

Porter Square Neighbors Association

P.O. Box 401016 ♦ Porter Square Station ♦ Cambridge, MA 02140 ♦ www.portersquare.net

Cambridge Planning Board
Cambridge Community Development Department
344 Inman Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

Re: PB#241 - Special Permit Application for Saint James Church Redevelopment

Sirs:

St. James's Episcopal Church is the one jewel left in the architectural disaster site at Massachusetts Avenue and Beech Street.

On the south side, the glass building hoisted above its ground-level parking lot prompted the creation of a zoning overlay district intended largely to prevent another building like it. Reflected in its façade is the offspring from a fling between an aging funeral home and a cheesy skyscraper, later abandoned on the neighborhood's doorstep. The lovely, historical church was once fully visible from well south along the avenue, but is now partially eclipsed by the so-called renovation of the funeral home.

Given this sorry history, the neighborhood is justifiably apprehensive about a project that affects this church. Our concerns fall into three areas: The size of the building, its design, and the entrance to the residential garage on Beech Street.

Size and residential impact. Although the building consumes only 73 percent of the allowable FAR and appears to conform to other zoning requirements, it will still loom over the residential neighborhood. Three stories of balconies plus possible roof gardens overlook the backyards of abutters along Blake and Orchard Street. This is a significant loss of privacy and potential noise generator.

If balconies are not acceptable facing the church garden, they are even less acceptable facing the abutters. At the ground level, existing trees should be preserved, especially within the residential setback.

The building also looms over the church, with a fourth story that is as high as its ridgeline.

We would prefer a three story building. We recognize that this is unlikely, but any rooftop mechanicals or elevator housings should be minimized in height and not visible to the residential neighbors. Noise generating equipment should be located far from the residential edge.

Design and streetscape. The initial design was a modern box whose style and materials were not compatible with either the residential neighborhood or the church.

The architects who have been working with St. James have significantly improved the original design and materials. The developers have also stated an intention to use materials compatible with the existing residential neighborhood on the sides of the building that face this neighborhood.

We ask that the final design be reviewed by a locally respected architect, acceptable to both the church and the abutters, for suitable urban design and sensitivity to neighborhood conditions. The historical commission should also review the design for compatibility with the church and site.

We appreciate the church's commitment to preserve and improve the garden and open it to the public. Reorienting church activities to face Massachusetts Avenue will be a significant improvement in the streetscape and the relationship with the community. Although we respect their good intentions, individuals and even whole congregations change over the years. To preserve the spirit of these intentions, we believe written commitments to maintain the public access to the garden and to not use the remaining FAR are appropriate.

Traffic on Beech Street. The abutters and nearby residents adamantly oppose placing the residential parking entrance on Beech Street.

We expect the Beech Street entrance will contribute to congestion in several ways:

- Left turns into the garage will block the single travel lane leading away from Massachusetts Avenue and create backups through the light and into Porter Square.
- Vans and trucks will stop in the travel lane in front of the building for deliveries and residential trash pickup. Although the entrance to the garage allows trucks to pull in, we doubt that they will do so because it is so difficult to back onto Beech, particularly in a large vehicle.
- The church and the developer have left open the option to allow day school parents and other participants in various church programs to use the garage for short periods. This undercuts the claim that all of the church traffic activity on Beech Street will move to Massachusetts Avenue.

The decision to place the entrance to the garage on Beech Street was made before the traffic study was conducted and without neighborhood input. Because we find this study to be seriously flawed, we cannot view decisions based upon it to be meaningful. Decisions made without even the small amount of information that it contains are not credible.

We have addressed our problems with this traffic study and with the traffic study process in general in a separate letter.

To avoid problems with deliveries, there should be a lobby or entrance on Massachusetts Avenue for drivers to deposit packages for residents and obtain signatures. A trash collection plan that does not block the sidewalk or block Beech Street during rush hours should also be required.

Construction mitigation. The construction phase, and particularly the excavation for the garage, will be very disruptive. The abutters and the surrounding neighborhood will be dealing with rats, dust, noise, the arrival and departure of trucks and equipment, and other issues. We request that approval of this special permit be contingent on a comprehensive plan to mitigate these problems that the developer has worked out with the abutters along Beech, Orchard, and Blake streets. This plan should also take in account other construction projects in the area.

Summary. The Porter Square Neighbors Association shares the neighbors' concerns over the size of the building and its impact on abutters. We also question the decisions made about the parking entrance on Beech Street without the results of the traffic study.

With reference to specifics in the zoning ordinance, the special permit application fails to adequately address Article 19.33(8) with respect to balconies, and article 19.32 (3) and (4) and article 19.37 with respect to the location of the ramp and street-level parking. The ramp also includes a mechanical garage door opener and functions as the only loading area for the residential use, yet it is within the setback area, conflicting with article 19.58 (1).

We do not believe that the process with the community is completed. It began in early June and has been plagued by misunderstandings and miscommunications. All parties to it—the church, the developer, the neighbors, and PSNA—made missteps. At a small meeting of these parties on August 6, the meaningful exchange that everyone had sought finally took place. But the opportunity to continue and build on that exchange was lost in the rush to file for the special permit.

We ask you to delay granting this permit until that conversation is finished. We believe that many, though certainly not all, of the issues raised in this and other letters you have received about this project could be addressed. We also believe that this intermission would permit the completion of a meaningful traffic study.

Yet the most important reason for this re-engagement may be the opportunity to restore civility. In the end, the church, the developer, the neighbors, and PSNA are going to have to live with each other.

Respectfully yours,

John Howard, President
Susan Hunziker, Vice President
Porter Square Neighbors Association