



City of Cambridge

Committee Report #3

IN CITY COUNCIL

December 18, 1995

COUNCILLOR SULLIVAN

ORDERED: That the City Manager be and hereby is requested to hold meetings with Representatives of Adams Realty, abutters, neighbors, representatives of the Historical Commission and any other City employees or other persons the City Manager deems useful, to attempt to arrive at a solution that can accommodate the Sheraton Commander Hotel's business need for additional parking. The residents need to preserve the quality of the neighborhood, community and City's concern with an obligation of historical preservation; and be it further

ORDERED: That the City Manager report back to the new City Council by mid-January.

In City Council December 18, 1995

Adopted by the affirmative vote of nine members.

Attest:- D. Margaret Drury, City Clerk.

A true copy;

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "D. Margaret Drury".

ATTEST:-

D. Margaret Drury
City Clerk

Ms. Crump stated that the extension of the district meets all of the Historical Commission's objectives. The landmark designation builds toward this goal but does not fully address it.

Charles Sullivan then explained the nature and purpose of a historical district. A district does not mean no demolition or alterations. It describes a procedure to ensure that change is appropriate to the historic structures involved.

Mr. Sullivan stated that in the negotiations with property owners, the Commission reached compromise with Harvard University, the owner of 29 Garden Street, to allow protection of 29 Garden Street under an alternative procedure. The second modification was reached in extensive negotiation with Adams Trust, and includes a conceptual approval of partial demolition of their three Garden Street properties for parking behind those buildings. He noted that over the years, the Historical Commission has approved several proposals for change by the Sheraton Hotel in order to accommodate the needs of this valued corporate neighbor.

Councillor Duehay inquired as to the agreement with Harvard. Mr. Sullivan said that 20 Garden would be included in the district; 29 Garden would not. Mr. Sullivan said that this agreement would take effect if the City Council approves the district extension.

Mayor Reeves stated that his reading of the Historical Commission's submission was that the buildings were significant because of the character of their area rather than the history of the buildings. He questioned how the Council can be assured that such a standard can be fairly applied. Charles Sullivan stated that the Commission did find that the buildings were historically valuable, both individually and as a whole.

Mayor Reeves stated that his view of "historically significant" would generally include the architecture and particular historical significance of the building.

Mayor Reeves asked whether there had been discussions of replacing the buildings with new buildings that were appropriate to the surroundings.

Charles Sullivan stated that all of the discussions with the owners have been discussions about parking. The Historical Commission would certainly consider proposals for replacement buildings in which the architecture and style related to the historical period represented by the district.

Mayor Reeves stated his concern that this process was going on too long without a compromise, when this appears to be a situation where a compromise could benefit all interests. Preserving the status quo is not necessarily the best option. However, someone is needed to propose this, and Adams Trust has not done this.

Alison Crump stated that the Mayor's suggestions are very consistent with the Historical Commission's concerns and willingness to enter discussions. Discussions have gotten stuck on the lack of specific plans and the number of parking spaces needed. She noted that the Trust's reluctance to invest in plans given the uncertainty of the situation is not unreasonable.

Mayor Reeves suggested that the City consider investing some of its resources, given how important the district is to the City. Mayor Reeves noted that his greatest fear is that the Trust will sell the building to Harvard and it will become a institutional extension.

Councillor Sullivan noted that sale to Harvard would also result in loss of tax revenues. He explained the City Council's obligation to take a broad view that includes revenues and employment for citizens as well as historic preservation.

Alison Crump stated that the Historical Commission knows that it is appointed by the Council to provide its expertise and advice in this area, but that the Commission understands that in running the City, the Council must consider more than its perspective. However, the Commission believes that there are many compromises that are possible.

Councillor Sullivan agreed that compromises are possible and noted that all parties must compromise. At Councillor Sullivan's request Charles Sullivan reviewed the agreement with Harvard in which there is internal administrative review of all changes to historical buildings.

Councillor Sullivan stated that he disagrees with the concept of private agreements with Harvard University.

Charles Sullivan stated that the Commission has tried to meet and compromise with all property owners who had concerns.

Ms. Crump stated that before this agreement was made ten years ago, relations with Harvard were very acrimonious. This agreement has led to a good working relationship which has benefitted the goals of the Historical Commission in protecting historical districts.

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Councillor Duehay asked for a ruling from the Law Department as to what extent the City Council can change or amend recommendations of the Historical Commission.

