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CITY OF CAMBRIDGE • EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT

Robert W. Healy, City Manager *Richard C. Rossi, Deputy City Manager*

September 9, 2002

To The Honorable, The City Council:

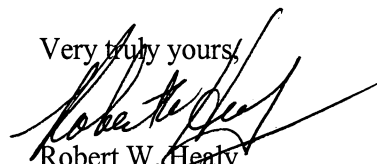
In response to Awaiting Report Item No. 02-67, report on Planning Board review of zoning ordinance provisions about measuring and altering the grade of a lot and their relation of the height of buildings and other dimensional requirements, Assistant City Manager for Community Development Beth Rubenstein reports the following:

The above referenced order requests a review of provisions of the Zoning Ordinance that determine the height of a building. As currently defined, the height of any building in Cambridge is measured from the highest point of the roof to the mean grade of the ground abutting the building. While fairly straightforward in wording, the definition leaves much to interpretation: Can the grade be altered by filling or excavation? Can that filling or excavation be assisted by the building of retaining walls? Should the provisions of the State Building Code, which is referenced in our Zoning Ordinance and which addresses the subject in a slightly different way, be applied more explicitly in our Ordinance? Is some pre-construction alteration of a lot's natural grade appropriate?

On large lots and for large commercial buildings these questions typically have little relevance. But in neighborhoods where lots are small and small changes in a building's height can be keenly felt, these questions have great importance. As Cambridge housing becomes ever more valuable and each additional square foot of living space is sought, there is a tendency for property owners to work within the ambiguities of the current regulations to get a slightly taller house or expose through excavation more of a home's basement to make that basement a more habitable space. In an established neighborhood, these individual private advantages can sometimes have negative consequences for neighbors or the general public. On the other hand, some flexibility may be fair and reasonable and have positive consequences.

We will work with the Planning Board to take up these questions in a systematic way later this fall, with the goal of formulating a recommendation as to how, if appropriate, our current zoning provisions can be modified to reflect current policy objectives and to make the city's requirements clear to both property owners and the city staff who will enforce the regulations.

Very truly yours,


Robert W. Healy
City Manager

RWH/mec

S-253

Consent Agenda #4

Awaiting Report Item Number

02-67, regarding a report on
Planning Board review of zoning
ordinance provisions about
measuring and altering the grade
of a lot and their relation of the
height of buildings and other
dimensional requirements.

In City Council September 9, 2002

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