



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

# PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date: April 23, 2014

Subject: Report on 2014 Town-Gown Process

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To the Honorable, the City Council,

On February 4, 2014, the Planning Board heard the annual Town-Gown presentations from MIT, Harvard University and Lesley University. At our meeting on April 1, we had the opportunity to discuss those presentations and reflect on the Town-Gown process in general. We would like to share our thoughts with the Council.

## Reflections on the Town-Gown Process

First, we would like to express our strong appreciation for the Town-Gown process, which we feel is a valuable component of the Board's work. There is a wealth of information in the reports and presentations prepared by the institutions, which helps us to better understand the educational missions of the universities and how they relate to programmatic needs and, in turn, the future development of the physical campus.

On a practical level, this knowledge prepares us to review cases involving institutional development. It is now common for most large-scale institutional development to come before the Planning Board, whether it is for a project review special permit, a rezoning initiative or some other process. For example, the annual Town-Gown reports helped us understand how Lesley's Art Institute project fit into its larger institutional planning, which aided our review of the project when it formally came before the Board. Similarly, our review of MIT's Kendall Square rezoning initiative was informed by our broader understanding of MIT's activities in both the academic and investment realms. This year's reports have prompted Board members to begin thinking about future plans for Harvard's Kennedy School of Government campus and what issues might be considered should that come before the Board. Even learning about campus development initiatives that do not come before the Board, such as MIT's renewal of its existing facilities, helps broaden the context within which we can evaluate future institutional projects.

Another advantage of the process is an opportunity to understand how institutional planning goals relate to citywide planning goals. A key example is the effort being made by the institutions, Harvard especially, to integrate environmental concerns into all aspects of campus development and operations. Understanding the universities' efforts helps to inform the City's own efforts toward climate change mitigation and environmental stewardship, and can result in opportunities for institutions to play a more active role in those citywide initiatives.

The Town-Gown process has also allowed us to focus on specific issues that are not part of the institution's current development plans but are of ongoing interest to the community. For instance, the MIT-owned vacant lot at the corner of School and Cherry Streets has been a longstanding community concern that the Board has continued to call attention to during the Town-Gown process, and is now approaching a positive outcome following an agreement between MIT and the City Council. Similarly, the Harvard-owned lot at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Everett Street, which is now undergoing environmental remediation, is an ongoing issue which the Planning Board will continue to ask about at Town-Gown.

As Cambridge residents, we find that the reports provide insight into the various resources that the universities offer to the city, including cultural, educational and recreational opportunities that can be enjoyed by the broader community. They also lend a greater familiarity to the campuses, which mitigates the sense felt by many in Cambridge that the campuses are not very approachable to individuals outside of the university communities. Our hope is that the general public benefits in a similar way from having this knowledge.

Overall, we feel that the Town-Gown process has played an important role in guiding the relationship between universities and the City from one that was often adversarial to one that is more collaborative and constructive. It provides an opportunity not only to discuss the challenges of institutional development, but to highlight the positive contributions that the institutions offer to the community. Examples include the recent MIT 150 and Lesley Centennial celebrations, and the potential for future celebrations upon completion of the new Harvard Art Museums project.

#### Future Considerations

While we appreciate the value of the current process, we also feel there are opportunities for improvement. In particular, while we learn a great deal from the reports and presentations, there has not been much opportunity for dialogue in recent years. In future years, we hope to promote more discussion between the Planning Board and the institutions on the issues raised in their reports and presentations, and even to encourage the institutions to engage in some dialogue with each other. This may be accomplished by scheduling two separate meetings, one for the Board to hear presentations from the institutions and comments from the public, and another for the Board to lead a conversation with the institutional representatives.

Prior to sending the request for Town-Gown reports this fall, we will have a further discussion to determine how next year's process will be structured and communicate that to the institutions. We welcome any suggestions from the Council for ways that the reporting process might be improved.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,



Hugh Russell, Chair.