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Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA)

From: Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC)  
Christian Science Church and Plaza  
Sybil Cooper-King & George Thrush, Co-Chairs

Re: Final Letter from CAC to BRA regarding Development Proposal for  
Christian Science Plaza Revitalization Project

Date: 1 November, 2010

The Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) reports its findings to the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) as part of the public review process for large projects that include more than the area for a single building. The proposed addition of 950,000 sf of development to the twelve acre Christian Science Church property made this proposal sufficiently complex as to necessitate the convening of a CAC.

The CAC has met monthly for nearly two years, and has discussed many issues pertaining to the development strategy. The Christian Science Church (CSC) discussed two major options during the time that the CAC was in place. The first called for a single, large mixed-use building to house roughly 700,000 sf on the pair of sites at the intersection of Dalton and Belvedere Streets, across from the Hilton and Sheraton Hotels, and behind the Church's Colonnade Building. This first proposal had a floor plate large enough to support office development on many floors. Later, after having discussed this version for many months, the CSC opted instead for a pair of more slender buildings whose floor plates are more suitable for hotel or apartment use. There was no change in overall square footage being proposed. This change was entirely a result of changing market conditions, which were interpreted by the CSC to favor housing and hotel uses over office ones, and not a result of any input on the part of the CAC.

The remaining 250,000 sf of development is planned for a glass, housing tower to be built on the Huntington Avenue side of the Sunday School Building, adapting it as part of the base of this new structure. The CAC is supportive of this idea.

This letter will serve as the formal response of the allied communities represented by the CAC to the official proposal by the CSC, which was only finally submitted in July, 2010. The letter disseminates the committee's findings in three parts. The first part will address issues of height and bulk, the second will address the reflecting pool, and the third, matters of streetscape. While the CAC has not always been unanimous on these matters, there is broad agreement among the group on most of them.

## **Introduction**

The CAC would like to note that because the Christian Science Church presented a very thoughtful and well-considered proposal from the beginning, the CAC has not had to address a wide range of issues that might have been present with a lesser proposal. The locations of the development parcels are the subject of broad agreement across the committee, and the CSC responded to the CAC's requests for information in a timely way. The Church was mindful of important ground plane issues throughout, and recognized the fundamental public value of the plaza, reflecting pool, and amenities that have come to be understood as public during the forty years of the Church's stewardship. The CAC considers the project to be well thought out.

### **Part 1- Height and Bulk:** financial arguments and urban design

Issues surrounding the height and bulk of the proposed development were discussed at length. There were two distinct sets of approaches. First, there was a question as to how the total development need was established. Why 950,000 and not 650,000 (the amount allowed as-of-right by existing zoning) , or 1,500,000 for that matter? The Church's answer was that they had run the numbers, and that this is what they need to support the stewardship of the plaza that they have supplied to the city for 40 years. This argument was seen by many on the committee as reasonable given the excellent track record of the Church on this matter. But even those who were receptive thought that a financial need argument should have more transparency on the nature of that need. To that end, the CAC requests the following financial data:

1. the projected annual revenue generated by the 950,000 sf of development
2. the projected capital costs for the renovation of the reflecting pool, underground garage, and underground structural piles
3. the annual maintenance costs for the plaza, garage, and reflecting pool.
4. The projected annual revenue from the development of the Midtown Hotel site to the limit of the current 110' zoning on Huntington Avenue.

Others thought that the critical question was not one of financial need but simply of good city building, and that the responsible deployment of new density in a part of the city well served by transportation infrastructure was a good idea, as long as the urban design was well thought out.

There was also concern that the Church was not including the Midtown Hotel property in their calculations (CSC owns the land, and the lease ends in 2016), and the implication was that if the hotel were included, the needed development would be smaller, and therefore the project could get shorter. The question of the Mid-Town Hotel was most important to those who agreed that the financial need

argument for sizing the development was the relevant one. The CAC's endorsement of the current proposal assumes, and is contingent upon, strictly enforcing any future development plans of the Midtown site to current zoning and FAR limitations in place as of October 2010.

There is also a significant concern about the wind generated by the 500' tower proposed for Dalton/ Belvedere. Because the face of the building comes down directly flush to the street, the wind force generated for pedestrians will be greater than necessary. The CAC encourages the use of a break in the plane of the building as it reaches the street level. Some kind of base or podium is suggested to achieve this break.

Owners and Abutters are concerned about disruption to the foundations of their properties as a result of the large scale construction going on next door, along St. Germaine Street in particular. The CAC recommends that the developer pay particular attention to this in order to ensure that no damage to adjoining foundations occurs.

In addition to the broad agreement that the height and bulk of the proposed buildings are reasonable for the site, and that new zoning assessment was reasonable for such a large holding (12 acres), there was also a minority opinion that the existing zoning protections for the St. Germaine neighborhood be enforced. This would mean a dramatically reduced project, from 500' to 75'.

