



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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November 1, 2016

To: Reservoir Hill Neighborhood Conservation District
and Historic District Study Committees

From: Charles Sullivan and Sarah Burks

Re: Goals and Guidelines

This is a first attempt at a rationale for enacting protective measures for the Reservoir Hill neighborhood, and for establishing goals and regulations for a potential neighborhood conservation district. This is intended as a starting point for discussion amongst the study committees about what measures are appropriate for this area.

Rationale for Protective Measures

The Reservoir Hill neighborhood occupies the sunny southward slope of a glacial moraine that separates Fresh Pond from the Charles River. Developed beginning in the 1850s, it is characterized by substantial homes originally intended for families of middle class professionals, academics, and business people. The houses on Brewster Street and Riedesel Avenue that were built as rentals are no less desirable than the larger homes on large lots that populate the rest of the area. Many homes were designed by notable architects and are considered significant for their design and/or their associations with notable figures in history. The neighborhood is a natural extension of Brattle Street, long the most prestigious address in Cambridge, and is clearly distinguishable from the streetcar suburban neighborhoods on the north slope of the hill.

The Reservoir Hill neighborhood is vulnerable to demolition and inappropriate alteration of its significant houses. As in many areas of Cambridge, property values have risen precipitously. In some cases the land is more valuable than the structure occupying it. Some houses have proven vulnerable to demolition as abutting owners seek to expand their properties; others, especially the Modern-period houses built in the 1960s, no longer appeal to contemporary tastes. Despite having the strictest zoning in Cambridge, many lots still exhibit substantial development potential – with or without their present structures.

Inappropriate design, whether new construction or alterations, may also be a significant issue. Speculative builders may pose a particular threat to the character of the neighborhood. Zoning regulations are quantitative, and may not provide sufficient setback, height and bulk controls to

protect neighborhood character, quite apart from design review of fenestration, materials and the like.

Historic District Protection

Reservoir Hill is adjacent to the Old Cambridge Historic District, which was established in 1963 under Chapter 40C of the Massachusetts General Laws and subsequently expanded several times. Historic district protection means that no publicly visible exterior alteration, demolition, or construction may take place without the Cambridge Historical Commission first having determined that the project is “appropriate” or at least “not incongruous” with the structure or its surroundings. A few exemptions from review are permitted by the statute; these include temporary structures or signs, terraces, walks or driveways, storm windows, walls and fences, color of paint and roofs, and other categories of exterior architectural features as may be later determined by the commission. The Cambridge Historical Commission regulates all of these features in the Old Cambridge Historic District except storm windows. An extension of the District could maintain the same protections, or a new Reservoir Hill Historic District could have different provisions under MGL Ch. 40C.

Neighborhood Conservation District Protection

Neighborhood conservation district provisions are drawn to address the specific characteristics and vulnerabilities of their neighborhoods. The NCD Study Committee’s role is to identify these characteristics to guide the preparation of the Order establishing the district. CHC staff propose the following goals and objectives for consideration:

I. Goals

The Reservoir Hill neighborhood is characterized by 19th and 20th century residences of significant architectural quality sited in a cohesive pedestrian-friendly neighborhood of pleasant streetscapes, abundant mature trees and plantings, and vistas through to surrounding properties. The neighborhood contains several National Register-listed properties. The generous size of the neighborhood’s lots and buildings contains potential for subdivision, new construction, and additions, which could alter or diminish the qualities and characteristics that render the neighborhood an attractive and desirable place in which to live. A Reservoir Hill Neighborhood Conservation District could be established for the following purposes:

- to preserve, conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the District’s architecture and streetscape,
- to improve the quality of its environment,
- to establish a process for accommodating changes to properties in the District,
- to ensure that additions and alterations to properties are compatible with the character of the District,
- to offer a forum for neighborhood dialogue about changes to properties in the District,
- to provide technical assistance to District property owners on issues of conservation and preservation,
- to foster wider public appreciation of the District, and
- to promote the public welfare by making the District a more attractive and desirable place in which to live.

II. Jurisdiction

As provided in the NCD enabling ordinance, Ch. 2.78 Article III of the Cambridge Municipal Code, the jurisdiction of an NCD commission extends to the review and approval of construction, demolition, or alteration that affects the exterior architectural features, other than color of any properties within the district.

Exterior architectural features as defined in the ordinance, “means and includes such portion of the exterior of a structure as is open to view from a public street, way, park or body of water, including but not limited to the architectural style and general arrangement and setting thereof, the kind, material and texture of exterior building materials, and the type and style of windows, doors, lights, signs and other appurtenant exterior fixtures.”

The Commission may impose dimensional and setback requirements in addition to those required by applicable provision of the zoning ordinance.

III. Exempted from Review

The authority of the Commission shall not extend to the following categories of structures or exterior architectural features and such structures or features may be constructed or altered without review by the Commission upon the issuance of a certificate of nonapplicability by staff.

1. Interior arrangements and alterations.
2. The repair or replacement in-kind (matching profiles, dimensions, and materials) of deteriorated exterior architectural features such as the cornice, fascia, soffit, decking, steps, shutters, asphalt/composite roofing shingles, gutters, clapboards, shingles, window casings and trim, or any other decorative element as determined in consultation with Commission staff. Alternative materials that match the appearance, profiles, and dimensions of the original material may be substituted in specific instances. (Staff is developing a guideline re: use of alternative materials)
3. The construction of terraces, walks, driveways, sidewalks, and similar structures that do not involve a change in grade level and that are not to be used for parking between the principal front wall plane of a building, or principal front and side wall planes of a building that occupies a corner property, and the street.
4. The construction of walls and fences four feet or less in height as measured from the sidewalk or existing immediately adjacent grade and located between the principal front wall plane of a building, or the principal front and side walls of a building that occupies a corner property, and the street, so long as they are not made of non-paintable extruded hollow vinyl or other highly reflective non-natural material. Walls and fences six feet or less in height elsewhere on a property shall not be subject to review.
5. The installation of solar panels on the roof of a building that project no further than 64” off the surface of the roof, are parallel to the roof plane, (see future guideline re: below ridge line, setback at least 6” from sides of roof, symmetrical arrangement if possible, etc.)
6. The installation of flush-mounted flat profile skylights that do not (in combination with existing skylights) cover more than 30% of the surface area of the roof plane on which they are located,

7. Temporary signs, temporary structures, lawn statuary, or recreational equipment, subject to such conditions as to duration of use, dimension, location, lighting, removal and similar matters as the Commission may reasonably specify.
8. Storm doors and windows, half-screens, and window air conditioners.
9. Pad mounted HVAC equipment that ~~are~~is not located forward of the front wall plane of a house and the street or within a zoning setback and that are screened from public view with plantings and/or with fencing measuring 4' high or less.
10. Utility meters in a manner that is screened from public view by dense or evergreen vegetation.
11. The construction of a one-story accessory building, which ~~that~~ is not to be used for the automobile parking or storage of automobiles, measures less than ~~150~~100 square feet, and ~~that~~ is not ~~to be~~ located within a zoning setback or forward of the front wall plane of the principal building and which conforms to the Cambridge zoning ordinance.
- ~~12. The construction of an addition (or the combination of additions within the last five years) of up to 350 square feet to an existing building if the addition is not located on the front elevation or the elevation containing the principal entrance to the building and if any roof dormers conform to the Design Guidelines for Roof Dormer prepared for the BZA in 1996.~~
- ~~13.~~12. The repair or reconstruction of a foundation wall to match the existing exterior finish materials and dimensions if the total height of the building above the pre-existing finish grade does not increase.