



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date: June 7, 2017

Subject: Observatory Hill Village (Mahon, et al.) Zoning Petition

Recommendation: The Planning Board does NOT RECOMMEND adoption.

To the Honorable, the City Council,

On May 16, 2017, the Planning Board held a public hearing on this petition by Cambridge residents to create a new “Observatory Hill Village Overlay District” covering the area currently zoned Business A-1 in the segment of Concord Avenue between Walden Street and Huron Avenue. This overlay district would apply an additional set of development and use standards to the area, including requiring one of a range of non-residential uses at the ground floor, modifying some front, side, and rear yard setback requirements, allowing a limited exemption of gross floor area (GFA) for residential projecting bays, and modifying some height limitations for mixed-use buildings with residential above retail. The Board received a presentation by representatives of the petitioners and City Councillor Dennis Carlone, reviewed material provided by CDD staff, and heard testimony from members of the public, including residents of the area and some owners of property in the district.

The Board agrees with the petitioners that this area is unique and worthy of special attention, given its strong interplay of residential and commercial uses serving a range of community needs within a village-like atmosphere. The Board also agrees that retail in this area is delicate, as it is in many parts of the City, given the current economic climate and the ongoing changes in the public’s patronage of brick and mortar retail stores. The Board agrees that it is crucial to employ strategies to preserve and support continued retail vibrancy where possible. Overall, the Board strongly supports the goals that have been set forth by the petitioners in their submission.

While the Board endorses the petition’s goals, the Board’s main concern is that the proposed zoning requirements do not seem to effectively serve these goals, because they primarily add restrictions to an area that already has strict zoning limitations. In the Board’s experience, since retail uses (particularly small-scale, local retail that is valued by the community) have to compete against other, often more economically viable land uses, additional zoning restrictions can discourage retail uses as an alternative to other use options. Rather than increasing the zoning restrictions in the area, the Board recommends the consideration of incentives, specials permits or other flexibility in zoning that would make retail uses more favorable and desirable to property owners when they are considering their land use options.

The Board also finds that there are aspects of the petition in need of clarification, including determining the exact area that is affected and the circumstances under which the different sets of dimensional requirements (base or overlay) would apply. The Board felt that the petition's overlay of restrictions is too complex, and that the petition would benefit from simplification and from a consolidation of the multiple layers of requirements and restrictions.

The Board does not favor the petition in its current form, but strongly encourages the petitioners to continue to work with the City to consider revisions to the proposal that would make it a more effective tool in preserving and strengthening the mixed-use vibrancy that characterizes this area. The Board would welcome the opportunity to review a revised submission if the Council wishes to proceed in this manner.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "H Theodore Cohen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "H" and a distinct "C" at the end.

H Theodore Cohen, Chair.