



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

# PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date: June 7, 2016

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Subject: Rainwater Separation from Flat Roofs Zoning Petition

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Recommendation: The Planning Board does NOT RECOMMEND adoption.

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To the Honorable, the City Council,

On May 24, 2016, the Board held a hearing on this City Council zoning petition, which would create a new Section 5.55 in the Zoning Ordinance to allow limited modifications to dimensional requirements (including FAR and height) by special permit from the Board of Zoning Appeal for improvements to buildings with flat or concave roofs that would result in disconnecting rooftop drainage connections from the public combined sewer system.

The Board heard a presentation from Councillor Craig Kelley and discussed the proposal. No other members of the public appeared to testify. The Board also received material in support of the proposal by Nicolai Cauchy. The Board had heard a version of this proposal, with slight differences, in 2013, and received materials from the Community Development Department (CDD) and Department of Public Works (DPW) that were prepared at that time along with the Planning Board's prior negative recommendation on that proposal.

At this time, the Board finds merit in some aspects of the proposal. Given the age of the housing stock and the desire among families in Cambridge to make use of existing homes, there is some benefit to providing a mechanism by which people can make better use of available space, including, in some cases, rooftop space. It is also true that there is some environmental benefit to disconnecting drain connections from the combined sewer, although the material previously provided by DPW indicates that such benefit is modest in comparison to certain other infrastructure improvements that are required of the City. Councillor Kelley noted that the improvements envisioned in this proposal can also allow for better removal of snow and ice from roofs.

However, the Board has several concerns about this proposal. The primary concern is that allowing the addition of a partial story to a building would create significant value for one group of property owners, that is not necessarily balanced by the benefit to the public. The Board also questioned whether the City should prefer and essentially reward this one group of property owners over other property owners who might propose different environmentally beneficial renovations to their properties. If the Council wished to consider allowing homeowners more flexibility to add space to existing buildings in return for environmentally beneficial renovations, there should be a broader consideration of the types of public benefits that could be achieved

through such allowances. If environmental sustainability is a focus, consideration should be given to the objectives of the Net Zero Action Plan and Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment, which aim to address the causes and expected impacts of climate change. Housing affordability is also a major City goal that might be taken into account when considering where greater zoning flexibility might be justified.

In addition, Board members have some concerns about allowing additional height to these particular buildings, as the three-decker is a pervasive and iconic development form in many neighborhoods, and the allowance of an additional story may disrupt that prevailing character. The change to the petition from the 2013 version, which now requires a step-back of the partial story from existing roof edges, helps to address this concern somewhat. However, it is difficult to determine where such additions would or would not be appropriate, and where they might be objectionable to neighbors who would not be entitled to the same benefit if their homes do not have flat roofs and central drain lines.

In conclusion, while the Board is generally supportive of approaches that might allow greater zoning flexibility for homeowners in exchange for making their homes more environmentally sensitive, Board members believe that more consideration is needed to determine what specific public objectives would be best served by allowing property owners to increase the usability and value of their homes, and to determine a fair way to balance the expected private benefit with those public objectives.

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 long horizontal stroke at the end.

H Theodore Cohen, Chair.