CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
PLANNING BOARD
CITY HALL ANNEX, 57 INMAN STREET, CAMBRIDGE 02139

October 4, 1977

The Honorable, the City Council

Dear Councillors:

SUBJECT: Planning Board Recommendation on a Petition to Rezone Land in the Mellen Street Area.

In accordance with Chapter 40A of the General Laws, the Planning Board held a public hearing on Tuesday, August 16, 1977 on a petition by Peter Desmond et al to rezone land generally bounded by Wendell Street, Everett Street, Oxford Street and Massachusetts Avenue from a Residence C-3 designation to a Residence C-1 designation.

1. The Character of the Wendell/Mellen Street Area

The area in question is at the southern edge of the residential section of the Agassiz Neighborhood, abutting Harvard University and Lesley College. While the area immediately to the north is essentially homogenous in residential use, scale and type of structure, with a general density of twenty-five (25) to thirty-five (35) dwelling units per acre, the Wendell/Mellen Street area has become a mix of two and three family dwellings, older three and four story apartment buildings, and institutional uses.

Given the proximity of intensive institutional uses, it was almost inevitable that this area would be among the first to undergo change. By 1960, many trends were evident in the area which have continued to date; a drop in the number of families, decreases in the number of births, school age population, and school enrollment, increases in the student and unmarried population, and large increases in rents. At present, all but fifteen of the parcels within the area proposed for rezoning are owned by the universities. Many of the universities' parcels are dormitories, several house academic uses, some are vacant and some are housing.

2. Zoning

The Wendell/Mellen Street area is presently zoned Residence C-3. The area immediately to the north is zoned Residence C-1 as the result of an earlier rezoning. The development controls of these two districts are widely disparate. Residence C-3 allows 144 units per acre with unlimited height. Residence C-1 allows 36 units per acre with a 35-foot height limit. Development interests would prefer the Residence C-3 designation to give maximum flexibility for use of their property. The petitioners are seeking a Residence C-1 designation to prevent high density, unlimited height development. The high densities permitted under Residence C-3 have allowed the conversion of many two and three family houses to apartments in the petition area. This has led to a condition where buildings have remained at C-1 scale, while densities have increased to near 70 dwelling units per acre or approximately Residence C-2 density. Given the ownership of most of the petition area, the potential for redevelopment under Residence C-3 zoning, the proximity of a low scale, low density residential neighborhood, and the inadequacy of parking and recreation facilities, there is a high probability that development at Residence C-3 heights and densities would have a very negative impact on the area.

Recommendation

The Planning Board feels that the central issue of this petition is transition between low scale residential uses as exist in the neighborhood and high density, potentially high scale institutional or commercial residential uses. To that end an effective zone of transition should be established.

It is the sense of the Planning Board that a Residence C-2 designation which carries an eighty-five (85) foot height limit and a permitted density of seventy-two (72) units per acre will allow enough development flexibility given conditions in the area yet will be more in keeping with existing density and scale and will provide an effective transition area between the Harvard Square C-3 zoning and the C-1 zoning of the residential neighborhood.

The Planning Board recommends that the Residence C-1 zoning designation requested in the petition be amended to a Residence C-2 designation and that the petition be APPROVED AS AMENDED.

Very truly yours,

For the Cambridge Planning Board

Arthur C. Parris

Arthur C. Parris
Chairman

ACP:jp

12.

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02139
Tel. 876-6800

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 4, 1977, relative to the Planning Board recommendation on a petition to rezone land in the Mellen Street area.

Very truly yours,

James L. Sullivan
City Manager

JLS/b

Agenda #12

O-51

Re: Planning Board recommendation on a petition to rezone land in the Mellen St. area.

In City Council,
October 17, 1977

10/17/77
Referred to Ordinance Committee