

Riley, Kate

From: David Adamian [REDACTED]
Sent: Sunday, February 9, 2020 9:21 PM
To: City Manager
Cc: Riley, Kate; Lynne Carvalho Adamian
Subject: Concerns regarding the VLUS / Tobin Montessori project

Dear Mr. DePasquale,

We applaud much of what Cambridge is trying to accomplish with the new school planned for the site of the Vassal Lane Upper / Tobin Montessori School. However, we feel like the city is overreaching what can reasonably be accomplished within the footprint and constraints of that site. Some of those laudable ambitions need to be addressed elsewhere. Early childhood education, expanded special education services, the Montessori option, and thoughtful middle schools are all essential components of a continually improving Cambridge educational system. By cramming all of them into this site, the city is creating a monstrosity that is out of sync with the character of the neighborhood, will create traffic nightmares on Vassal Lane and Concord Ave., and - most importantly - will undermine the quality of education delivered in each of those educational programs.

There has been much hand wringing about the city's lack of foresight in failing to negotiate a solution that would have allowed the city to make at least partial use of the Armory site, the city's failure to buy the adjacent site of the Tokyo Restaurant that sat idle for almost two decades (what a wonderful bridge from the school/playground site to Fresh Pond that could have been). But that is all water under the bridge. The solution is not, however, to compound those errors with the Frankenstein school that is currently on offer.

With all the development going on around Fawcett Street and Cambridge Park Drive and the talk of making those neighborhoods more walkable (not to mention the availability of underutilized real estate, especially around Fawcett Street), doesn't it make sense to shift some of this programming there?

Consider some of the cascading effects of the over-programming that's baked into the design criteria for this new school:

First, you've got enormous competition for ground floor space - neither the pre-schoolers nor the special needs classrooms belong on the upper floors. Safely and quickly exiting a building in an emergency is essential. This school is planned to eventually house many substantially separate classrooms of students, many who will need thoughtfully programmed learning space and quiet and clear paths as they learn independence or guided mobility throughout the new school. If Cambridge is looking to have the school design genuinely embrace and serve more students in the substantially separate classrooms based on projected population growth, and additionally those who are currently served in out of district programs, the overreaching program of this site needs to be scaled back.

Second, cramming these various programs together will undermine the quality of service delivered to the kids who most stand to benefit from these programs. How is the proposed shared space in the current "front runner" design (Option 1A: replacement) going to genuinely meet the needs of this many disparate groups? One dining area cannot successfully meet the different scale, environmental and scheduling needs of this many students and staff. Any design that promotes this much shared space for dining, auditoriums, arts and gymnasiums needs to account for the whole population.

Third, the space needs, and neighborhood need to avoid too much vertical construction, have put the school in direct conflict with the city's obligation to preserve green space. We're told that the designs meet those obligations, but that seems questionable to begin with, and even if they technically meet the requirements, the

spaces on offer will be broken up in a way that will be a significant downgrade from the current Father Callanan fields (shouldn't a project like this be an opportunity to improve rather than degrade?).

Fourth, the increase in student and staff population is going to create a traffic situation that is untenable for the site. Vassal Lane is a neighborhood street and in the latest option (option 1A: replacement) most referenced at the community meeting ALL the traffic for the site is designed to enter and exit on Vassal. This is unreasonable and burdensome to the neighborhood, especially since the school site will now be a year-round and full-day operation.

Fifth, the square footage required to meet all of these needs has put this project at odds with the city's goal for projects to be net-zero energy. A smaller footprint will allow for more of the buildings energy needs to be served via geothermal heating and cooling and will put the building's energy loads more in line with the energy production from solar panels on the site.

It seems that this project, and its \$250 million budget, have become the catch-all to address a series of challenges that have been put off or were not dealt with on previous projects because it was too difficult to address them then. In the most recent city response presentation "Strategies based on community input" there is no mention of the one of most discussed neighborhood concerns: the over programming of this site. Well, it's not going to work. Unless we change course dramatically, we are on a course for a \$250 million project that is going to leave educators, parents, and students frustrated that their needs were not adequately met and going to undermine the character of the neighborhood by taking away beloved green space and creating an untenable traffic situation.

We believe the city can do better and sincerely hope it will find a way to address these concerns.

Sincerely,
David Adamian and Lynne Carvalho Adamian