

reviewed at meeting

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New urbanization for old suburbs

MARTIN F. NOLAN

SAN FRANCISCO

In the 40 years since Robert C. Wood popularized the phrase in his book, "Suburbia," cul de sacs and offramps have multiplied because people seek the grail of a picket fence and grass of one's own. Like other dreams, the vision of suburbia is frayed by reality. Land is no longer cheap in suburbia, a factor more important than traffic.

On all-news radio, traffic reporting is not really news, because the story is so often the same. Traffic reporters have become therapists, assuring their creep-and-crawl constituents at every cloverleaf that misery loves company.

Congestion can mean opportunity. Peter Calthorpe, as a "new urbanist" planner, has tackled that distinctively suburban totem, the shopping mall. Neither he nor anyone else will be bulldozing petunia patches soon, but many malls are dead or dying, and their owners are willing to listen to new ideas. "Densifying the suburb" is Calthorpe's answer to "the maturation of the American suburb."

The new idea is old: a village, with street-scapes and mixed-income housing above retail stores. When Calthorpe spoke to the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, he showed slides of such a transformed parking lot in Florida. "These apartments are tremendously successful," he said. "Typically in Florida, the up-

per floors always rent first because of the big views. There, the second floor rented first because people like watching other people go by."

Calthorpe's redesign efforts have transformed malls in San Diego and near Portland, Ore., where multi-family housing replaced "chaos and suburban strip malls." Small parking garages, including a car-stacking German invention, are more efficient than surface parking, more appealing, and therefore more profitable.

Planners are bringing new life to dead malls.

"Urbanism is transferable to suburbs, and, quite frankly, people are starting to make money on it. That's the good news," Calthorpe says. Some of the bad news is "never-ending."

"I don't think cities can be healthy as isolated phenomena," he says. "More and more we're becoming regional cultures, not cities or towns or villages. Even though all of our jurisdictions and governance mitigates against it, our most serious issues, whether it's concentrations of poverty or environmental impact, are regional in scope."

The notion of "metropolitan planning" as a panacea never succeeded when suburbia was young. Such top-down notions rarely fly, except in places like Oregon. "We need affordable housing

infill, and we need more rail transit. Both of these things need regional governance," Calthorpe notes. "We continue to address everything on a piecemeal basis."

It is a truism of American life that major civic problems persist until the pain spreads, however unevenly. Suburbs will stop competing with each other only when they band together against a common foe.

"We watch individual jurisdictions chasing high-tax-base land uses," Calthorpe says, citing his experience in Fremont, a city on the edge of Silicon Valley, which has a housing crisis.

"We wanted to do a mixed-use development, with well-located, affordable, mixed-income housing, but the city saw this endless stream of tax dollars from a commercial development," he recalls. "It's the same thing with Wal-Mart. A town says: 'We want Wal-Mart because it's a lot of tax dollars and it'll go to go to the next town if we turn it down.' Wal-Mart can manipulate towns into destroying their own main streets because of this odd logic. Regional tax-base sharing would cure this."

Calthorpe may be a visionary, but he believes in incrementalism or, as he calls it, "ad hoc regionalism." Bringing new life to dead malls happens only five or 10 acres at a time, but it does prove that no matter how bleak or chaotic a suburban landscape, "You can airlift urbanism, drop it down, and watch it take root and grow."

Martin F. Nolan is a Globe columnist

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To: The Honorable, the City Councillors

From: The Co-Chairs of the Cambridgeport Neighborhood Initiative (CNI) OF THE CITY CLERK
Daphne Abeel, Gordie Fellman, Stash Horowitz, SAA (CNI), page 1 of 8
Anastasia Leotsakos, Maureen VanStry, Elie Yarden

Date: November 11, 1998 - for Council meeting of Nov. 16

Re: Letters from City official & from CNI's Traffic consultant to Spaulding & Slye and to
Inspectional Services Dept., in relation to 784 Memorial Drive LLC
reapplying for curb cut relocations seven months after withdrawal.

