City accepts Simplex plan despite Cambridgeport opposition

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The original proposal had a ceiling of 2 million square feet for non-residential buildings, but the council unanimously approved a 100,000 square foot reduction.

- A limit on two-way traffic to 1700 vehicles per day upon completion of the project.

In support of the ordinance were Mayor Alfred E. Villucci and Councilor Thomas W. Dacey, Francis H. Durkee, Sverre Graham, Sheila T. Russell, Walter J. Sullivan, and William H. Walsh. Voting against the petition were Councillors Alice K. Wolf and David E. Sullivan ‘74.

Several proposed amendments debated

Debate focused on several amendments that were proposed to make the plan more acceptable to Cambridgeport residents. Wolf, David Sullivan, and Durkee proposed numerous amendments to the zoning petition, most of which narrowly failed to achieve majority backing. All of the amendments were members of the Cambridge Civic Association, an organization that has opposed MIT's development in the area. The amendments failed by one vote.

A proposal to further reduce the non-residential square footage to 1.5 million failed by one vote. Dave Leif, a representative of MIT's developer Forest City, said that it could not guarantee that it would build any housing under such an amendment.

A further amendment was proposed that would have explicitly linked the granting of Simplex construction permits to a traffic count for the area. This amendment was initially approved but later rescinded when ambiguities arose as to the timing and frequency of traffic counts.

In the end, the Council made two amendments to the petition, both of which were accepted by MIT. One cut the maximum non-residential development from 2 million to 1.5 million square feet. The second forces MIT to begin construction at the Brookline St. site within the next three years.

Compromise

David Sullivan urged the Council to amend the plan to give the City Council more time to work out a more favorable plan for neighborhood residents. "This project is just too big for this neighborhood. I think the City Council needs to start over and do it better than we are now."

Wolf specifically criticized the overwhelming amount of traffic that would accompany the development. "There will be traffic to go to very hard on Simplex," he warned.

But MIT, Forest City, and several councillors viewed the approved plan as an acceptable compromise between MIT and the community. Dave Leif, who voted in favor of the amendments, ultimately supported the plan. He declared that he would have voted against the plan "if I felt that a "no" vote (on the ordinance) would allow us more housing," but he did not feel that a "re-filing" of the plan would eventually result in a new plan with more housing that would be acceptable to MIT and Forest City.

Graham pointed out that, a few years earlier, MIT had been willing to build only 10 housing units and was now willing to build 400 units of housing and 50 mid-income units. "We're doing what we started building," she said.

She reminded the Council that the plan was the strictest in the history of the city and that MIT's agreement to build the 400 housing units was not merely a promise but a legal commitment. She pointed out that the various parties involved will never agree on a perfect plan, and she called the plan "the best plan we've ever produced.

Under the previous zoning classification, the Simplex site is designated "industry B" and cannot be used for residential buildings. The Council compromised on an alternative of having a Simplex development with no housing units at all. If MIT wishes to do so, it could withdraw its re-zoning petition and refuse to build any housing at all.

Citizens criticise plan

About 20 Cambridge residents and others addressed the City Council on the development plan. Most urged the council not to approve the plan.

Bill Noble, a Cambridge resident, declared that the impact of the development on the surrounding community would be "catastrophic." Noble felt that the Simplex development would become a second Kendall Square and the "needy in the low income category eligible for low-income housing is not to say that it is going to make the plan in a neighborhood."

Another resident said the development project is just too big for my neighborhood. I think the City Council more time to work out this is an agreement, "someone all," she warned.

Resident Patricia Natch said that she had voted against the development plan because it was not opposed to the development plan and was opposed to the development plan. Only two of the Cambridgeport residents spoke in favor of MIT. Major Brooks said that disapproval of the proposal after so much research and negotiation would be ludicrous. In the past, whenever the parties came closer to an agreement, "someone always asked for more and more," he said. "Let's start building now," he urged.

20-year saga

The Simplex property was acquired by MIT in 1969 and is one of the last large sections of undeveloped land in the city.

Ronald P. Sudlik, special assistant to the MIT president, called the vote "a culmination of a lot of work and a long process."

The development is scheduled for completion in ten years. But Cavellini vowed that Cambridgeport residents will continue to oppose the development. The residents are considering the following options: filing a new zoning petition; overriding the decision of the City Council by circulating a city-wide petition; initiating a recall of some or all of the Council's nine members.

Cavellini explained that the "rigid, uncompromising" stand against meeting neighborhood needs — shown by MIT, Forest City, and the City Council — has unified the Cambridgeport community. He asserted that close to 30 percent of Cambridgeport residents opposed the development plan in its approved form. "Staying to do this to development is something that is crucial to us as a neighborhood. The unified support we have is unprecedented."

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Art and reason

When Mark and I decided to spend the weekend at his house, I never imagined I would be walking into a mouse's nightmare. There were cats everywhere.

Cat plaques, cat statues, cat clocks, even a cat mat. I couldn't begin to duplicate her collection of kitty litter if I spent a year at a garage sale. "I'm not supposed to be here, but I was a real cat. Strange, I thought, and began to fear that a weekend with cat woman could be a lot less than purrfect.

But when I came home, and Mark introduced her. She was dressed surprisingly well in leopard pants. In fact, you could say she was the cat's meow, I'd rather not.

She offered me a cup of Dutch Chocolate Mint. Now that was something I could relate to. Then she brought it out the most beautiful, distinctly unchina I've ever seen. As we sipped, I found out that Mrs. Campbell has a weakness for chocolate, loves the theater as much as I do, but, incredibly, never saw "Cats." So Mark and I are taking her next month.

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