

# BOSTON PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

www.bostonpreservation.org

July 7, 2021

Edward Carmody  
Boston Planning and Development Agency  
Boston City Hall  
**Re: MGH Clinical Buildings, 55 Fruit Street, West End**

Dear Mr. Carmody,

The Boston Preservation Alliance is Boston's primary, non-profit advocacy organization that protects and promotes the use of historic buildings and landscapes in all of the city's neighborhoods. With 40 Organizational Members, 103 Corporate Members, and a reach of over 100,000 friends and supporters we represent a diverse constituency advocating for the thoughtful evolution of the city and celebration of its unique character. We appreciate the opportunity to offer comments on projects that impact the historic character of the city.

As the West End prepares for yet another monumental change to its built environment when this project breaks ground, the Alliance would like to acknowledge the substantial amount of time spent by all parties on improving this proposal- from neighborhood residents and community groups to staff at the BPDA and the City to elected officials, particularly Boston City Councilor Kenzie Bok and Representative Jay Livingstone, to the MGH team itself. Many voices have contributed to the evolution of the project and the mitigation package and we are confident that the neighborhood will benefit from investments and resources MGH has committed to local nonprofits and community services. We are especially appreciative of the \$1million earmarked for The Legacy Fund for Boston, a fund dedicated to historic preservation projects throughout the city. However, no amount of mitigation lessens the heartbreaking loss of the three historic buildings on this site; three of only about a dozen that survived the devastating effects of Urban Renewal in the 1950s and 1960s. These buildings are physical connections for this community to their past and demolition is like salt in an open wound yet to heal from Urban Renewal.

The Alliance has reviewed several options for relocating the historic buildings with the MGH team, and appreciate the analysis provided by MGH to allow assessment. We acknowledge that viable alternatives to demolition are minimal when one accepts the specific programming requirements including underground parking enumerated by the hospital. In support of the valuable medical services the hospital will provide with this expanded campus and without expertise to refute the programmatic demands, we have reluctantly deferred to MGH's findings that saving the buildings on the site is not feasible. It is a disappointing result as well as the fact that no sites emerged in the vicinity as viable for relocation. The negative impact of the loss of these buildings cannot be understated.

The only physical preservation option that remains on the table is a proposal to reconstruct two facades of the Winchell School in its approximate existing location. The Alliance does not find this an acceptable preservation solution since the reconstructed historic facades will be subsumed by the new building, giving the facades no autonomy as an independent structure and little in the way of street presence. It is our understanding, however, that members of the community find value in this

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proposal and its ability to provide some modest representation of the neighborhood's evolution in the built environment. Though we cannot support this solution as preservation, we will not oppose its inclusion but do encourage the proponent to continue to evolve the design to give the facades more prominence on the street and better cohesion and visual breathing room within the design of the new building. We agree with several comments from BCDC that have been critical of this design element. We have yet to encounter anyone in the design or preservation community who feels this is a good strategy.

Additionally, we encourage the proponent to continue to explore ways to provide a stronger viewshed and access to the historic Etherdome on the MGH campus. This nationally significant building and green space should be a prominent feature of the MGH campus but the current design blocks and privatizes views and accessibility. The iconic and beckoning view down North Anderson Street is lost to the enclosed arcade. As we have heard from residents, especially throughout the COVID-19 crisis, porosity through the MGH campus and access to green spaces for public use are crucial to the vibrancy of the West End and the health of its residents. And for many the long view to the landmark Etherdome is a hallmark of the neighborhood. We hope that the current design will be revised to feature the Etherdome rather than obscure it.

Finally, we feel it is necessary to state for the record that the overall massing of the proposal overwhelms the streetscape along Cambridge Street and we are concerned about precedent for taller proposals across the street. Though the Beacon Hill neighborhood is a designated local Landmark, the commercial storefronts along Cambridge Street are not included within the boundaries of the district. As a gateway to arguably Boston's most iconic historic neighborhood, it is critical that the character of Cambridge Street be preserved. We do not feel that the design of the current proposal complements or enhances the character of Cambridge Street, and we strongly urge the BPDA to signal to owners on the Beacon Hill side of the street that this project will not set a new precedent for height and incongruous design along the entrances to the Beacon Hill historic district as well as other areas of the Beacon Hill and West End neighborhoods.

We look forward to further discussion as the process continues and the design evolves.

Thank you,



Greg Galer  
Executive Director

CC:

Representative Jay Livingstone, 8<sup>th</sup> Suffolk, Massachusetts State House

Mayor Kim Janey, City of Boston

Kenzie Bok, Boston City Council

Lydia Edwards, Boston City Council

Annissa Essaibi George, Boston City Council

Michael Flaherty, Boston City Council  
Julia Mejia, Boston City Council  
Michelle Wu, Boston City Council  
Brian Golden, Boston Planning and Development Agency  
Jonathan Greeley, Boston Planning and Development Agency  
Elizabeth Stifel, Boston Civic Design Commission  
Andrea Leers, Boston Civic Design Commission  
David Hanitchak, MGH  
Nicholas Haney, MGH  
Doug Kelleher, Epsilon Associates  
Geoffrey Melhuish, Epsilon Associates  
Tom Sieniewicz, NBBJ  
Brona Simon, Massachusetts Historical Commission  
Elizabeth Sherva, Massachusetts Historical Commission  
Rosanne Foley, Boston Landmarks Commission  
Lynn Smiledge, Boston Landmarks Commission  
Beacon Hill Civic Association  
Friends of the West End Library  
Historic New England  
Martha McNamara  
Old West Church  
West End Civic Association