

Cambridge City Council urges state, developer to reduce impacts of redeveloped courthouse



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In a unanimous vote, the Cambridge City Council passed a resolution on Monday night that calls on the state and the designated redeveloper of the Edward J. Sullivan Courthouse to downsize the impacts of the project.

The vote, which is advisory, call on the Division of Capital Asset Management & Maintenance, the state agency that is selling the shuttered 22-story tower, and Leggat McCall Properties, the designated developer, to design a project that will win community support. The resolution encourages DCAMM and the developer to work together in an “expeditious and creative fashion to substantially reduce the height, traffic and environment impacts of the developer’s proposal so as to gain community support and resolve the great uncertainty that now surrounds the project.”

City Councilors are expected to take a vote later this month on the transfer the city-owned parking spaces at the First Street Garage to the developer in order to satisfy the parking requirements for the proposed office building. The resolution also said the City Council will not simply consider whether the “RFP’s agreed-upon price represents fair market value of the parking spaces, but rather the council will listen closely to the concerns of residents and consider the overall project impacts to determine whether the plan will lead to the greatest public benefit that must be obtained from the property.”

Under the proposal, the Boston-based developer would redesign the 500,000-square-foot courthouse to include 460,000 square feet of office space, 15,000 square feet of retail, 15,000 square feet of open space and two dozen apartments taking about 24,000 square feet of space. The apartments, to be built on the second, third and fourth floor along Third Street, was designed by Elkus Manfredi Architects in keeping with the architecture of the neighborhood. Leggat McCall has a purchase and sale agreement to buy the courthouse from the state. DCAMM will not disclose the sale price until the closing that is expected this spring.

Many neighbors oppose the \$200 million project, saying the building has been an eyesore in the neighborhood for decades and this is an opportunity to lower the height in keeping with the surrounding homes. But the developer has said they need the height and density given the project cost.

[Barbara Broussard](#), president of the East Cambridge Planning Team, said the City Council is sending a message to the state and the developer to work with the community.

"It tells the state and the developer to come to the table and resolve these issues," she said.

Seth Teller, a Cambridge resident and a founding member of the Neighborhood Association of East Cambridge, said the vote recognizes what many residents have known all along — that the developer's proposal never made sense.

"It showed no respect for the neighborhood," he said. "And to support it, the developers put forth a set of numbers about parking, traffic, wind, light etc. that never passed the common sense test, and came from consultants who are either incompetent or dishonest or both."

[Robert Dickey](#), executive vice president and partner at Leggat McCall, said his company remains committed to the project and will continue to talk with residents and city officials. "We are open to making additional modifications to our plan that address some community concerns," he said.

But Dickey said the cost of buying the building, removing asbestos and the renovation makes it impossible to construct a building that fits the zoning of about 80 to 100 feet, a solution that has been suggested by some residents.

"We believe we have a strong proposal which will transform the current building from an out of scale eyesore into a mixed use facility that will provide a positive lifestyle and economic boost to the neighborhood and city," he said.

In an email, a spokeswoman for DCAMM Commissioner Carole Cornelison said since the agency has signed a final purchase and sale agreement with the developer, "it would not be appropriate for the commonwealth to participate in further discussions of the future of the property."

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