



OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS  
**PLANNING BOARD**

HALL ANNEX, 57 INMAN STREET, CAMBRIDGE 02139

Case No. PB-21

NOTICE OF DECISION (summary)

In reference to the petition of the Cambridge Housing Authority (CHA) for a multi-family Special Permit to allow 175 dwelling units on the premises at the block bounded by Harvard, Portland, Washington, and Windsor Streets known as Washington Elms, Cambridge, Mass; the the petition has been GRANTED with the following conditions.

1. The development will include 175 dwelling units, approximately 236,145 square feet of gross floor area, and contain a floor area ratio of approximately .65. Any changes to the above or otherwise shall be reviewed by the Planning Board.
2. Washington Street, a private street owned by the CHA, shall remain a one-way street.
3. All proposed trees shall be a minimum three inch (3") caliper at the time of planting.
4. New curb cuts along Windsor and Harvard Streets will require City Council approval.
5. Only those variances and special permits cited in the complete decision shall be permitted.

A copy of the complete decision has been filed with the Office of the City Clerk on 11/24/81. Appeals, if any, shall be made pursuant to Section 17, Chapter 40A, Mass. General Laws and shall be filed within twenty days after the date of filing of such notice (11/24/81) in the office of the City Clerk.

*Elizabeth McCarthy*  
Elizabeth McCarthy  
Secretary to the  
Planning Board



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS  
**PLANNING BOARD**

CITY HALL ANNEX, 57 INMAN STREET, CAMBRIDGE 02139

CASE NO.: PB-21  
PREMISES: Block bounded by Harvard, Portland, Washington,  
and Windsor Streets  
ZONING DISTRICT: Residence C-1  
PETITIONER: Cambridge Housing Authority (CHA)  
APPLICATION DATE: 8/31/81  
PUBLIC HEARING DATE: 9/22/81  
PETITION: Section 4.25 Multi-Family Special Permit for  
175 Dwelling Units  
DATE OF PLANNING BOARD DECISION: October 6, 1981

Petition

The petitioners propose to develop 175 multi-family dwelling units on a site (known as Washington Elms) containing approximately 8.3 acres. The site currently contains over 300 units. While some of the dwellings are still occupied most are vacant and/or boarded up. The proposal calls for the major reconstruction of the interior of the buildings with some minor exterior work. Two of the current buildings (#3 and #18) will be razed. Another building (#14) will also be demolished but a community building will be constructed in its place.

Documents

1. In support of the petition, the architects, Gelardin, Bruner, and Cott, submitted on behalf of the applicant required materials, data, and site plan (received by the CDD on 8/31/81).
2. On September 18, 1981 Gelardin, Bruner, and Cott (GBC) submitted to the CDD additional elevations and floor plans for the proposed Community Building.
3. On September 21, 1981, GBC submitted to the CDD a revised site plan showing a new parking layout and design for the closure of Washington Street.

4. At the public hearing of 9/22/81, GBC submitted two additional revised site plans showing different parking and Washington Street closure design.
5. GBC also submitted a revised site plan dated 9/17/81 and building types plan dated 8/31/81 to the CDD on 9/28/81.
6. Finally, GBC submitted an additional site plan dated 10/1/81 and received by the CDD on 10/6/81 showing another design for Washington Street.

#### The Public Hearing

Mr. Fred Putnam, Cambridge Housing Authority, outlined the general history of the project leading to the current proposal to substantially rehabilitate all but three of the existing buildings on the site. Severe management and tenant problems could only be solved, it was felt, if such major reconstruction were undertaken. Mr. Lee Cott, Architect for the Authority, listed the several objectives which have served to shape the redesign of the project:

1. To transform the appearance of the complex to more resemble townhouses.
2. To improve access to units by eliminating internal hallways and to increase the units' average size.
3. To create a public and a private side to each building or group of buildings.

Mr. Eric Pfeufer, Gelardin, Bruner, Cott, Inc. reviewed the various variances which would be required. The variances fall into two categories. The first are those resulting from the existing placement of buildings which were constructed under earlier zoning controls. The second are as a result of the proposed changes and they are quite modest: (a) encroachment of stairways into the setbacks required and (b) various violations of the parking requirements.

#### Questions and Comments by Board Members

Mr. Kennedy suggested that demolition of the existing buildings and construction of new housing might offer an opportunity to create a much more imaginative design and site layout. The architects responded that the quality of the buildings is good and with the money available masonry buildings could not be duplicated today.

#### Citizen Questions and Comments

Mr. William Noble and others expressed general disapproval of the demolition of housing stock in the development when a severe housing shortage exists in the city today.

