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Cambridge City Council
c/o City Clerk
City Hall
Cambridge, MA

Councillors:

At the February 3 meeting of the City Council, the report of the January 22 meeting of the Traffic and Transportation Committee was received and approved. This meeting focused on the issue of conflicts between bicyclists and pedestrians on the sidewalks of the city. As a speaker at the committee meeting, I was disturbed to find that what was reported was exactly the opposite of what I said at the meeting. This concerns me greatly since I am but one person who spoke at one meeting and must assume that similar errors must be occurring in other committee reports.

I cannot say whether city councillors, city officials, or the general public actually read these committee reports. It would be unreasonable and quite unnecessary to expect full transcripts of these meetings. I do, however, feel that these reports should accurately reflect the spirit of testimony presented. There are some of us who at least try to choose our words very carefully when testifying, and even if it is not feasible to be quoted accurately, it would be desirable if at least our meaning can be conveyed accurately. I understand that this is not always a simple task. In recent years, the City Council has created many subcommittees, sometimes of rather questionable relevance, and the Office of the City Clerk has been expected to dutifully record and prepare written reports of hours of testimony every week. In recognition of this, I feel that the responsibility for accuracy must fall on the chairs of the Council subcommittees.

At the conclusion of every committee report can be found the signature of the Chair of that committee. It seems appropriate to me to expect that a Chair should assume the responsibility of ensuring the accuracy of his or her committee's report before signing it. To sign an inaccurate document suggests disregard for those who committed the time to testify or, at best, inattention to detail.

Regarding the report of the Traffic and Transportation Committee, the paragraph referring to my testimony reads as follows:

The committee heard from Robert Winters, 366 Broadway, who stated that sidewalk bicycling is one of the biggest issues. He stated that prior to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) you needed to find a driveway in order to get on the sidewalk. Mr. Winters stated that to eliminate the conflicts the city needs to give equal separate facilities for both pedestrians and bicyclists.

What I actually said at this meeting might be reported, more or less, as follows:

The committee heard from Robert Winters, 366 Broadway, who stated that the issue of sidewalk bicycling has been grossly overstated and is a relatively minor issue in comparison to other pressing matters before the City. He asserted that since the end of rent control, certain issues have been manufactured in order to distinguish the various political players. He quoted as evidence a recent mailing from the Cambridge Civic Association that highlighted the following important issues: Affordable housing, environmental concerns at

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Alewife, affirmative action in city hiring policies, Cambridge's 150th birthday celebration, transportation issues, taxi and bus service, and sidewalk bicycling.

Mr. Winters then asserted his belief that this is now and has always been an issue of conflict resolution and is hardly a new issue. He pointed to evidence from the 19th century showing attempts to minimize conflicts between bicyclists and pedestrians in the design of Beacon Street and the Emerald Necklace in Boston, including provisions for bicycle paths, trolley paths, sidewalks, and bridle paths. What is different today is, in part:

- a) The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which contributed to design changes in sidewalks, providing accessible ramps which make it very simple for bicyclists to speed along sidewalks without the need to jump curbs or find driveways where they can enter or exit a sidewalk.
- b) Current fashion in adolescent behavior in which aggressive bicycle riding on sidewalks is a statement of defiance of law, i.e. "gangsterism." This is not unlike the situation of high school age students walking down the middle of roadways challenging automobiles, a practice common along Broadway and Cambridge Street.
- c) A general erosion of respect for regulations and order.

Mr. Winters suggested that there are some who favor what he called a "Jim Crow" perspective of conflict resolution, one that insists that the only way to resolve conflicts between bicyclists and pedestrians is to provide "separate but equal" facilities such as bicycle lanes. He stated that while he finds some bicycle lanes very appealing and sometimes a necessary improvement, he is skeptical about their need in general. He challenged the notion that the only way for bicyclists and pedestrians to peacefully coexist in places like the Cambridge Common and the Charles River paths is to create separate paths.

Mr. Winters concluded his remarks by suggesting that bicycles must be viewed as a dual entity on the public ways. When a bicyclist is in the roadway, he should behave as an automobile would, following all the rules of the road just like any other vehicle. When a bicyclist needs to or chooses to ride on a sidewalk, he should act as a pedestrian, travel at pedestrian speeds, dismount when many pedestrians are present, yield to pedestrians at all times, and maybe even tip his hat, say excuse me, or stop and strike up a conversation with his fellow pedestrians.

While I would expect that the City Clerk or Deputy City Clerk would provide a much more brief account of my testimony, the written record should at least have captured the spirit of what I had to say. Though not nearly as important as the wording of an ordinance or a significant resolution, all records of City Council affairs should paint an accurate picture of what has taken place.

I would like to encourage all committee chairs to listen very carefully to all testimony at committee meetings and to very carefully review all reports before signing them. Those who record and transcribe testimony of Council and Council subcommittees are human beings and are capable of error. It falls to the Chair of a committee to ensure accuracy and adequate detail. With an sizable increase in salary should come a corresponding increase in attention to the public and in accurately reflecting what the public has to say.

Sincerely,

Robert Winters

Communication was received from Robert Winters, transmitting his concerns regarding the Traffic and Transportation Committee report of January 22, 1997.

In City Council February 10, 1997

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