



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
P L A N N I N G B O A R D

CITY HALL ANNEX, 57 INMAN STREET, CAMBRIDGE 39

December 15, 1972

The Honorable, the City Council
City Hall
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

SUBJECT: Petition to Rezone Lower Cambridgeport Area

Dear Councillors:

In accordance with Chapter 40A of the General Laws, the Planning Board held a public hearing on November 28, 1972, on the petition by the Cambridgeport Planning Team and Cambridgeport Residents Union to rezone land bounded generally by or adjacent to Putnam Avenue, Memorial Drive, Pleasant Street, and Sidney Street.

On the basis of the testimony presented at the public hearing and information provided by the Planning and Development Department Staff, the Planning Board recommends that the petition be APPROVED.

1. The Pressures on Cambridge Families

The last twenty years have been significant--indeed, drastic--alterations in the composition of the Cambridge population. Some trends are more obvious than others, for example: the influx of students and young people; the pressures on low-and moderate-income families and persons to leave the City; the decrease in blue collar employment; the pressures on the elderly. At least as important to the future of Cambridge is a trend that transcends income or employment groups: the decline of the City as a place of residence for families with children.

- A. Recent Trends - Families are leaving Cambridge at a precipitous rate. In 1950 family households comprised 87% of all households; by 1970 this figure had dropped to 57%. During the same period the number of non-family households has tripled. Between 1960 and 1970 the percentage of married persons has dropped 10%. During the same period the elementary school enrollment has decreased by over 25%.

B. These figures indicate beyond a doubt that Cambridge is rapidly losing its appeal as a family environment. The City is increasingly the home of students and young people, the childless couple, the single, and the wealthy.

C. Cambridge as a Family Environment. Despite the breadth and intensity of the forces which are altering the composition of the City's population, the Board feels not only that public actions can effectively blunt some of these forces, but also that such actions will be absolutely necessary for the future well-being of Cambridge. The Board finds the loss of families particularly distressing: the existence of a core of families with children is critical to the long-run economic, social, and political stability of any community. This family segment is one which has received little public attention in Cambridge during the last decade--as the trends indicate. Cambridge cannot afford to permit this state of affairs to continue.

2. Zoning and Family Needs

To the extent that zoning affects the frequency, distribution, and intensity of land uses throughout the City, zoning interacts with the needs of families in a multitude of ways. However, zoning has its most direct impact on the suitability of a family environment in two respects: zoning plays a significant role in (1) the provision and preservation of housing units suitable for families with children and (2) determining the general character of the neighborhood environment. Families with children must of course have housing units of sufficient size to accommodate their higher activity levels. But even a unit of satisfactory size is not enough; the unit must be located in a relatively low activity neighborhood that affords a reasonable degree of open space and houses a number of similar constituted households--i.e., other families with children.

In Cambridge the "protection" issue is more critical than the "provision" issue. Most of the City was developed in the 19th Century in a pattern of working and middle class family-type neighborhoods. Only in the last decade have pressures grown to the extent that both the physical and sociological character of many of these neighborhoods has already been altered considerably and the suitability as family environments threatened with extinction. In several neighborhoods zoning has contributed to this situation by implicitly encouraging pressures for redevelopment and conversion to higher densities. In those areas where densities permitted by the Zoning Ordinance are substantially higher than existing densities, such pressures are inevitable. This is the case in the petition under consideration.

3. The Character of the Cambridgeport Neighborhood

The lower Cambridgeport Neighborhood was originally developed in predominately one, two and three-family structures. Although the housing types indicate that a variety of income groups were served within a relatively small area, the neighborhood nevertheless was oriented towards families with children. With its location between Harvard and MIT, it was inevitable that this neighborhood would be among the first to undergo changes. By 1960 many trends were evident, and these have continued to date: a drop in the number of families, decreases in the number of births, children, and school enrollment, increases in the student and unmarried population, drastic increases in rents.

Despite the pressures, until recently there has been comparatively little redevelopment. Thus the area has maintained its characteristics of moderate density and low scale, with a supply of units suitable for families with children. Redevelopment has been postponed because: there is almost no vacant land and the parcels are small, making land assembly difficult; reluctance of many owner occupants to sell to developers, despite high offers; relatively high permitted densities have led to conversions which in turn have satisfied some of the increased housing demand; "apartment stuffing" has permitted high rentals without conversion of redevelopment. Thus the Cambridgeport Neighborhood has managed to preserve some elements of a family environment in spite of the variety of external forces acting upon it.

4. The Logic of C-1

Existing zoning in the Cambridgeport Neighborhood is predominately C-1, with Business A and Industrial B on the borders of the residential areas. The general density of this area is 25 to 35 units per acre. The C-1 zoning in an area of C-1 structural characteristics has acted as a hedge against the forces that are acting to discourage family occupancy.

C-2 zoning permits a density for 72 dwelling units per acre, with a height of 85 feet (nine stories). The issue of family housing aside, the Board questions the capability of this area to accommodate such a density--double that now existing. The streets are uniformly narrow; parking is already an impossible situation; recreation facilities are inadequate to serve the present population level. In sum, the Planning Board cannot condone a "Harvard Street apartment environment" in the Cambridgeport Neighborhood.

5. The Property Value Issue

A complex issue in any "down-zoning" is the impact on property values. Some owners will argue that the loss of development potential will reduce property value--meaning the value of the land for redevelopment is adversely affected. On the other hand, the protection afforded a residential neighborhood by zoning that preserves existing character is also translatable into "property value"-- particularly in Cambridge where speculative, redevelopment pressures are at work in many neighborhoods. The Board feels that these forces will tend to cancel out one another; in other words, property values will not be substantially affected in either direction. The other issues involved in the proposed zoning change are, in the Board's mind, more significant.

6. Recommendation

The Board feels that the preservation of family environments should be a principal objective of Cambridge. They represent a scarce commodity that the City cannot afford to lose. The proposed rezoning for C-2 to C-1 will contribute to this end.

The attendance and evidence presented at the public hearing indicated that discussion of the zoning change was extensive within the neighborhood. The petition appeared to be a broadly based neighborhood effort. Support for the petition was nearly unanimous among the large audience.

The Planning Board recommends that the petition be APPROVED.

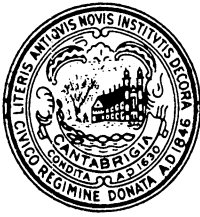
Very truly yours,

For the Cambridge Planning Board



Arthur C. Parris
Chairman

ACP:jw



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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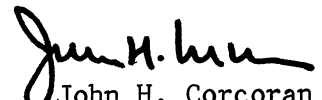
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT
JOHN H. CORCORAN
City Manager

January 15, 1973

To the Honorable, the City Council,

I transmit herewith recommendations from the Planning Board relative to the petition to rezone Lower Cambridgeport area.

Yours truly,


John H. Corcoran
City Manager

JHC/m

Agenda #1.

recommendation from Planning Board Re:
to the petition to rezone lower
Cambridgeport area.

In City Council

January 15, 1973

1/15/73
Reported to the Council
on Ordinances for
Hearing -