Robert LaTremouille questioned the safety of large flights of exterior stairs. Such stairs have been successfully used in Boston according to Mr. Putnam. Florence West of the Tenants Council indicated that the residents have generally opposed demolition of buildings and have favored more units than proposed on the application. The Council has, nevertheless, agreed to the general details of the proposal as presented with the hope that additional units might be added through agreement with the Housing Authority.

## Findings

In accordance with Subsection 10.43 of the Zoning Ordinance, criteria for special permits, the Board makes the following findings:

1. There are a number of existing violations and some new infractions created by this proposal which will preclude conformance with some of the requirements of this Ordinance. However, the Board finds that such violations will not be to the detriment of the public interest as will be discussed.
2. Traffic generated should not cause any congestion, hazard or substantial negative change in established neighborhood character. In fact, traffic patterns at the site and in the immediate area should improve due to a decrease in total number of dwelling units and provision for some on-site parking. The Board further finds that the proposed six (6) front yard parking spaces along Portland Street (delineated on the first submitted site plan, received by the CDD on 8/31/81) are not safe and should be removed or relocated elsewhere.
3. The continued operation of or the development of adjacent uses as allowed by the Zoning Ordinance should not be adversely affected by the nature of the proposed use. The proposed development itself should not cause any nuisance or hazard or be detrimental to the health, safety and/or welfare of the occupants of the proposed use or the citizens of the City. The proposed development should enhance what is now a blighted area by the addition of landscaping, a reduction in density, and provision for some on-site parking.
4. The proposed development will not impair the integrity of the district or adjoining districts and should not derogate from the intent and purpose of this Ordinance.

The Board further finds, based on additional criteria for multi-family developments (sub-subsection 10.464), that:

5. The existing site contains few distinguishable key features as it is primarily surfaced with asphalt. However, existing trees will be preserved and, as mentioned, new landscaping will be replacing some of the asphalt.
6. The only new building, the community building, will slightly exceed the height of existing dwellings by about 7-8 feet and as such will not overwhelm the existing buildings. The addition of landscaping, benches, game tables, play areas, and brick paving will provide visual and functional improvements.
7. Except as cited in finding #2 above, parking areas should be safe and convenient. Handicapped spaces will be provided near the units they are intended to serve.

8. The interior and perimeter of the two larger parking areas containing 18 and 16 parking spaces respectively are adequately landscaped and screened (as indicated on the site plan submitted to the CDD on 10/6/81 and dated 10/1/81).
9. Based on the information provided to the CDD by Jim Rice of the City Engineer's office, Washington Street between Windsor and Portland Streets is currently owned by the CHA.
10. The development will include 175 dwelling units, approximately 236,145 sq. ft. of gross floor area, and contain a floor ratio of approximately .65, (15 dwellings x 14,623 sq. ft. of GFA per building; plus 11,000 sq. ft. of total basement GFA, plus 5800 sq. ft. of GFA for community building).
11. The applicants request approval for a number of variances and special permits which customarily require review and approval by the Board of Zoning Appeal. Under the authority of Section 10.45, the Planning Board can review and approve such requests (see the "DECISION" section of this document below for specific Planning Board actions and details regarding the above).

#### DECISION

Based on the public hearing held on 9/22/81, staff review, and the findings presented above, the Planning Board voted unanimously (6-0) to GRANT a special permit with the following conditions:

1. The applicants' plans shall remain substantially as approved including any modifications required herein. Minor changes may be allowed by the Planning Board subsequent to this approval without requiring notice and public hearing. Major changes shall require application for another special permit. The Board shall have final say on determining what shall be considered a minor or major modification.
2. The applicant shall certify to the CDD that the City Fire Department approves of the new design for Washington Street and other emergency access points prior to the filing of this decision in the City Clerk's Office.
3. The one way sign shall be retained at the corner of Windsor and Washington Streets. The proposed new curved portion (actual traveled way) of Washington Street just southwest of the community building, shall be the same width as the rest of Washington Street between Windsor & Washington Streets (approx. 26').
4. All proposed trees as indicated on the site plan of 9/17/81 shall be a minimum of 3" caliper.
5. New curb cuts along city streets (Windsor and Harvard) will also require City Council approval.

- 6. The applicant shall submit information concerning the per unit cost of the development and supporting data which shall be made part of the official file. The Board was particularly interested in this information since the size of units varied and the development involved the rehabilitation of existing structures.
- 7. Under the authority of Subsection 10.45, the Planning Board grants the following variances:

A.

