

Michael Halle
2 Westacott Court
Cambridge, MA 02139
617-868-3362

January 24, 1998

To: The Honorable Cambridge City Council
Re: Citizen advisory committees

The Honorable Council,

As Chairman of the Bicycle Committee and as a member of several other advisory committees in the past, I would like to ask the Council for its renewed commitment in supporting the work of these types of bodies in the city. These committees are an important way for citizens to be involved in municipal decisions that impact their lives and the lives of others in their community. I have found my participation to be one of the most rewarding civic activities in which I have ever been involved. I believe, in turn, that the committees provide a valuable service to the city by allowing residents from different backgrounds, beliefs, and viewpoints to hear each other's opinions and work toward meaningful compromises within a professional setting. The work of these committees is public, and their meetings are widely publicized; they are a wonderful example of New England participatory democracy in its most tangible and effective sense.

On several occasions, however, the time and effort volunteered by citizen advisory committees has been compromised, and the entire purpose of the committees themselves undermined, by residents who have not participated in the public committee meetings but who have waited until the committee work is complete before raising their objections or making their voices heard. Without the benefit of the committee's discussions, presentations, or deliberations, these residents cannot help but present a narrow view of what is usually a complex and sensitive issue. Conversely, the committee is denied any unique insight these citizens could have provided to the matter at hand. Conflict and division, not compromise and understanding, are the usual result.

This is not a matter of denying the right of any citizen to make his or her voice heard. As chair of my committee I have worked to reach out as widely as possible to include a variety of opinions and ideas; anyone is welcome to constructively contribute, or to listen, or to learn, or to disagree. In my experience, the Community Development Department takes extraordinary steps to incorporate a wide spectrum of viewpoints into the makeup of the committees, and to encourage public attendance in their meetings and other public hearings. But it is the responsibility of interested parties, from ordinary citizens to City Councillors, to participate beginning early in the discussion process; otherwise, it is impossible to reach a solution acceptable to all.

In the end, the well-reasoned and thoughtful conclusions that result from a committee's many hours of meetings and discussions must be weighed as the union of the voices who have contributed to the committee's work. Without the support and respect of the City Council and the city staff, citizen advisory committees cannot fulfill their mission, and citizens have no compelling reason to dedicate their time to them. I ask that you continue your strong support for constructive and organized citizen involvement in the process of improving and guiding our great city.

Sincerely, ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Halle", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Michael Halle
Chairman, Cambridge Bicycle Committee

Consent Communication #5

S-82

Communication was received from Michael Halle, Chairman, of the Bicycle Committee, asking the City Council to support the work of all the citizen advisory committees.

In City Council February 9, 1998

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