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# Cambridge Civic Journal

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## THE HOLMES DEBATE

### Next Stop: Planning Board

Central Square is proving to be not only the civic center of Cambridge but also the center of a debate that has been raging for most of this year. Last Spring, the Holmes Nominee Trust announced plans to demolish and rebuild its property in the heart of Central Square, a property with commercial tenants that include CVS, the Golden Donut, Irving Shoes, Emily Rose, Wiener's Tobacco, Lucy Parsons Center, the A&S Diner, Oriental Buffet, Central Cleaners, Anthony's Greek Market, Ethiopian Restaurant, Surman's, and a number of professional offices. Though the owners worked with most of the existing tenants to enable them to return or relocate, the degree of disruption or displacement and the scale of the proposed buildings left many people dissatisfied with the proposal.

The initial plans called for a new building which would have contained roughly the same amount of retail space as today but with 92 residential units, a floor area ratio (FAR) of 4.7, and a maximum height of 116 feet. The plans did not include continuing any of the restaurant uses. These plans were brought before the Central Square Advisory Committee in a series of four public meetings during the summer and early fall. In response to the report and recommendations of the Advisory Committee, the owners and architects came back last week before the Advisory Committee with a radically revised plan.

The new plan calls two separate buildings with a publicly accessible courtyard, 72 residential units (with the City's standard percentage of affordable units), a maximum height of 77 ft., a 57 ft. cornice elevation (approximately the same as the adjacent Putnam Furniture Building), and a 3.8 FAR. There would still be two levels of retail, one accessible from the street and the other from the courtyard. The owners have negotiated agreements with many of the existing tenants to return after construction and to relocate in the interim. The new proposal also allows for a restaurant use and a cafe.

Nonetheless, an opposition group calling itself Save Central Square! is continuing its campaign to stop the demolition and reconstruction of this property. The chief arguments used in their petition campaign and in their unsuccessful attempts with the Historical Commission have centered on claims that all tenants would be permanently evicted, that the scale of the project would be too great, and that the addition of residential units would cause an increase in average rents in the surrounding neighborhood. Many residents signed a petition to stop the project based on these claims, some of which are no longer true or were never true.

On Tuesday, November 18 at 8:30 p.m., the new proposal will come before the Planning Board as the proponents seek needed special permits and approvals. At a later date, the proponents will go to the Board of Zoning Appeals for needed variances. It is anticipated that both regulatory boards will require several meetings before making any decisions so there is plenty of time for

residents to express themselves either in writing or in person with the concerns about this proposal.

The first subtext behind the Holmes story is the belief held by rent control proponents that blocking this proposal will somehow stem the tide of increasing rents and accompanying demographic shifts. These same activists appear to believe that there is a causal relationship between this project and the appearance of Starbucks coffee shops, "chain stores", rising rents, and more. While there may well be some correlation, it is not at all clear that any causal relationship exists. The second subtext is clearly the symbolic nature of a (capitalist) property owner having the power to put the Lucy Parsons Center's future in jeopardy. Their logo on their web site has the caption "Smash Capitalism". Sounds like a holy war.

### City Council Scorecard

Now that the biannual Cambridge municipal elections have passed with no change in the composition of the City Council, the show continues. Here's a preview of today's fare, as indicated by the nature of the Consent Orders submitted by the various councillors. There are basically six categories of orders: (A) announcements of events; (C) congratulatory orders, weddings, get well wishes, and general fluff; (M) maintenance and repairs such as potholes, traffic lights, etc.; (D) death orders; (I) requests for information from the City Manager; and (P) orders dealing with policy matters. Here's this week's approximate tally:

Councillor	A	C	M	D	I	P
Born	0	0	1	0	0	0
Davis	0	1	0	0	0	1
Duehay	0	0	0	1	0	0
Galluccio	0	2	4	6	1	3
Reeves	2	6	0	0	1	0
Russell	5	16	4	2	0	2
Sullivan	1	3	3	15	1	0
Toomey	4	5	1	9	2	2
Triantafillou	0	1	1	0	1	1

Mayor Russell's high number of congratulatory orders and announcements are an expected part of her role as Mayor. This week's clear winner in death resolutions is Councillor Sullivan. As usual, Council Orders that deal with policy matters lag far behind. New policy matters brought up this week by the City Council concern Cable TV service, licensing of bicycle messengers, and not much else.

