

Save Central Square

February 19, 1998

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To the Honorable, the Cambridge City Council,
the Planning Board, and the Community Development Department

Re: New Public Hearings Required for Holmes' Central Square Redesign

At the recent Planning Board meeting, the Holmes Trust was instructed to significantly redo its plans for its proposed high-rise development in Central Square. In addition, Holmes traffic plan was rejected as unsatisfactory.

Holmes' revised plans for Central Square are not even scheduled to be completed before February 24, which will render impossible any informed debate or review at the scheduled March 3 Planning Board meeting.

These are not just a few minor revisions which arose out of a long process, but a significant redesign, for example changing from two buildings to one building, removing a central plaza, and changing the shape and arrangement of the proposal. The Planning Board did not even address every concern about the proposal at the previous Planning Board meeting—there was not enough opportunity to get all the issues on the table. Since Holmes' previous plans were so far off the mark, one week for review of a new plan which will change the nature of Central Square, is inadequate.

No-one has even seen Holmes' new plan. Holmes' proposed changes have not been reviewed by the Public, the Central Square Advisory Committee, nor the Planning Board. Robust and meaningful public review is necessary to see if Holmes' revised plan adequately addresses the community's needs. A mere 1-week review would likely overlook major problems in Holmes' hasty redesign.

In addition, the Community Development Department indicated it plans to "communicate" planning issues with the Holmes Trust for the new Holmes plan. These communications and instructions to the Holmes Trust should include the many concerns raised by the Public, including the public comments, submissions, and the Petitions. Essential among these public concerns are the return of the many business which are being forced out by the developer, the excess size, affordability of retail and commercial rents, and many other concerns about the Holmes proposals.

Public policy and design requirements for Central Square call for re-initiation of the hearing process, including new public hearings, comments, and reviews by the Central Square Advisory Committee.

Drew Haidler

Kurt Sandell

Carla Berman

22-1

Designs of proposed Central Square structure rejected

BY AMY MILLER
Chronicle Staff

The proposed design for a controversial development in the heart of Central Square hit a wall last week when the Planning Board rejected many aspects of the seven-story complex.

Planning board members told the developer, Holmes Realty Trust, that the building would put too much of Carl Barron Plaza in the shade and would create public space that is not useful to the public.

"It's fair to say they didn't see it as a design scheme that they were enthusiastic about," concluded James Rafferty, attorney for the Holmes Realty Trust.

Rafferty responded to the Planning Board's rejection by repeating his warning that if the city and Holmes Realty Trust do not agree soon on a design for a housing/retail complex, the owners may simply build an office building as

large as allowed by law.

"We're very close to reaching from a financial point of view [the time] when there is going to have to be finality," said Rafferty. "We'll have to come up with a design acceptable to the Planning Board or the property owner will exercise his as-of-right option."

The latest proposal, which comes after six months of design review meetings with neighbors and city officials, calls for 72 apartments, including 11 affordable units, in addition to first and second floor retail.

Regardless of what design is finally approved, the developers plan to demolish the existing structure this spring. The last of about half-a-dozen retail tenants in the block, the Lucy Parsons Book Store, is supposed to be out by April 1, said Rafferty.

The design presented to the city Planning Board last week called for two buildings with a total of 125,000 square feet surrounding a

public courtyard of about 10,000 square feet. One building, fronting on Carl Barron Plaza, would be seven stories and the other would be five stories. The public courtyard would be reached by stairs from Mass. Ave., and would be surrounded by second story retail shops. The first floor would also hold stores, accessible from the street.

"There were several big problems with the design that need to be fixed," said Hugh Russell, a member of the Planning Board. "[The courtyard] is a bad space to create and it's in the wrong location on the site."

Also, he said, architects "put the highest part directly south of Carl Barron Plaza, which would ensure it would get very little sun any season of the year. [This would

have a] very bad impact on the only little piece of central open space in the square."

Ideally, the courtyard should be somehow joined visually with open space already available at Carl Barron plaza.

Russell suggested developers have not been listening well to community input, and are unsophisticated in coming up with designs. In the case of the Holmes project, he said, the owner is a family trust, which complicates efforts to reach decisions on design.

"I think sometimes people don't listen very well and they hear what they want to hear," said Russell. "And some developers aren't very experienced and that seems to be the case [here]. The owners develop a project every century."

Russell also indicated he is not worried about threats that the owners would build an office building as big as allowed by zoning laws. From his point of view, such a plan is not financially sound and Rafferty is just taking a tough negotiating stand.

"Nobody has built a speculative as-of-right office building in 10 or 15 years and no one is financing them," said Russell. "It's a tough competition and if you're not very experienced or organized and can't deliver a property quickly, it's even harder, he said."

The Holmes trust could build a 90,000-square-foot office building 55 feet high without any permission from city boards.

Opponents of the Holmes proposal celebrated the Planning Board's decision.

"This is a first round victory for the people of Cambridge," said David Hoicka, a leader in the Save Central Square movement to block the development. "[This is] a par-

tial vindication for all the three or four thousand people who signed petitions and came to public meetings to protest this profit-making thing they are putting in Central Square."

Although public comment has been useful to a point, Russell pointed out that much of the public opposition has been against any development replacing the existing two-story structure with a dozen independent shops, while the Planning Board's concerns have focused on the design of the proposed development itself.

Planning Board members support the idea of a mixed retail and residential complex. It was the specifics of the design that the Planning Board as a whole rejected.

"Their use proposal makes a lot of sense to a lot of people, but they have to come up with a reasonable design," said Russell. "I've done some sketching and I think there is a reasonable design to be had there."

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Consent Communication #22

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Communication was received from David
Hoicka et al., regarding new public
hearings required for Holmes' Cental
Square redesign

In City Council February 23, 1998

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