In the end, however, the majority of the CAC feels that the size of the development is generally acceptable, especially as it is deployed on the portions of the land owned by the Church that everyone agreed were the two most logical parts of the site.

### **Part 2- The Reflecting Pool:** location and visual continuity

The CSC has proposed to demolish the current plaza in order to renovate the garage below and rebuild a more cost effective and environmentally sustainable pool in addition to other landscaping improvements. The proposed work includes adding a crossing to highlight the Mother Church and improve cross-site passage, shortening the pool at the Sunday School building end by about 20' to better facilitate pedestrian traffic and to altering the depth of the pool to save water and energy.

All constituents were in broad agreement that the reflecting pool is one of the city's great treasures and needs to be maintained and protected but recognized that the existing structure requires substantial renovation. The Church's desire to add a crossing was supported by some, but by no means all. The location of the proposed crossing was also discussed. Some saw that a diagonal crossing aligned with the old Norway Street would afford the greatest public benefit by linking Cumberland Street with the Massachusetts Avenue across the site. The CSC proposed a crossing perpendicular to Huntington Avenue, in order to recreate an historic view of the old Mother Church. In general, there was no dissent regarding the shortening of the pool assuming the current visual illusion of the Sunday School floating on water

could be maintained. There was also support in improving the environmental sustainability of the site by making the pool shallower assuming the flat, smooth, uninterrupted visual quality is not altered.

In conclusion, the CAC supports rebuilding and modification of the reflecting pool, including a potential crossing, shortening and depth, in order to provide a more cost effective and environmentally sustainable site. However, any modification of the site must be done in such a manner as to maintain the current visual qualities and illusions of the site as viewed by a 5'6" person standing at ground level at the Children's Fountain end of the pool. The maintenance of this one-of-a-kind visual experience in the city was seen as the single most important aspect of the reflecting pool.

### **Part 3- Streetscape:** set-backs, views, entrances, and loading

In many ways streetscape is the most critical aspect of this proposal. But because it is still very early in the design of the actual structures, this report will mention only basic performance expectations, and leave it for future reviews to assess whether these criteria are being met. The most critical streetscape issues are:

1. Design the base of the Dalton/ Belvedere building so that the scale of St. Germaine is not unduly affected
2. The need for a set back at 50-100 feet above the street to mitigate wind on the tall buildings at both the Belvedere/ Dalton parcel and the Huntington Avenue/ Sunday School locations.
3. Huntington Avenue edge needs to be enlivened and needs more street life at the base of this new building. Restaurant/ Retail?
4. Pedestrians need a nice passage from the back side of new towers on Dalton and Belvedere so that they can get to Boylston Street easily and nicely.
5. Street retail and good pedestrian edges along front of Dalton/ Belvedere
6. View down Dalton from Boylston should terminate well at base level.
7. Views of loading and trash need to be carefully hidden.
8. The CAC feels that the project would benefit from a relocation of the existing bus parking along Huntington Avenue. We understand, as presented by the City, that they are in the process of finding new bus parking locations. However, there was concern by business representatives that adequate bus pick up and drop off accommodations along Huntington Avenue for the thousands of visitors to the area be provided for in any scheme that relocates the bus parking function.

### **Conclusion**

The Christian Science Church proposal places what most deem to be a reasonable amount of development, on the portions of the property best suited to receive it.

The reflecting pool will be completely re-built, but its fundamental visual effect must remain as it is. And the potential for streetscape improvements is high, given that the development is proposed for some of the poorest performing areas of the site. All in all, the development should be a significant improvement for the area, and provide additional generations of Bostonians a wonderful public amenity supported by private funds. It should also be noted that representatives from Fenway Civic Association, Fenway Community Development Corporation and Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay have declined to sign this letter because of unresolved issues previously raised by these organizations and others in comment letters.

**CAC Membership:**

Tom Aucella, Belvedere Condo Association; Kelly Brilliant, Fenway Alliance; Vanessa Calderon-Rosado, Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (IBA); Mark Cataudella, Boston Symphony Orchestra; Christian Coffin, Back Bay Hilton Hotel; Sybil Cooper-King, Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay; William Richardson, Fenway Civic Association; Ryan Higginson, Resident of the South End; Meg Mainzer-Cohen, Back Bay Association; Joanne McKenna, Fenway Community Development Corporation; Craig Nicholson, American Planning Association – Massachusetts Chapter; Lee Steele, St. Botolph Neighborhood Association; George Thrush, Boston Society of Architects; Robert Wright, Symphony United Neighbors; Donald Margotta, Church Park Apartments

**Ex-Officio Members:**

Massachusetts State Representative Byron Rushing; Massachusetts State Representative Sonia Chang-Diaz; Boston City Councilor Chuck Turner