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Sullivan Courthouse: State Rep. Asks For Working Group

By Erin Baldassari

Banker & Tradesman Correspondant

City Councilor and State Rep. Tim Toomey is asking for the state to participate in a working group to "explore options" for redeveloping the Sullivan Courthouse in East Cambridge after a neighborhood group threatened to sue to block the project.

In a letter to the developer, Leggat McCall, dated March 10, Toomey said it was his hope that "all parties can come together and agree upon a project that is more palatable and for the parcel to become an asset to the East Cambridge community."

Toomey told Banker & Tradesman he had also reached out to the Division of Capital Asset Management (DCAMM) and the governor's office with his request.

Leggat McCall has proposed turning the nearly 600,000-square-foot courthouse and jail into primarily office space with 24 units of housing, 15,000 square feet of ground floor retail, and 15,000 square feet of open space. Parking for the project hinges on a vote of the City Council to approve the disposition of 420 parking spaces at a municipal garage across the street from the project. Ninety-two parking spaces are included onsite.

The newly-formed Neighborhood Association of East Cambridge convened in late February to oppose the project, which they say is grossly out of place with the 80-foot tall buildings around it. The group's website, 40thorndike.org, cites concerns over increased traffic, light pollution, and the wind tunnel effect the tall building creates.

On Monday, March 17, the council is expected to vote on a policy order requiring the council to "go on record" indicating it will

not only consider the fair market value of the city-owned parking spaces, but will also "listen closely to the concerns of East Cambridge residents and consider the overall impact" of the redevelopment.

Toomey said the goal of the working group would be to bring the community, city staff, the developer, and representatives from DCAMM together to "address the many concerns that have arisen during the process."

Leggat McCall Vice President Rob Dickey has described the building as a "fortress" and "eyesore," and said the redevelopment would bring new vitality to the block. DCAMM selected Leggat McCall in Dec. 2012 from a pool of seven bidders after a first round of bids were all rejected. Of the seven proposals, only one offered to reduce the height of the building.

"We welcome any chance to participate in an ongoing constructive dialogue with residents and city officials as we are confident this project will transform what has been an eyesore for the East Cambridge and deliver overwhelming positive lifestyle and economic benefits to the neighborhood and city," Dickey said in a statement.

While Toomey said he's "working on" getting DCAMM to participate, DCAMM spokeswoman Meghan Kelly said the state agency didn't feel it was "appropriate" since they had already signed a final purchase-and-sale agreement with Leggat McCall. Commissioner Carole Cornelison and her deputy, Dana Harrell, both visited with the community before Leggat McCall was selected.

"We note that it is within the city's land-use powers to affect the future use of the property," Kelly said, adding the state encourages those discussions among the developer, the community and the city.

Kelly did not respond to a question about whether modifying the proposal at this stage would violate the purchase-and-sale agreement. DCAMM denied a public records request for a copy of the agreement until the deed is officially transferred, which won't happen until the prisoners are relocated.

The opacity of the deal has caused consternation among community members, Toomey said.

"While I understand (DCAMM is) restricted from addressing the particulars of this transaction, their silence has contributed to much confusion and speculation that has been detrimental to the process," Toomey said in the letter. "DCAMM needs to play an active role going forward."

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