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## Sullivan Courthouse developer provides project details in wake of growing opposition

Representatives of developer Leggat McCall are defending plans for the former Sullivan Courthouse even as two initiatives aimed at reducing the project's impact are gathering steam.

On one hand is the newly formed [Neighborhood Association of East Cambridge](#) (NAEC); on the other, a City Council [policy order](#) requesting the developer reduce the height, traffic, and environmental impacts of the proposal.

Representatives of developer Leggat McCall Properties maintain they are willing to work with the community and have set up a [website on coUrbanize.com](#) in an attempt to be more transparent.

### The plan

Leggat McCall plans to transform the 22-story courthouse and detention center at 40 Thorndike St. into an office building geared toward high-tech firms.

Over the past 14 months, Leggat McCall has modified its initial design to include 26 residential units, eight to 12 storefronts, a community meeting room and more open space around the building. They also agreed to develop an empty space in a nearby public garage into a neighborhood supermarket.

Some residents welcome the transformation. Others are still angered with the state for selling the building to Leggat McCall without much public input and with Leggat McCall for not reducing the structure's 280-foot height, far above the 80 feet zoned for the area. They argue the courthouse got an exemption in the 1970s because it was a public building, but the exemption should not remain for a commercial building.

Further, opponents of the current redevelopment plan remain worried about traffic congestion, a wind-tunnel effect, and light and noise pollution from offices in use past daylight hours.

### Redesign

On March 3, four city councilors submitted a resolution to the City Clerk urging Leggat McCall and the state Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance to work together to "substantially reduce the height, traffic, and environmental impacts of the courthouse redevelopment proposal."

The resolution also calls for the City Council to consider the fair-market value of the selling price, and to "listen closely to the concerns of East Cambridge residents and consider the overall impact of the project," before deciding whether to sell the developer a parking garage on First Street for 420 parking spaces for the development

The resolution was drafted by Councilor Dennis Carlone and co-sponsored by councilors Tim Toomey, Marc McGovern and Nadeem Mazen.

"This policy order is uncharted waters," said McGovern. "There are a lot of things going on here that the city hasn't grappled with before. Everyone is kind of feeling their way. ... The only leverage the City Council has is the parking [garage sale]."

"It's not Leggat McCall's fault that building is the way it is," McGovern said. "But here's an opportunity to do something to mitigate this horrific building. We do know that it's going to be very costly for them to develop it."

Leggat McCall will need to spend an estimated \$30-40 million just to remove asbestos from the 500,000-square-foot building, which is insulated in the highly toxic material. Rob Dickey, Leggat McCall's director for the project, estimates the final cost to be \$200 million.

"My frustration is primarily with the state — they have been dismissive of the community," McGovern added. "But there's only so much I can do about that."

### New group forms

The newly formed Neighborhood Association of East Cambridge (NAEC) wants to have the developer's special permit application denied by the Planning Board "to send the state and developer back to the drawing board."

NAEC is an offshoot of the East Cambridge Planning Team (ECPT), a long-time neighborhood group instrumental in getting Leggat McCall to change its initial



PHOTO/ COURTESY IMAGE/LEGGAT MCCALL

An artist's rendering of the Sullivan Courthouse redevelopment from the view of Third and Spring streets.

design.

"The government effectively ruined a founding block of our city, a place that was supposed to be for public use," said Michael Hawley, one of the members of NAEC. "They destroyed it by building a colossal mistake. ... An approach now would be for the city to put its foot down: refuse the permits, enforce strict zoning, and, all of us, demand that the site be razed and remediated."

Dickey agreed, "The courthouse is an eyesore and a fortress." But he maintains that the redesign plan "is pretty close to right; maybe it's a little more housing, an improved residential design, improved landscaping — it's getting the right mix. Our goal is to transform it into a place that's a lifestyle and economic boost for the community."

"We're open to conversation with the community, to getting together a task force of representatives in the community and city," Dickey added.

Dickey estimates the Thorndike Street project will generate \$3 million to \$4 million in annual tax revenues.

"It's a very expensive project," Dickey said. "It has to work economically; for instance we're putting in the supermarket without a profit, so how do we balance that? I know that people are very positive about the grocery store."

Finding the right mix is complicated because the building isn't really suited for residential development, Dickey said.

Concerns about light and noise pollution and the wind-tunnel effect are misplaced, according to Dickey, who cites studies done as part of the redevelopment.

He said that Leggat McCall is looking into planting more trees around the building as windbreakers.

Leggat McCall has begun using a website, [coUrbanize.com](http://coUrbanize.com), to publicize its design plans, results of studies on wind, noise, traffic, and other issues, copies of submitted documents, timeline of community meetings, and a public forum.

"We know that not everyone can make it to meetings," said Dickey. "We're trying to make all the information available in an easily accessible fashion."

Already, there are more than a dozen comments on the forum, most of them serious attempts to argue the pros and cons of the project.

"Is this building terrible, both in design and in context for the neighborhood? Yes," wrote one contributor. "Would it also cost \$15 million to tear down on top of asbestos abatement? Yes. Does any government entity want to pay \$45 million to make this an empty lot? No. The only way to prevent this from becoming an even worse eyesore for the community is for private money to redevelop it."

Someone else said: "While I am looking forward to the redevelopment at 40 Thorndike St., I am against repurposing the full height and bulk of this 22-story, nonconforming structure. The proposed project does not establish that it will not have a substantially more detrimental impact on the neighborhood."

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