



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date: June 7, 2016

Subject: Riverside Neighborhood Protective Zoning Petition

Recommendation: The Planning Board does NOT RECOMMEND adoption.

To the Honorable, the City Council,

On May 24, 2016, the Board held a hearing on the Riverside Neighborhood Protective Zoning Petition to rezone a portion of the neighborhood currently zoned Residence C-1 to Residence C. The Board heard testimony from the petitioners and from neighborhood residents and community members both in support of and opposed to the petition, and also received information from the Community Development Department (CDD) analyzing the anticipated impacts of the proposed rezoning. The Board offers the following comments.

The effect of changing the zoning designation from Residence C-1 to Residence C would be to decrease the allowed Floor Area Ratio (FAR) and dwelling unit density limitations for all lots, and to increase the open space requirement (which includes usable private open space and permeable open space) from a total of 30% to 36% of lot area. According to the analysis provided by CDD, about 60% of the lots affected by the petition already exceed the Residence C-1 FAR and density limitations, and about 80% would exceed the limitations of Residence C. For this reason, the Board believes that the proposed change would be overly restrictive and would prevent most property owners from making even small changes that would be in keeping with the prevailing character of the neighborhood. Given the housing pressures facing Cambridge and the region and the different measures the City has decided to take, including allowing accessory units in all neighborhoods and increasing housing density in some areas, it seems inconsistent at this time to “downzone” a particular residential neighborhood where the current regulations are already restricting what changes can be made.

Some of the testimony heard by the Planning Board focused on the impact of construction in the yard spaces of existing homes. While the Board is sensitive to these impacts, Board members would also note that these spaces are private property, and that property owners are entitled to make decisions based on clear and consistent regulations about what they can and cannot do.

Much of the comment heard by the Board focused on neighbors’ negative reaction to projects that have had an unappealing visual character, which is an issue that zoning cannot resolve because zoning does not directly regulate architectural style. To address this issue, the Board strongly suggests consideration of the Neighborhood Conservation District model, as it has been implemented in Mid-Cambridge and some other areas. Under this model, zoning restrictions

would continue to apply, but proposed new construction or alterations would also need to be reviewed by a commission made up of neighborhood residents to determine whether they are appropriate to the character of the neighborhood.

In a Neighborhood Conservation District Commission review, consideration would be given to matters such as the arrangement of massing, location of windows and other exterior features, relationship to neighbors, and architectural detail. Such review takes place at a public hearing at which neighbors can provide input. Based on experience in other neighborhoods, Board members believe that this process can result in improved designs for new buildings and alterations, as well as discouraging speculative buyers who may be seeking opportunities to tear down existing homes and build larger projects expeditiously. By allowing property owners the existing development rights under zoning, but providing a process to address issues related to design and neighborhood character, Board members believe this approach could provide a “win-win” solution for both supporters and opponents of this particular petition.

For the above reasons, the Board recommends that the Council not adopt the zoning petition that is currently under consideration.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,



H Theodore Cohen, Chair.