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CAMBRIDGE MA.

Robert L. Whalen
5 Howland Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
Tel. 497-9269
25 January 1989

Cambridge City Council
City Hall
Cambridge, MA 02139

Re: The purchase by the Cambridge Housing Authority (CHA)
and subsequent plans for #71 Hammond Street

Dear Council Members:

I am writing to express my concern about the recent purchase of #71 Hammond Street by the CHA and their plan to renovate the building into an eight bedroom "community residence." This facility is then to be used to house eight mentally ill patients.

The circumstances under which the CHA has acquired this property are most disturbing. The building was owned by an elderly, life-long resident of Cambridge (Eva Mahoney). Her principal source of support for the past twenty years had been from renting rooms in her home, which is a registered eight bedroom rooming house. With advancing years and numerous recent medical problems, the burden of operating the rooming house had become too great; and she decided to sell the property last fall. For some time now, there had been only a single tenant in the building other than herself.

The one remaining tenant is an individual whom she had previously tried to evict. That eviction was unsuccessful, however. She was told by city officials that while the house could be sold, her tenant had a right to remain in the house for life if he so chose. Thus, any potential buyer of the property had to be informed that the property came with a tenant who could never be evicted. It is no great surprise that she was unable to find a buyer for the house in over six months' time, despite the fact that the house was being offered at a price approximately one half of its value if it had been on the market as a single or two family home.

CHA thus acquired this property at a bargain price. More surprisingly, CHA apparently will be able to evict the remaining tenant to accomplish their objectives. Is it fair to impose one set of rules for individuals, while a state-funded agency is allowed to function without the same limitations? I rather doubt that the intent of rent control in Cambridge is to make victims of the elderly, but in this case that was exactly the result. Indeed, CHA representatives acknowledged at a community meeting held on January 11, 1989, at the Agassiz Neighborhood Council that the effect of rent control in cases such as this has been to make it distinctly advantageous for the CHA to buy property in Cambridge in preference to Somerville, the other community served by the program under which the community residences are provided. It does not seem reasonable that the laws of our city should serve to make victims of its citizens, particularly the elderly, who may have no recourse.

I have substantive objections as well with the CHA plan and the specifics of the program to be established at 71 Hammond Street. It is a euphemism to refer to the proposed facility as a "community residence". In fact, it is to be a mini-mental institution, with eight patients and a staff of nine to provide round the clock surveillance, care, and supervision. According to representatives of CASCAP Inc., the agency most likely to operate the facility, approximately one third of the "clients" in this type of facility will move on to less supervised settings, one third will never do so, and the remaining third are likely to require re-hospitalization. Pressed for more detail, CASCAP will say only that the patients who are accepted in the facility will not have a *pattern* of violent behavior in their background, and specifically that the patients in this facility will be individuals with manic-depressive psychoses or schizophrenia.

Unlike other sites in which this type of facility previously has been established (such as Aberdeen or Lee Streets in Cambridge), Hammond Street is not a major through street. It is rather a quiet, low traffic area with a distinct neighborhood tone. It is common, for example, for children to play and ride bicycles on Howland Street, the street on which I have lived for the last thirteen years. Indeed, there are numerous families with small children here, and the area is characterized by a preponderance of closely spaced, owner-occupied

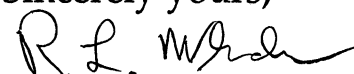
homes. The placement of this type of facility in a neighborhood environment such as this is an affront to good judgement.

No one would argue that the mentally ill need our help and support. The only available choices, however, are not Boston State Hospital or the decimation of our neighborhoods. There are many alternatives which could benefit both the city and its residents as well as provide better care for the mentally ill. For example, why is it not possible to utilize existing, city-owned property for this purpose? Buildings at the Cambridge City Hospital are potentially available which could provide a setting more appropriate for the care of the mentally ill. In addition to not removing property from the tax roles, this would even have the potential to generate income for the city from property which now represents only a drain on the city's financial resources. Doesn't this make more sense?

Finally, I would also like to point out the obvious regarding the placement of these types of facilities at present. In the Agassiz neighborhood we are already besieged with institutions. Harvard University, Lesley College, and three separate sites used for community residences or facilities for the disadvantaged are all located within a small radius. I rather doubt that there is much emphasis by the CHA in placing a facility on Brattle Street, for example, where homes much better suited for institutional use have been for sale. I once believed that zoning laws protected us from arbitrary encroachment of this kind on our neighborhoods, but apparently this is not the case. One can only wonder, also, if the officials making the decisions on these matters are acting in a manner that is "reasonable and consistent with local needs." (Chapter 40A of the Massachusetts General Laws) I think not.

I would be happy to discuss this matter further if there is any purpose, and I can be reached either at my home or at my business number in Somerville which is 628-3654. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely yours,



Robert L. Whalen

4. S-67

Comm. from Robert L. Whalen, expressing concern Re: recent purchase by the CHA of the premises numbered 71 Hammond St. & subsequent plans to renovate the building for use as a community residence.

In City Council,

January 30, 1989

1-30-89

Placed on file. Copy
to the City Manager.

Copy sent to the City Manager 2/1/89 *wh*