



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 57 INMAN STREET, CAMBRIDGE 02139

October 6, 1977

The Honorable, the City Council

Dear Councillors:

SUBJECT: Planning Board Recommendation on the Petition to
Rezone the Observatory Hill Area

In accordance with Chapter 40A of the General Laws, the Planning Board held a public hearing on Tuesday, September 6, 1977 on a petition by Mrs. John Vincent et al to rezone land generally bounded by Concord Avenue, Madison Street, Garden Street, and Bond Street from a Residence C-2 and a Residence C-1 designation to a Residence B designation.

The Character of the Observatory Hill Neighborhood

The area surrounding Observatory Hill is partly in Neighborhood 10 and partly in Neighborhood 9 with Concord Avenue as the dividing line. The petition area falls in Neighborhood 9.

The areas immediately north and south of Concord Avenue were originally developed in low scale, low density residential uses with one and two family houses predominating. While most of these houses have survived, parcels along Concord Avenue and to a lesser degree Garden Street, originally developed at a similar scale, have been redeveloped to multi-family residential and institutional uses. There has also been substantial redevelopment to these uses along nearby Linnaean Street.

The growth of the universities and Harvard Square with attendant development along major connectors like Concord Avenue and Garden Street has increased traffic flow through the Observatory Hill area. Persons using Harvard Square for commuting or business purposes, as well as persons connected with the universities, park along Garden Street and on side streets in the neighborhood. This creates congestion not in keeping with the character of the neighborhood.

Zoning

The zoning in the Observatory Hill area can best be described as a patchwork of various zones. The petition site is divided two-thirds in Residence C-2 and one-third in Residence C-1. Most of the institutionally owned land in the area is in either a C-1 or a C-2 designation. The residential neighborhoods both north and south of Concord Avenue are predominantly in Residence A-2 or Residence B designations.

Residence C-2 carries an 85-foot height limit and a permitted density of 72 units per acre. Residence C-1 carries a 35-foot height limit and a permitted density of 36 units per acre. Residence B carries a 35-foot height limit and a permitted density of 18 units per acre. Residence A-2 carries a 35-foot height limit and a permitted density of 9 units per acre. All four of these zoning designations allow residential and institutional uses only.

In 1974 an extensive rezoning petition for the area along the Concord Avenue spine originated in the neighborhood.

After several revampings, the petition, as passed, changed most of the existing C-2 designation along Concord Avenue, from Huron Avenue to Waterhouse Street, to a Residence C-1 designation. A small area north of Concord Avenue at Bond Street was changed from Residence C-2 to Residence B and a larger area at Healy, Parker, and Craigie Streets was changed to Residence A-2. Other areas, including the present petition area, were excluded from the neighborhood's petition as inappropriate for rezoning at the time.

Background to the Observatory Hill Petition

Radcliffe College has proposed to build a two-level 27,000 square foot plus athletic facility on part of the Observatory site. The lower level would contain locker rooms, squash courts, exercise areas and a multi-use room which could be used as basketball courts or tennis courts. The upper level would contain lounge areas and the upper halves of court areas on the lower level. Earth berms would be used to conceal the exterior walls of the building with two surface tennis courts covering much of the top of the building.

Certain neighborhood residents, concerned over the ultimate loss of one of the few open spaces in the Observatory Hill area and concerned over the potential future use of available land on the Observatory site, drafted a petition to rezone the Observatory site from Residence C-2 and C-1 to Residence B. This would reduce the potential height of new construction in the C-2 section of the petition area from 85 feet to 35 feet. In addition, the allowed floor area ratio, a calculation used to determine the amount of building space which could

be constructed based on available land area, would be reduced from 1.75 under C-2 and .75 under C-1 to .5 under Residence B zoning. With a total lot area of 340,486 square feet, the above figures translate as follows: Residence C-2 allows a total building space of approximately 600,000 square feet on the Observatory site. Residence C-1 allows approximately 260,000 square feet of building space. The 127,000 square feet of existing construction has to be subtracted from these figures to determine the allowable building construction space remaining. The net result of the petition would not affect construction of the proposed athletic facility as the floor area ratio permitted under Residence B would allow for construction of this 27,000 square foot facility. However, a Residence B designation over the entire petition site would severely limit any future construction in addition to the proposed athletic facility. Parking facilities, including garages, are exempt from floor area ratio calculations and would be unaffected by the proposed rezoning.

Recommendation

The Planning Board, at its public hearing of September 6, 1977, heard testimony both in favor and in opposition to the proposed rezoning. Written statements by Harvard in opposition to the petition and by the Neighborhood 9 Association in favor of the proposed rezoning were taken by the Planning Board. In addition, the Planning Board reviewed statements by Madison Street residents who expressed concern over the potential height of future development, particularly on the Madison Street edge of the petition area. The Harvard University statement opposes the proposed down-zoning because the attendant reduction in floor area ratio would prohibit the implementation of plans for future academic buildings on the Observatory site, to be constructed in addition to the proposed athletic facility.

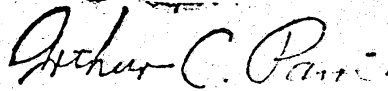
The Neighborhood 9 Association statement contained strong objections to the construction of the proposed athletic facility because of its impact on the surrounding neighborhood in terms of traffic and parking and because, after being assured of input into planning the use of the Observatory site by Radcliffe, the neighborhood was presented with a plan for an athletic facility as a fait accompli and asked to review its design only.

However, the petitioners supplied no evidence to support the proposed Residence B designation; either as being more in keeping with the existing dimensional characteristics of the area, or with allowed uses, than the existing zoning. Arguments were almost exclusively directed at Radcliffe's proposed use of the land for an athletic facility and the impact of that facility on the surrounding neighborhood.

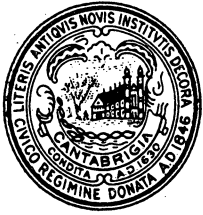
As the proposed rezoning to a Residence B designation will not prevent construction of the proposed athletic facility and as the Planning Board feels that the Residence C-2 designation which applies to more than half the petition area would allow construction of an undesirable height and bulk, it is the sense of the Planning Board that a Residence C-1 designation would be the most appropriate zoning for the petition area. Therefore, the Planning Board recommends that the City Council amend the proposed zoning designation from Residence B to Residence C-1 and that this petition be APPROVED AS AMENDED.

Very truly yours,

For the Cambridge Planning Board



Arthur C. Parris
Chairman



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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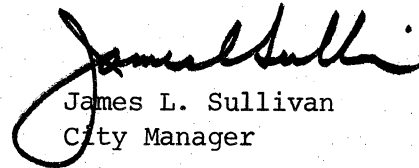
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT
JAMES L. SULLIVAN
City Manager

October 17, 1977

To the Honorable, the City Council:

I transmit herewith communication from Arthur C. Paris,
Chairman of the Cambridge Planning Board, dated October 6,
1977, relative to the Planning Board recommendation on the
petition to rezone the Observatory Hill Area.

Very truly yours,


James L. Sullivan
City Manager

JLS/b

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Re: Planning Board recommendation on the
petition to rezone the Observatory Hill area.

In City Council,
October 17, 1977

10/17/77

Referred to Ordinance
Committee