1. Attached is a plan by the proposed project's architect, Cannon Associates, which helps the Council & public understand which buildings have been permitted and renovated (only the front 45,000 sf one which Polaroid is occupying), which are still proposed and have not been permitted (two six-story office towers for commercial rental by Spaulding & Slye Real Estate Services Inc.), and which are under abuttor appeal (a 577-car garage as a multi-storied structural parking facility). The appeal pertains to issues of curb cut safety and conformity, in compliance with City of Cambridge Zoning Ordinance requirements, and its continued hearing will occur Thursday, November 19, at 8:15p.m. before the BZA (Board of Zoning Appeal).
2. Letter sent to abuttors from Spaulding & Slye, dated October 23, 1998, which twice mentions City approval of Right Turn Only Restriction for cars exiting the above-mentioned garage, which the City has not yet approved.
As those who live in the neighborhood well know from experience, the resultant traffic which must merge into the afternoon queues heading west on Memorial Drive cannot do so without a traffic light there, and none has been approved by the Metropolitan District Commission, which administers the Drive. This would result in Mass Pike-bound commuters from this proposed project driving through already congested neighborhood streets.
3. Letter from the City's Dept. of Traffic, Parking & Transportation to Spaulding & Slye, dated October 26, 1998 (2 pages) in which the City writes, in reviewing the Spaulding & Slye / Vanasse & Associates Traffic Study submitted as part of an application for a special permit: "Based on the materials you have submitted with your application, I cannot certify your traffic study as complete and reliable at this time because the study assumes two access points for project traffic but the garage building permit has only one approved access point." On page 2, it adds, "Therefore, the study does not accurately describe the traffic impacts of the project and cannot be used to determine whether the project will have no substantial impact on city traffic"
4. Letter from Stephen H. Kaiser, CNI's Traffic Consultant, to the City Dept. of Inspectional Services, dated November 9, 1998 (3 pages), explaining the problems this project faces, in matters of traffic safety and non-compliance with City of Cambridge Zoning Ordinance, in using "a single, non-conforming driveway."

784 Memorial Drive L.L.C.

c/o Spaulding & Slye
125 CambridgePark Drive
Cambridge, MA 02140

To: Abutters of 784 Memorial Drive

Re: Application for Driveway Cuts and Openings
City of Cambridge

Date: October 23, 1998

As the owner of the Polaroid site, 784 Memorial Drive LLC is preparing to resubmit an application to the City of Cambridge for two (2) new curb cuts: one on Putnam Avenue and one on Pleasant Street opposite Florence Street. If the new curb cuts are granted by the City as requested, then 784 Memorial Drive LLC will relocate the two (2) existing curb cuts to the new locations.

The curb cut relocations are shown on the three enclosed plans:

1. **Site Plan Exhibit** - This shows the entire six acre site with the proposed master plan and the location of the new curb cut at Driveway A (Pleasant Street) and Driveway B (Putnam Avenue). Both these driveways will provide two-way access to the new and permitted 577-car parking garage. However, vehicles exiting the property at Driveway A onto Pleasant Street will be restricted to a right turn only directing traffic away from the neighborhood to Memorial Drive.
2. **Pleasant Street Driveway A** - This engineered plan shows the new driveway at Pleasant Street which has been relocated approximately 112' to the west of the existing driveway and away from the intersection of Florence Street. Again, vehicles exiting this driveway will be restricted to a right turn only.
3. **Putnam Avenue Driveway B** - This engineered plan shows the new driveway at Putnam Avenue which has been relocated approximately 30' to the northwest of the existing driveway and away from the intersection of Pleasant Street.

Also enclosed is an Abutter's Form. Please indicate your approval or disapproval of the proposed relocations as indicated on this Abutter's Form and return the form by Thursday, November 5, 1998 using the enclosed stamped, addressed envelope. Be sure to include your name and the address of your property on the Abutter's Form. Additionally, we have added optional information to aid the City in making a determination on the new curb cuts.

If you have any questions about the Abutter's Form, please contact the Inspectional Services Department at (617) 349-6100. If you have any questions regarding the project and the proposed driveway relocations, please feel free to contact Rob Dickey of Spaulding & Slye at (617) 523-8000.

Thank you for your cooperation.



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Traffic, Parking and Transportation
57 Inman Street,
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

CNI, 11-16-98
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Susan E. Clippinger
Director

Administration 349-4700
Parking Violations 349-4705
Resident Parking 349-4701

VIA FACSIMILE AND U.S. MAIL

Mr. Robert M. Dickey
Vice President
Spaulding & Slye
125 Cambridge Park Drive
Cambridge, MA

October 26, 1998

Dear Mr. Dickey:

I am in receipt of your letter of October 16, 1998 and associated documents as required by the "Planning Overlay Special Permit" under Section 11.511 (b) of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance as amended September 29, 1998. Based on the materials you have submitted with your application, I cannot certify your traffic study as complete and reliable at this time because the study assumes two access points for project traffic but the garage building permit has only one approved access point.

As you are aware, and as you indicate in your letter, there have been numerous meetings and discussions of the traffic study and traffic impacts of the proposed development at 784 Memorial Drive between representatives of Spaulding and Sly, city staff, and residents.

