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# Neighborhood Association of East Cambridge

Monday September 8, 2014

City Councilors,

The planning and permitting process in Cambridge is in dire need of fixing, and the Carlone Petition provides an interim mechanism to oversee the process until it is fixed. The Neighborhood Association of East Cambridge (NAEC) asks you to pass the Petition to a second reading and eventually adopt it.

For the duration of the new Master Planning process, the Carlone Petition places final approval of (only) the largest city projects in the hands of the Council – the City’s publicly elected policy-making body. This is where such authority belongs, because large developments directly impact important policy matters (like housing affordability, gentrification/diversity, neighborhood quality of life, traffic, parking, etc.) in a *de facto* manner. For example, a 500,000 sq ft commercial office building like the proposed renovation of the Sullivan Courthouse in East Cambridge will have severe impacts on housing affordability in the neighborhood, as well as quality of life and environmental impacts from car and truck traffic, noise, Greenhouse Gas emissions, etc.

The Planning Board, a body of unelected volunteers, is currently vested with the authority to approve projects that *de facto* influence core policy matters. Shouldn’t these policy matters be more influenced by our elected officials? How can the policy goals of the Council be achieved if they do not have the power to directly influence permitting outcomes on the largest projects? For example, housing, job-training, day-care, environmental preservation, neighborhood diversity are all matters that real estate developments impact. To effectively negotiate with developers for the best outcomes for the citizens of Cambridge regarding these matters, elected officials need direct authority over outcomes on the largest projects versus giving-up this authority to the Planning Board, which traditionally employs its permitting authority along very narrow technical grounds versus broader policy-level considerations. Under the current system, how can policy-level goals be effectively attained? What elected officials, with the proper leverage and mandate from the people, are doing the bidding for the citizens?

(Yes, the Council has the authority to alter the city zoning code, but zoning codes are constantly behind the times, as new technology, policy mandates and development challenges face the city. Controlling development via just the zoning code is like driving using just the rear view mirror.)

Case in point: on March 17, 2014 the City Council unanimously passed a Policy Order regarding the pending Sullivan Courthouse development, requesting that “...DCAMM and the developer work together in an expeditious and creative fashion to substantially reduce the height, traffic, and environmental impacts of the developer’s proposal so as to gain community support...” In response, the developer reduced the 22 story building by 2 stories, which has been clearly and consistently

regarded by the community via votes at BOTH the East Cambridge Planning Team and the Neighborhood Association of East Cambridge, as NOT substantial enough. However, the Planning Board may very well disregard both the community's opinion and the Council's Policy Order and approve the developer's plan. Where is the influence of the City's elected officials (and therefore citizens) in the permitting of such a massive project with major neighborhood impacts and policy ramifications?

Cambridge is fortunate to have become such a desirable development location. Many benefits accrue from new development, including jobs, taxes and services, but there are costs, too, in terms of rapid gentrification, parking/traffic congestion, noise, shadows, general neighborhood quality of life impacts, etc. The current planning and permitting process is not properly designed to best review, site and manage all the development that is currently aimed at Cambridge, and bargain for proportional mitigating benefits for its citizens. Structural changes need to be made to the system. Perhaps Planning Board members should be elected and paid a salary? Perhaps they should have limited terms and their appointments be approved by the City Council? Perhaps the Council should have a designated committee (with voting authority) that works with the Planning Board on achieving policy goals? The system needs fixing and the time is NOW – as development pressure on neighborhoods and environmental resources is at all-time highs.

The Carlone Petition allows the city and the Council to buy time (about 2 years) to revamp the process and update the Master Plan so as to properly safeguard the public interest and better guide development. Once buildings are approved and built – and their policy impacts made – it is almost impossible to undo them. As our elected officials, we ask you to assume this interim responsibility NOW and pass the Carlone Petition.

Respectfully,

Neighborhood Association of East Cambridge