March 3, 2014

Dear Cambridge City Councilors,

I urge that the zoning petition be rejected. The zoning change and suggested development is totally out of scale with the community fabric, and with the transportation infrastructure which exists in Central Square. In particular, the Red Line is operating beyond its practical capacity today, and the current plans for new Red Line vehicles only propose to REPLACE but NOT INCREASE the current capacity. Approvals already granted by the city of Cambridge for increased density in Kendall Square will add to the already severe overcrowding of the Red Line. The recent disastrous collapse of transit service during the blizzards gives a glimpse of the terrible conditions that occur when the capacity of the transit system is exceeded. The city of Cambridge has already permitted development far in excess of the capacity which is available on the MBTA and should focus on how to convince the Governor to prioritize enough added investment in transit to meet the additional demand already approved by the city.

Moreover, Central Square is a particularly bad location at which to add further demand in excess of the existing transit and roadway capacity. The width of Prospect street, and complexity of the street intersections at Central Square are not going to change in a manner to improve the safety and convenience for the existing pedestrian, bus, bicycle and auto use already overusing the infrastructure. There are no plans in place nor contemplated to increase street or transit capacity.

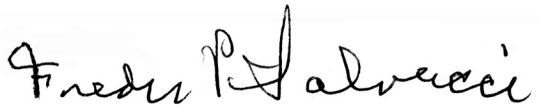
In addition, it must be recognized that there are no unique conditions that justify higher density at the proposed location than anywhere else in the Central Square area, so if this proposal is approved, EVERY OTHER LANDOWNER IN CENTRAL SQUARE WILL DEMAND "EQUAL TREATMENT" to still further overload the existing infrastructure. It is important to remember that the underlying soil in the area is Boston Blue Clay, notorious for its lack of stability to support high structures. To construct high structures in this location should not be considered without extensive study of the unusually bad soils, and the proximity of the Red Line tunnel and other infrastructure. The construction techniques likely to be required to safely construct high structures in this location are likely to cause severe noise and ground water disruption for the logistical support of the techniques and the scale of operations required. By contrast, construction of low rise structures consistent with existing zoning would impose no such unusual requirements.

Finally, the claim that this development should be approved in order to increase the number of affordable units of housing is invalid, and needs to be put into context.

When the City Council approved the proposals by MIT to increase permitted density on its land, MIT promised to do a study of the graduate student housing needs which are a major contributing factor in causing the affordable housing crisis in Cambridge. The Clay commission recommended that MIT should construct 1000 units of on or near campus housing, (a number far lower than most of us believe is necessary), and that Kendall square is an ideal place to add such graduate student housing. Yet MIT is now proposing to use the land resources near Kendall for commercial office and laboratory buildings, eliminate the existing 200 units of married student housing, and eventually produce an undefined number of replacement units. The proposed new commercial office and labs will further drive up the demand for affordable housing, worsening the already severe shortage. The way for the city of Cambridge to reduce the affordable housing shortage is to insist that MIT deliver on the 1000 units of graduate student housing in Kendall in the immediate future. Recognizing that the total shortage of graduate student housing at MIT exceeds 5000 units, and that over 2000 graduate students are currently occupying affordable housing units in Cambridge, the 1000 units in Kendall Square should be just the beginning of what MIT owes its own students, and the Cambridge community. But the token number of "affordable" units being discussed in Central Square, as justifying the totally out of scale and massive addition of non affordable housing units is a distraction from the necessary strategy of forcing MIT to deliver 1000 units immediately in Kendall square, and at least 1000 more in the near term future.

I urge that the current proposal be definitively rejected, with prejudice, and that the focus of the planning board and city should be shifted to the MIT-owned land in Kendall Square, and elsewhere, to encourage MIT to develop 1000 units of graduate student housing in Kendall Square in the immediate future, and to develop plans for at least an additional 1000 units elsewhere. It should be noted that because graduate students on or near campus put essentially no added stress on the transit and street systems, that this is an appropriate focus for the short term future, until it is much more clear what additional transit capacity the state is contractually committed to add to the Kendall Square area.

Sincerely,



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