

# Cambridge courthouse project under fire

By **Brock Parker** | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 13, 2014



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**A front-entrance view of the old Middlesex County courthouse, built in the 1970s. The building was purchased in 2012.**

The old Middlesex County courthouse is an unpolished diamond that can be transformed into a gleaming outpost for the booming technology community in nearby Kendall Square that is spreading into East Cambridge.

The old Middlesex County courthouse is a towering eyesore that once again threatens to violate a quaint residential neighborhood of modest homes and workers cottages.

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That's the crux of a raging debate in Cambridge as a developer picked by the state moves forward with plans to overhaul one of the most visible buildings on the outskirts of Boston's skyline. Although the two courts once housed there are gone, about 200 prisoners remain on the upper floors of the 22-story structure, in the Middlesex Jail.

Leggat McCall Properties is seeking to start work this summer on turning the Edward J. Sullivan Courthouse at 40 Thorndike St. into a home for high-tech offices, along with additional retail and residential space — a

project estimated to cost more than \$200 million. It would replace most of the gray facade with glass and improve the forbidding ground-level space by adding a small park and more pedestrian access.

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**Graphic: The new building's height an issue**

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With demand high for Kendall office space, Leggat McCall executive vice president Robert Dickey said, converting the courthouse will help keep high-tech companies in Cambridge.

“Our objective . . . is to attract high-tech tenants, small innovation companies, as well as mature companies, and they don't have a lot to choose from today,” Dickey said.

But nearby residents contend redevelopment of a building that never should have been erected will hurt a neighborhood increasingly leery of the creeping advances of Kendall Square toward their quiet pocket of Cambridge. They are pressuring city officials to reject the special permits Leggat McCall needs to pull off its redevelopment project.

The neighbors are also proposing a radical change for the 282-foot-tall building — chopping it down to comply with the area's 80-foot height limit.

“The building was a mistake and everybody knows it,” said East Cambridge resident Michael Hawley. “It's rare in life that you get a chance to undo a mistake like this.”

Several Cambridge city councilors are calling on the state and Leggat McCall to work together to substantially reduce the height, traffic, and environmental impacts of the development.

“This is a building that probably never should have been built. That is the problem,” said Councilor Dennis Carlone.

On one point, all parties agree: The building is ugly. Leggat McCall describes the 1970s-era architecture as Brutalist. When the state built the courthouse it was exempt from local zoning laws, and the 22-story tower soared above neighboring homes.

The courthouse is also toxic. It is so shot through with asbestos that Middlesex Superior Court relocated to Woburn in 2008 and Cambridge District Court moved to Medford in 2009. Leggat McCall estimates it will cost at least \$30 million to remove the asbestos.

As for the county prisoners, they will be moved to the Middlesex House of Correction in Billerica until a new jail and court complex is built.

Despite the hurdles, Dickey believes the old building can be turned into a neighborhood asset. As high-tech development pushes out from Kendall Square and the North Point development project progresses on the other side of East Cambridge, he said, the converted building would serve as a link between the two and also aid a neighborhood goal to improve business along Cambridge and First streets.

Development in the area already has extended beyond Kendall Square with a series of projects by Alexandria Real Estate, including the recently completed Biogen Idec headquarters on Binney Street. Alexandria is constructing additional office and research space on Binney Street and a residential building at the intersection of Binney

and Third streets.

A Cambridge Community Development Department report in December identified the US Department of Transportation's Volpe Research Center at the corner of Broadway and Third Street as a potential site for more office and residential space.

But Brian Murphy, Cambridge's assistant city manager for community development, said Third Street has a different feel farther from Kendall Square.

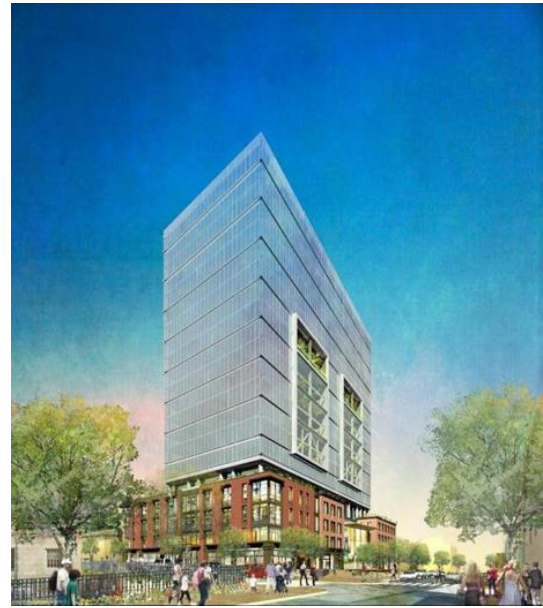
He said the area around the courthouse wasn't considered in the city's Kendall Square study.

"I don't think we're looking and saying that Third Street is an area that is really going to be transformed," Murphy said.

The state selected Leggat McCall to redevelop the courthouse after the developer submitted the highest of three bids to purchase the building in late 2012. The price has not been disclosed, but the state Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance expects to close the sale this spring.

In addition to facade changes, Leggat McCall plans to convert the upper floors into office space geared toward the types of technology firms associated with Kendall Square. To address neighborhood calls for residential space, the developer has included 24 residential units on the lower floors, and there will be room for retail stores on ground level.

But Hawley said the building is "grossly outsized" for its location, and neighbors say converting the facade to glass will create problems with solar glare during the day and light pollution at night. They have launched a website, [40thorndike.org](http://40thorndike.org), to publicize their concerns, which also include potential traffic and parking problems.



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**Developer's vision for 40 Thorndike St.**

Rhoda Fantasia, who has lived on Third Street for 20 years, said the project has raised residents' awareness of development pressures facing East Cambridge. Many worry about no longer being able to afford to live in the neighborhood.

"They have likened what is going on in Kendall Square and now pushing toward North Point, with this 40 Thorndike Street being in the middle, as a malignancy creeping, creeping, creeping," Fantasia said.

Leggat McCall has launched its own website, [courb.co/40thorndike](http://courb.co/40thorndike), to tout the public benefits of the project, including about \$3 million in new tax revenue for the city, the creation of construction jobs for four years, and approximately 1,500 permanent jobs in the building once the work is done.

Dickey said Leggat McCall has met with neighbors about its proposal and is willing to talk about the possibility of a height reduction.

"That will be part of the discussion," he said. "In the end, I don't know if that makes it a better project or not."

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