## Inclusionary Zoning

Up for consideration by the City Council is a Community Development Department (CDD) proposal that would mandate the inclusion of affordable housing units in all new housing developments of ten or more units. The basic idea is that for each additional "affordable" unit built by a housing developer, a density bonus would be permitted as of right that would allow the developer to build to a density greater than what the base zoning allows. The key features are:

- Ordinance would be citywide and mandatory.
- It would not alter existing linkage or incentive zoning provisions applicable to some new commercial and retail developments.
- It would apply to all projects of ten or more units and encourage voluntary compliance for smaller projects.
- Affordable units would be targeted to low and moderate income residents, the average unit affordable to a household with income equal to 65% of area median. Affordable rent levels would be guaranteed for 50 years and deed restrictions would be attached to units for sale.
- Affordable units for sale would average \$100,000 today and the average rent would be \$777 plus utilities.
- The required percentage of affordable units would be between 10 and 15%, depending on City Council action.
- Compliance with the affordability provisions would give a developer a density bonus as of right. This density bonus would be approximately twice the percentage requirement for affordable units. Smaller projects with voluntary compliance could receive density bonuses via special permit from the Planning Board.
- In the event that a development is deemed by the City to be unsuitable for affordable housing, allowance to build affordable units off-site or in-lieu payments would suffice to meet the requirements of the ordinance.

Arguably, this inclusionary zoning provision would have minimal effect on general affordability of housing. Its chief benefit would be to guarantee some degree of economic diversity in new housing built in Cambridge. However, until significant amounts of new or rehabilitated housing are produced and vacancy rates rise above the negligible levels we're currently seeing in the region, don't expect to see general affordability in housing anytime soon.

## Coming Next Week:

- Report on the 1st Computerized PR Election

- Law and Sausages - Wheeling, Dealing, and choosing a Mayor
- Council Report, Updates, Calendar

## CALENDAR

### Mon, 17 Nov

5:30pm City Council Meeting (Sullivan Chamber)

7:00pm Public hearing to receive information from the Cambridge Savings Bank regarding plans for "The Tasty" in Harvard Square. (Sullivan Chamber)

### Tues, 18 Nov

8:30pm Planning Board hearing on Holmes proposal for their Central Square property (Sullivan Chamber)

### Wed, 19 Nov

4:30pm Ordinance Committee public hearing on a proposed change to the application procedures for banners across the public way. (Sullivan Chamber)

5:00pm Ordinance Committee public hearing on proposed amendment to the Noise Control Ordinance to authorize police to have tow companies disable alarms or tow vehicles from private property if the vehicle's alarm is sounding in violation of the ten minute shut off requirement. (Sullivan Chamber)

5:30pm Ordinance Committee public hearing to regulate the placement of newspaper boxes. (Sullivan Chamber)

7:00pm Civil and Human Rights Committee public hearing to talk about the incident at the Cambridge Galleria Mall. (Sullivan Chamber)

### Mon, 24 Nov

5:30pm City Council Meeting (Sullivan Chamber)

### Tues, 25 Nov

6:30pm Traffic and Transportation Committee hearing on available methods for regulating the size of trucks making local deliveries (Sullivan Chamber)

### Mon, 15 Dec

5:30pm City Council Meeting (Sullivan Chamber)

7:00pm Discussion of the City's goals and objectives.

(Sullivan Chamber)

### Mon, 22 Dec

5:30pm City Council Meeting (Sullivan Chamber)

The Cambridge Civic Journal is produced by Central Square Publications. Guest submissions are welcome, subject to discretion of the editor. For further info, to submit articles, or to get on our electronic mailing list, send e-mail to [rwinters@math.harvard.edu](mailto:rwinters@math.harvard.edu) or mail to Editor, Central Square Publications, 366 Broadway, Cambridge MA 02139. All items in this edition written by Robert Winters.