On January 27, 1998, I sent a memo to Robert Bersani, Commissioner of Inspectional Services, saying that use of the Putnam Ave. curb cut as currently configured is unsafe. The building permit you received for the garage shows the use of only one curb cut on Pleasant Street. On February 2, 1998, I sent a second memo to Mr. Bersani, Commissioner of Inspectional Services, saying that use of the current Putnam Ave. curb cut for exits only would be safe, provided it was a single lane driveway. To date you have not requested approval through Inspectional Services for any change to your building permit that would allow you to use the Putnam Ave curb cut in any way.

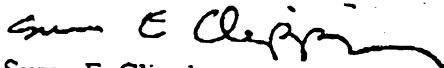
At the request of the City Council, the City Manager and city staff met with you on February 4, 1998 to discuss alternatives for minimizing traffic impacts on the neighborhood. You agree to pursue an application to the city to relocate both the Putnam Ave. and Pleasant Street curb cuts. In the previous meetings held with representatives of Spaulding and Sly, city staff and residents substantial consensus was achieved with regard to new curb cut locations.

You applied for these relocated curb cuts. On February 9, 1998 Inspectional Services and the Historical Commission signed off on the application to relocate your curb cuts. This department signed off on the application on February 17, 1998. The Public Works Department withdrew their signature until a required tree removal hearing could be scheduled. On March 31, 1998 you notified the Inspectional Services Commissioner that you were withdrawing your application to relocate your curb cuts. To date, a new curb cut application to relocate the curbs has not been received by the Inspectional Services Department.

Given this situation, I cannot certify your traffic study as being done in a complete and reliable manner nor can I certify the methodology used. The study assumes the project will be using two curb cuts. The project has only one approved curb cut. Therefore, the study does not accurately describe the traffic impacts of the project and cannot be used to determine whether "the project will have no substantial adverse impact on city traffic."

To remedy this situation you have two basic options. You can revise the traffic study so that it reliably and completely describes the traffic impacts of a project that uses only the Pleasant Street curb cut so the Planning Board can determine whether the project will have a substantial adverse impact on city traffic. The other option is to create two safe access and egress points to the project, consistent with the assumptions used in the study that was just submitted.

Sincerely,



Susan E. Clippinger
Director

cc: R. Healy
B. Rubenstein
D. Drisdell
Planning Board

November 9, 1998

Stephen H. Kaiser
191 Hamilton Street
Cambridge, Mass. 02139

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Robert R. Bersani, Commissioner
Department of Inspection Services
831 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, Mass. 02139

**SUBJECT: Access to Parking Garage for 784 Memorial Drive
Via a Single, Non-Conforming Driveway**

Dear Mr. Bersani,

As things currently stand, your office has issued a building permit for a parking garage servicing 784 Memorial Drive, and this permit is based on a single driveway access from an existing curbcut on Pleasant Street. I contend that this driveway is non-conforming, because it is within 25 feet of an intersection. You have contended to the contrary -- that the driveway is conforming but that in issuing the building permit it would make no difference to you whether the curb cut was conforming or non-conforming.

I sense that the Law Department sees the conforming/non-conforming issue as quite significant and hence the focus of Mr. Drisdell's analysis of driveways at T-intersections. The essence of Mr. Drisdell's testimony from last March is that if one can possibly work the words around so that an intersection at a T-intersection is not in an intersection, then for the purposes of zoning, the 25-foot rule can somehow be deemed not to apply.

So we have a situation where the Law Department is saying the issue of conformity is important, while Inspectional Services says it is not. I think we can all agree that there is nothing to prevent a landowner from using a preexisting driveway for access to an existing building or activity. The key issue is : can one get a building permit based on a non-conforming driveway -- one that is in conflict with the Zoning Code?

There may be another way to resolve this problem. The key activities occurred in tight sequence in early February of this year. First Rizzo Associates issued their report concluding that the Putnam Avenue Driveway was "*unsafe*" and that the Pleasant Street was "*safe*" but would operated more efficiently and safely if moved. None of the traffic reports -- Vanasse, Rizzo or mine -- looked at the implications of using only one driveway for the site. It just was not an issue at any time until February of this year.

Spaulding and Slye's letter to the City Manager on January 21 indicated a plan to use the existing driveways and promised to submit a plan to relocate both driveways "*in connection with our design effort for the two new office buildings*" at some unspecified time in the future. The developer stated that if they were unable to obtain new curbcut approval, "we would use the existing driveways for the entire project."

Suddenly in February, the arrangement was thrown awry by the finding that the Putnam Avenue driveway was unsafe. The quick solution was to grant the building permit for the garage based on the other driveway (Pleasant Street) and accelerate the driveway permit application process. Indeed, on February 5, the Building permit for the garage was stamped approved at 4:49 PM by Inspectional Services and the driveway application form was stamped in at 4:59 PM. For various reasons, the driveway relocation process was suspended and only recently has been restarted.