Councillor Duehay then questioned the assumption regarding the legality of additional parking. There has been no Board of Zoning Appeal opinion this issue. He agreed that the hotel has a need for additional parking.

Councillor Born noted that it is a rare instance in which the new buildings are such a good replacement for demolished historical buildings, as is true at Arsenal Square and even so, in no way are those buildings, attractive as they are, an adequate replacement for the historical structures. She added that she agrees that the Sheraton Commander is an extremely valuable asset to the City of Cambridge. She values local involvement and family management. Councillor Born stated that there may be a compromise but it has not been reached yet. This is a very important project because it is the tip of the iceberg that is coming with the resurgence of construction. Taking down one of the buildings is not an appropriate compromise.

Councillor Sullivan stated the importance of employment considerations and tax considerations and the fact that the Sheraton Hotel is a good neighbor and good citizen.

Charles Sullivan stated that the requested demo permits have been delayed under a city ordinance that Adams is now challenging. Under those circumstances the best protection is extension of the district. Then the individual proposals for changes to the buildings can be considered.

Vice Mayor Russell then opened the hearing to testimony from members of the public in favor of the proposal.

Corneilus Bull, 12 Concord Avenue, Chair, Arsenal Square Citizens Committee, stated that at the last Historical Commission meeting the organization submitted a petition signed by 600 people in favor of extending the historical district. As a abuttor, he also worries about 10 Garden Street as well. He read a letter from the First Church, Cambridge, in support of the proposed extension of the historical district and submitted the letter for the record.

Lansing Fair, 5 Berkeley Place, spoke in support of the proposal. The neighborhood concern goes back twenty years, and it was through neighborhood action that the neighborhood has been preserved.

Richard Terent, 7 Berkeley Street, spoke in support of the proposed extension as the most effective way to preserve the neighborhood and its quality of life. The compromise suggested by Adams Trust, removal of the middle building, could become, in effect, removal of all three buildings.

Elizabeth Dunn, 27 Walker Street, stated that this neighborhood has worked very hard to preserve the residential quality of the area. The large parking area proposed would bring an unacceptable commercial destruction of this residential quality.

Frank Westhermer, 3 Berkeley Street, stated that he is an abuttor of the lots under consideration. He stated that parking is a zoning issue, not a historic preservation issue. He worries about the parking because of noise, fumes and traffic jams.

Mary Jane Kornacki, 103 Avon Hill Street, Executive Committee of Neighborhood Nine Association. She stated that the organization has had several discussions. They voted to support the Historical Commission's proposal. She stated that there was passionate discussion of the issue at several meetings.

Sheila Cook, Follen Street, spoke in support of the proposal. She noted that the hotel, which was named after George Washington, features its historic location in its advertising literature. While the houses are not the most beautiful, their historical value is tremendous. The neighborhood has worked very hard to preserve its quality. She appreciates the hotel, and hopes that a compromise will be reached.

Vice Mayor Russell then invited testimony from those in opposition.

Matthew Kiefer, Attorney for Adams Trust, made a presentation. Sheraton Hotel has been owned by the Gulesarian family for 35 years. There are 175 guest rooms. The hotel employs 130 people, over one third Cambridge residents. The functions the hotel hosts are local functions, not conventions. The hotel is itself a Cambridge institution. It is the only Cambridge hotel without adequate offstreet parking. Their consultants concluded the hotel has a shortfall of 100-150 parking spaces. The site was purchased for the purpose of solving their parking problems. The proposal is for demolition of 24 Garden Street and the rear of 22 Garden Street. They would restore the front of 22 and all of 26 Garden Street. 24 Garden is the youngest house, it was built later than the other two. Their proposal goes halfway; the owners would like to demolish all three.

Attorney Kiefer noted that most discussion has focused on the neighborhood character; not the historical value. He requested that the City Council incorporate conceptual approval of their proposed compromise in any action that it takes.

Edward Gulesarian, partner, Adams Trust, Managing Director of Sheraton Commander Hotel, stated that he has no intention of selling the hotel to Harvard. The hotel's number one operational problem is its lack of parking. They need the additional parking to be able to compete. He urged the City Council to reject the proposal to extend the district or landmark the buildings.

Charles Deland, Director of Sales at the Sheraton Commander, emphasized the local nature of their business. Polaroid and Bread and Circus are two examples of businesses which probably will not book with them again because of the parking.

