



January, 1985

MCNA NEWS

NEIGHBORHOOD CONSERVATION FOR MID-CAMBRIDGE?

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CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

On January 21 at 6PM, the Cambridge City Council will consider the Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Proposal. The MCNA urges all neighborhood residents to support this proposal and has prepared this newsletter to give neighborhood residents background information on the proposal and to answer some frequently asked questions about it.

BACKGROUND

In 1980, the City Council passed legislation enabling the establishment of Neighborhood Conservation Districts to provide neighborhood-based review of development and demolition. In June of 1982 a proposal for such a district in Mid-Cambridge was submitted. The plan was supported by many neighborhood residents and by the MCNA, but many other residents opposed it.

Since no consensus could be reached, the proposal was withdrawn and referred to a working group of residents, representing the diverse points of view on the District. This group, consisting of Robert Campbell, William Doebele, Ed Feinman, Catherine Hanley, John Hudson, Wanda Koetz, George Metzger, Jeremy Moskow, Andy Oldman, Denise Rothschild, and Hugh Russell, met frequently over the following two years to develop a compromise proposal that would be more acceptable to the neighborhood in general. They were greatly assisted in their work by Kathy Spiegelman, Assistant City Manager for Community Development, and her staff.

In the Spring of 1984, a draft proposal was presented at a series of public meetings, and input from neighborhood residents was incorporated into it prior to its submission to the Historical Commission and then to the City Council.

QUESTIONS

What are the boundaries of the proposed Conservation District?

The District is bounded by Massachusetts Avenue from Prescott Street to Prospect Street (excluding buildings fronting directly on the avenue), Prospect Street to Hampshire Street, north to the Somerville line, Line Street to Kirkland Street, to Summer Road, to Cambridge Street to Prescott Street.

How does this proposal differ from that of 1982?

In two major ways. First, the authority of the neighborhood commission is much more limited and the kinds of changes and categories of buildings affected have been greatly reduced. Regulation is focused on major pressures on the neighborhood—continued development and loss through demolition. Second, educational and incentive programs have been incorporated and are an integral part of this proposal. This combination of regulation and education is intended to promote neighborhood conservation. These matters are discussed in more detail below.

What is the composition of the Commission?

The Commission would consist of five members and three alternates, to be appointed by the City Manager. The five members would be two District resident homeowners, one District resident tenant, one District resident property owner, and one member of the Cambridge Historical Commission. The three alternates would be District resident property owners. It is intended that the membership should represent the diversity of the neighborhood and that it should be rotating.

What property changes are not affected by the proposed order?

Most repair and remodeling of most buildings would not be subject to Commission review. For example, paint color; installation of siding, including aluminum and vinyl; rearrangement of doors and windows; minor additions (such as an extra room); and alteration to a building's trim and detail would not be reviewed unless these items were part of a major redevelopment or involved a National Register building. Rather, the Commission would focus on the types of changes that have impact beyond the individual property owner on the larger community.

What property changes are affected by the proposed order?

The order provides for two categories of reviews - non-binding (advisory) and binding.

Non-binding reviews apply to:

(a) buildings listed or eligible to be listed by the National Register of Historic Places (there are about 55 of these in the District)

(b) public and non-residential buildings. Changes to these buildings that would be reviewed include alteration of bay window, cornices, fascias, porches, cornerboards, window and door casings, skylights, and signs, if these changes are visible from the public way.

In reviewing these types of changes, the Commission would consider their impact on the neighborhood, their effect on surrounding properties and streets, and the economic effects of preservation alternatives.

These non-binding reviews are intended to help preserve important buildings; to protect the character of the neighborhood as changes take place, while enhancing the quality of those changes; and to give residents information about and participation in alterations occurring in their neighborhood.

Binding reviews apply to major development, demolition, and substantial enlargement, specifically:

- (a) Demolition of 33% or more of a building.
- (b) New construction larger than 750 sq. ft. or occupying 33% or more of vacant lot area.
- (c) Additions that increase existing building size by either 750 sq. ft. or 33% or more.
- (d) Any relocation of building.
- (e) Changes involving non-conforming zoning uses.