<u>5.31</u>	<u>Front yard setbacks</u>	<u>Existing</u>	<u>Required</u>	<u>Granted</u>
<u>Harvard St.</u>	Bldg. #1	4'	10'	0'*
	2	5.5'	10'	5.5'
	4	9'	10'	9'*
	5	10'	10'	5'*
	7	10.5'	10'	5'*
	8	9.5'	10'	0'
<u>Windsor St.</u>	Bldg. #8	8'	10'	8'*
	9	9'	10'	0'*
	10	9'	10'	0'

\*This violation will be increased because of the addition of new unenclosed stairs which must meet the setback requirements. See 5.242.

<u>Washington St., front yard setback</u>			
<u>Community Building</u>	N.A.	19.8'	16'*

\*measured from the edge of the proposed parking area (southwest of community bldg.) to the closest portion of such building as depicted on site plan dated 10/1/81 and submitted to the CDD on 10/6/81.

- B. The smaller groupings of parking spaces along Harvard, Windsor and Washington streets generally do not provide a transition (change in ground material or paving) from such spaces to sidewalks. The Board grants a variance for this violation (6.477).
- C. 6.47, Screening - Most of the aforementioned parking spaces (discussed in "B" above) are not effectively screened from abutting streets. Since these spaces are located at the street line, it is practically impossible to provide such screening. The Board grants a variance for this violation.
- D. 6.441(c), Setbacks for on-grade, open parking - Most of the parking spaces along the street (discussed above in "C") and some in the larger lot containing 16 spaces in the northeast part of the site are located in required front yards. The Board grants a variance for this violation.
- E. 6.48, Landscaping - The lot containing 7 spaces at the northwest part of the site contains no interior landscaping. The Board grants a variance for this violation.
- F. 8.22(e), Alteration of nonconforming structures - A variance is required because setback violations will be increased as outlined above in "A". The Board grants a variance for this violation.

With regard to the variances granted above as outlined in 7, A-F, the Board finds that an improved site plan will result and there should be no detrimental impact on abutting properties, the occupants of the proposed development, or the citizens of Cambridge in general.

8. Under the authority of subsection 10.45, the Planning Board grants the following special permits:

A. 6.35, Reduced parking - The site currently contains no off-street parking facilities. The applicants' proposal calls for 98 parking spaces including 69 off-street and 29 along Washington Street, a private street owned by the CHA. Clearly, this provision for parking will be a major improvement over existing conditions. In addition, based upon testimony given at the hearing by the CHA and some of the Washington Elms tenants, a case can be made for reduced parking. The applicants maintain that reduced parking is desirable to discourage the use of parking lots as "hang-outs" and/or places for "outsiders" to leave or work on their cars or dump debris. Furthermore, it was argued that less parking would allow for more open space. The tenants also maintain that many occupants of Washington Elms simply cannot afford an automobile and as such less parking is necessary. The Board finds then that such lesser amount of parking will provide positive environmental and other benefits as well. The Board also finds that due to occupancy restrictions, there will likely be a lower level of auto usage (6.354) and that the Kendall Square and Central Square MBTA stations are relatively short distances away (6.351). In sum, the Board determines that reduced parking will not cause excessive congestion, endanger public safety or otherwise adversely impact the neighborhood.

<u>6.35 Reduced Parking</u>	<u>Existing</u>	<u>Required</u>	<u>Granted</u>
	0	172	98*

\* 69 off-street and 29 on private street.

B. 6.435(b), Increased curb-cut width - The Board finds that increased curb cuts will not impede traffic or endanger the safety of the occupants or abutters. As such the Board grants a special permit as follows:

<u>6.433(a) Curb Cut Widths</u>	<u>Required</u>	<u>Granted</u> *
	20' max.	9 curb cuts exceed required width

\* As delineated on the site plan dated 10/1/81 and submitted by GBC to the CDD on 10/6/81.

- C. 6.441(a), Setbacks for on-grade, open parking - A number of parking spaces are located less than 10' from dwellings with windows at first story level. The Board grants a special permit (6.441g.) for this but with a condition that landscaping be added in such areas (between parking spaces and building) wherever possible.

Respectfully submitted,

For the Planning Board

*Arthur C. Parris*  
Arthur C. Parris  
Chairman

Attest: A true and correct copy of the decision filed with the Office of the City Clerk on 11/24/81 by Max A. Levee authorized representative of the Cambridge Planning Board. Twenty days have elapsed since the date of filing this decision.

No appeal has been filed \_\_\_\_\_.  
Appeal filed and dismissed or denied \_\_\_\_\_.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
City Clerk, City of Cambridge