Councillor Duehay agreed that the hotel needs parking, but stated that the problem seems to be a zoning problem. Parking would require a variance from the Board of Zoning Appeal. Variances are not easy to get. The City and the hotel ought to be talking about parking rather than taking down houses in a residential district.

Councillor Duehay suggested careful conversations with the abutters regarding the parking issues, because they may be the parties with whom compromise is necessary. He noted that the same kind of problem exists in many places in Cambridge, and, as is always true in these situations, the City Council will be more responsive if the hotel comes to a compromise with its neighbors.

Attorney Kiefer stated that the hotel's proposal already represents a compromise.

Councillor Duehay said that he does not see why neighbors would want to compromise to have parking. He questioned whether the current use of the backyards for parking is legal.

Councillor Sullivan moved that the City Manager be requested to hold meetings with neighbors, representatives of Adams Realty, and the Historical Commission with hope of getting to a solution, and that the City Manager invite any additional person he deems useful in arriving at a compromise. He further moved that the City Manager be requested to report back to the new City Council by mid-January.

Councillor Born asked whether the Adams Trust would object to extension of the historic district if it included support to tear down one of the buildings. Attorney Kiefer answered that in that case the Trust would withdraw its objection.

Councillor Born pointed out that the Board of Zoning Appeal is an independent decision-making body, and a vote of the City Council not to extend the historic district can have no bearing or influence on the decision of the Board of Zoning Appeal. She emphasized her concern for the hotel but stated that the requested concessions represent an extraordinary price to the neighborhood.

Councillor Duehay emphasized the owner's need to work with the abutters. He asked whether the owners would demolish the buildings during the process requested by Councillor Sullivan, and Attorney Kiefer stated that they would not.

Councillor Sullivan's motion was then adopted unanimously by a voice vote. It was agreed without objection that the matter will remain in committee pending the report from the City Manager.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:10 pm.

For the Committee

Sheila T Russell DMD
Vice Mayor Sheila T. Russell, Chair

City of Cambridge

The Ordinance Committee held a public hearing on December 13, 1995, beginning at 5:42 p.m. in the Sullivan Chamber for the purpose of considering a proposed Arsenal Square Extension of the Old Cambridge Historical District and/or a proposed landmark designation of 22, 24 and 26-28 Garden Street.

Present at the hearing were Vice Mayor Sheila T. Russell, Chair of the Committee, Councillor Kathleen L. Born, Councillor Francis H. Duehay, Mayor Kenneth E. Reeves, Councillor Michael A. Sullivan, Councillor Timothy J. Toomey, Jr., and City Clerk D. Margaret Drury.

Vice Mayor Russell convened the hearing and explained the purpose.

Vice Mayor Russell requested that Deputy Solicitor Don Drisdell report on his research as to the effect of the commencement of a new Council term January 1, 1996 on pending proposed ordinances, undertaken at the request of the Ordinance Committee in the meeting held in the previous half hour. Attorney Drisdell noted that he had had limited time for research but he had found a Massachusetts Court Case on a zoning matter that established that the City Council is a continuing body and may continue to act in the next Council on business begun in the previous Council.

Vice Mayor Russell requested that the meeting begin with a description of the proposal by representatives of the Cambridge Historical Commission, which submitted the proposal.

Alison Crump, Vice Chair of the Historical Commission and Charles Sullivan, Executive Director of the Historical Commission introduced themselves.

Ms. Crump stated that the Historical Commission's preferred alternative would be to extend the Old Cambridge Historical District. The district has been re-evaluated about every ten years since its inception in the 1960's. The Commission has found that views change every time this reexamination occurs.

Ms. Crump described the process that the Historical Commission engaged in. The Commission held a series of meetings with affected property owners over the spring and summer. There is only one owner whose opposition is known to the Historical Commission. The Commission is very concerned with opposition of property owners and do not believe that the door to future negotiations has been closed.

Committee Report #3

CM-311

The Ordinance Committee held a public meeting on Wednesday, December 13, 1995 for the purpose of considering a proposed Arsenal Square Extension of the Old Cambridge Historical District and/or a proposed landmark designation of 22, 24 and 26-28 Garden Street.

Report received
10-7-96

Consent Agenda #20
of 10-7-96

In City Council December 18, 1995

Report Accepted
Placed on file
Order Adopted