clearly articulating what the city wants to see through a form-based code and then allowing development that meets those criteria to proceed by right.

I think this proposal, if enacted, would be a tremendous step back from being a leading progressive city in the US. A proposal as significant as this is just the kind of thing that should come out of the master plan conversation that has already begun, at Councilor Carlone’s behest. This latest petition makes me doubt the earnestness with which the master plan process was undertaken.

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