



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

# PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date: July 13, 2018

Subject: Douglas Brown, et al., Zoning Petition

Recommendation: The Planning Board does NOT RECOMMEND adoption.

To the Honorable, the City Council,

The Planning Board held a public hearing on the Douglas Brown, et al., Zoning Petition, on June 26, 2018. This petition proposes to amend the extents and requirements of the Flood Plain Overlay District in Section 20.70 of the Zoning Ordinance and to create a new Section 22.80 entitled "Green Factor." The Board heard a presentation from petitioners, reviewed information from staff, and received written and oral testimony from many community members. The hearing concluded with the Board voting not to recommend adoption of the zoning petition.

The Board acknowledges that climate change is a global, national, regional, and local problem. The impacts of climate change, including increased heat and flood risk, are real concerns that need to be addressed. These impacts create risks for many developed areas of Cambridge, some of which contain sites that are likely to experience redevelopment, and there is a need to formulate strategies to protect existing and new buildings in the future. In its review of recent projects, the Board has incorporated standards recommended by City staff when considering flood risk mitigation, such as employing the City's 2070 projected flood elevations. In the Board's experience, developers and property owners also have an interest in mitigating climate change risks in order to protect the large investments they are making into their properties.

The Board greatly appreciates the work done by the petitioners, who have shown tremendous concern for the community and have helped to start a conversation that is important to advance given the urgency of this problem. The Board also appreciates the civil dialogue that took place at the public hearing, where many different points of view were expressed. However, the Board does not support moving forward with this particular proposal at this time.

Generally, Board members expressed concerns about the prohibitive and far-reaching scope of the petition, which would create many new requirements for almost half the parcels in the city. Some Board members were concerned about the lack of clarity as to what areas would be included or not included in the proposed Flood Plain Overlay District. Board members were also concerned about requiring Planning Board review for what would otherwise amount to minor construction or renovations, but leaving out 1-3 family homes. Board members questioned whether using the 2070 projected 500-year flood elevation was excessive, and whether restricting new development on streets that had anticipated flood risks would effectively pause all development in many places. Some Board members noted that large required setbacks, while

beneficial at some level, would not always be feasible and would reduce the land that could be built on, diminishing the capacity for affordable housing and other uses needed to support the economic and general well-being of the community. Board members acknowledged that it was difficult to predict or fully understand all of the consequences and impacts of the proposed petition, but most felt that it was hard to dismiss the testimony of developers, including affordable housing developers, who described the significant detrimental impact the petition would have on their projects.

Moreover, Board members recognized that the City has invested significant time and resources into studying this issue through the Climate Change Preparedness and Resiliency (CCPR) plan, which will inform the broader Envision Cambridge comprehensive plan as well as the earlier-phase Envision Alewife plan. As Board members noted during the latest Envision Cambridge update, that process will result in many different objectives and potential actions that will need to be prioritized, and it might not be appropriate to pull out one topic to be addressed separately from the others. Board members understand that these complex planning processes take time, and some members acknowledged that the Envision Cambridge process will proceed even if particular issues of concern are acted upon sooner. However, on the whole, it is the preference of the Board to follow the ongoing planning processes to their conclusions, so that they can be used to weigh and balance priorities for future development. Board members also raised concern that the time and attention needed to properly address the specific proposals included in this petition could divert resources from completing the planning processes that are currently underway.

The Board hopes that the advocacy and support for this issue will not go to waste; and believes that in the interim some aspects of this petition could be utilized in the review of new and pending projects. Existing language in the Zoning Ordinance, such as the Citywide Urban Design Objectives, allows the Planning Board to investigate a broad range of issues through project review. Using the example of the Board's current incorporation of 2070 projected flood elevations, the Board could ask questions about urban heat island mitigation, flood protection, green infrastructure, tree canopy, and other issues mentioned in the petition and in the City's ongoing studies. Board members expressed a particular interest in learning more about the full range of urban heat island mitigation strategies and their impacts, and several Board members identified the "Green Factor" score as an idea that could be used informally now to collect information and study the feasibility and impact of different mitigation measures.

In conclusion, the Board hopes that this petition can be a starting point for further discussion, and can be studied together with the CCPR and Envision Cambridge processes, with input from the City Engineer and Conservation Commission, in order to craft a zoning approach that will address the relevant issues without unduly impacting other city planning objectives.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,



H Theodore Cohen, Chair.