General considerations would be the same as for the non-binding reviews. Specific considerations for demolitions

YOUR SUPPORT C/ N HE .P

Dear Mid-Cambridge Resident:

Mid-Cambridge, is an attractive, desirable place to live. First and foremost, it is desirable because of its central location, near Harvard University, M.I.T., and public transportation to Boston. Many people are attracted by the kinds of neighbors they find here, a cross-section of Cambridge and the world. There is a third ingredient to the appeal of our neighborhood besides its location and its people, namely its physical endowments.

What makes Mid-Cambridge's blend of buildings, streets, and open space a successful living environment defies precise definition. Is it the prevalence of certain architectural styles or the diversity of these styles, or is it perhaps the frequent contrast of greenery with these buildings, their setting? Individual perspectives differ as to which ingredients are essential.

In spite of differences of opinion about which quality is most important, there is a widely shared belief that the physical character of Mid-Cambridge is being steadily eroded by infill construction in back and side yards. Frequently this development occurs with major alteration or demolition of existing buildings. Most streets in the neighborhood have experienced this kind of development in the last decade.

The current proposal reflects the dedicated efforts of a committee that included several people who actively opposed the 1982 initiative. The current proposal is a substantial improvement over the earlier one. It explicitly excludes almost all alterations typically made by homeowners. It provides for an active program of education and incentives to encourage conservation and restoration of existing buildings. It requires early and frequent review of the working of the Conservation District.

Your support is needed if the new proposal is to succeed. As of this month, the MCNA has about 600 members, less than 5% of all the residents in the neighborhood. Without the support of a broader spectrum of Mid-Cambridge residents, including many who do not belong to the Association, the City Council will not pass the Conservation District Proposal.

You can demonstrate your active support in one of three ways: by coming to the City Council hearing at City Hall, Monday, January 21 at 6PM, by writing to the City Council, or by writing to the MCNA. Of these, the most effective is to come to the City Council hearing.

Sincerely,



John Pitkin
Chairperson

would involve the building's condition, evidence of hardship, and plans for replacement. For new construction and alterations, consideration would be given to site layout, parking, size of the building and its relation to its surroundings, open space and landscaping, and significant changes to existing buildings.

These binding reviews are intended to avoid excessive infill development, to encourage new construction that complements existing buildings, to avoid unnecessary demolition, and to preserve and protect existing buildings.

What is the Commission's process in the case of a binding review?

In allowing a project to proceed, the Commission would issue one of three types of certificate:

- (a) a certificate of appropriateness, for projects that meet neighborhood conservation objectives.
- (b) a certificate of hardship, if evidence of hardship leads the Commission to approve a project that otherwise would not have been approved.
- (c) a certificate of non-applicability, when a project may do nothing to support neighborhood conservation, but also does nothing detrimental.

To deny a certificate, or to impose conditions on an issued certificate, requires a vote of four of the five members.

How long does the process take?

From the date of application for a building permit, non-binding reviews of National Register buildings take not more than 21 days, non-binding reviews of non-residential and public buildings take not more than 30 days, and binding reviews shall not take more than 45 days.

Is there an appeal process?

Yes. There is provision for an arbitration process with an arbitrator appointed jointly by the applicant and the Commission. Formal appeals may be made to the Cambridge Historical Commission or to the Superior Court.

What are the educational and incentive programs mentioned earlier?

This proposal has been designed not only to regulate and limit what is deemed to be inappropriate development and demolition, but also to take positive action to further goals of neighborhood conservation through non-regulatory approaches. The District Commission, along with the City Historical Commission, would conduct an on-going educational program to publicize the objectives of the Conservation District and to encourage preservation of the District's historical character and distinctive architecture. For example, the Commission would seek funding for and give guidance on rehabilitation projects, give recognition to preservation actions, seek legal easements to protect important buildings, sponsor neighborhood tours to increase public awareness of the neighborhood's architecture, and produce publications and lectures on examples of preservation in the neighborhood. These programs

would be funded by an annual city appropriation through the Historical Commission; without these funds the regulatory aspects of the ordinance would not be enforceable.

Once the Conservation District is in effect, would there be any opportunity for public review and input?

Yes. For the first two years, the Commission would hold a public meeting every six months. Neighborhood residents would be invited to review the Commission's actions, assess its effectiveness, and make recommendations for changes in policies and procedures. At the end of the two years, continuation of the Conservation District would require approval by the City Council.

MCNA
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Comm. from Joan Lorentz, Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Assoc., transmitting a copy of the January, 1985 issue of MCNA News, relative to establishment of a Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District.

In City Council,

January 21, 1985

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