A February 2 memo from Traffic and Parking stated that the Putnam Avenue driveway was acceptable for exits only, but I could find no city document which assessed the implications of only one driveway. Sometime in early February a quick decision was made to permit the garage for only one driveway, even though it was never the developer's intent to *operate* the garage with just this single driveway.

In his February 9, 1998 report to the City Council, the Manager did not conclude that the Pleasant Street driveway was either conforming or adequate, although he admitted that it would *"not provide for optimal traffic management at the site..."* He properly noted the Pell report had concluded that relocation of both curbcuts *"would provide for both safer and better traffic flow to and from the site."*

While I am at odds with the logical inconsistencies of Mr. Drisdell's presentation to the City Council on March 16, I have stated earlier that his ultimate conclusions are reasonable and consistent with the City's position : *"It is clear that many people, traffic engineers included, believe that the Pleasant Street curbcut would operate better if it were located differently on Pleasant Street..."* I agree and have consistently taken the position that relocation of the driveway on Pleasant Street is the only reasonable and professional solution -- and have challenged any engineer to defend the proposal to use the existing driveway at Florence Street -- which I feel has severe safety deficiencies.

The Manager wishes to have the driveways relocated and sees the benefits, as do Mr. Drisdell, Rizzo Associates and I. So do the Department of Traffic and Parking and Community Development. Mr. Haley for the developers noted his clients "are trying to relocate it to a safer" location (p. 278) . As I see it there is only one City entity defending the Pleasant Street driveway as "adequate" -- and that is Inspectional Services.

During the BZA hearing on the safety of the driveway to Pleasant Street, Laura Kershner inquired if *"it would be a safe exit from there?"* You replied that you considered the curb cut to be *"adequate"* (p. 242) but you did not use the word "safe" or "safety." Chairman Curry also has expressed exasperation over the situation : *"why are we here"* when there is *"widespread concern that a good solid safe solution hasn't been found to the traffic problems."* (p. 265) Mr. Pierce inquired, *"Is there a real big problem with moving that driveway?"* and attorney Haley for the developer replied *"Absolutely not."* Mr. Pierce asked the obvious follow-up question *"So why are we here?"* From the beginning of the planning process last year, the developer has adopted the most unfortunate strategy of deferring any application for relocating the driveways to a safer location and instead has chosen to proceed with construction first, with permits later. Willingly or not, Inspectional Services has become snared in that strategy. For the sake of the City's credibility and your own, you do not need to accept the consequences -- which include poorly designed driveways and deficient public processes.

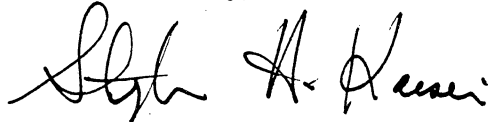
November 9, 1998

Inspectional Services has the leverage. The developer will be back for building permits for the office buildings. Tell them their strategy has been flawed and it has placed Inspectional Services in an extremely difficult position. This same strategy has compelled the Law Department to go through embarrassing semantic contortions to claim that the Florence Street driveway is not in an intersection. No traffic engineer has said that using the single existing driveway at Florence Street is "*adequate*."

The solution is for the developer to void the Building Permit of February 5. It was based on a non-conforming driveway which is in conflict with the Zoning Ordinance of the City of Cambridge. No request has been filed by the developer to the BZA for a zoning variance to deal with this non-conforming driveway. The Board members are correct : there would be no reason for this case to come before the BZA if the safe and proper driveway design had been implemented in a timely manner.

There is no reason for the City to accept this development plan without safer, relocated driveways -- when the driveway can easily be relocated and the attorney for the developer admits that there is absolutely no big problem in doing so. For the City and the developer to proceed with this project while it has such deficient driveways is to become vulnerable to charges of negligence. Under these circumstances, City officials must assure that they do what is right and see to it that developers do the same thing -- in the public interest.

Sincerely,



Stephen H. Kaiser
Traffic and Transportation Engineer, CNI

- cc. S. Clippinger, Traffic and Parking
D. Drisdell, Law Department
B. Rubenstein, Community Development
C. Woodbury, Community Development
B. Barnes, License Commission
R. Norwood, Polaroid Corp.
D. Vickery, Spaulding & Slye
R. Dickey, Spaulding & Slye
J. Haley, Goodwin, Proctor & Hoar
K. Triantifillou, City Council
S. Horowitz, Cambridgeport Neighborhood Initiative
E. Yarden, Cambridgeport Neighborhood Initiative

Consent Communication #11 7475

A communication was received from the CNI
Chairs regarding the reapplication for a
curb cut by Spaulding & Slye at the
premises numbered 784 Memorial Drive
seven months after they were withdrawn.

In City Council November 16, 1998.

PLACED ON FILE