

City of Cambridge

The Housing and Community Development Committee held a public meeting on March 30, 1995 beginning at 5:40 pm in the Sullivan Chamber for the purpose of discussing the Cambridge Housing Authority's proposed new affordable housing on Worcester Street.

Present at the hearing were Councillor Francis H. Duehay, Chair of the Committee, Councillor Kathleen L. Born, Councillor Anthony D. Galluccio, Mayor Kenneth E. Reeves, Vice Mayor Sheila T. Russell, Councillor Michael A. Sullivan, and City Clerk D. Margaret Drury. Also present was Daniel Wuenschel, Executive Director, Cambridge Housing Authority (CHA).

Councillor Duehay convened the hearing and explained the purpose. He stated that several weeks ago residents contacted members of the City Council regarding their concerns about housing being built on Worcester Street.

Councillor Duehay said that he wants to put the issue in context. There is an affordable housing crisis in the City. Last November, the City lost nearly 16,000 units of rent control housing. Many people may have to leave Cambridge. In addition, President Clinton has recommended a reorganization of Housing and Urban Development, (HUD) which threatens Cambridge Housing Authority housing. There is also the problem of the "expiring use" buildings which are at risk. This is a growing issue which will affect more and more people.

Councillor Duehay stated that there are no right or wrong answers for this issue. This meeting is to try to solve a problem and come up with a solution. While he has not always agreed with every decision of the Cambridge Housing Authority, Cambridge has a very distinguished and well respected housing authority, one of the best in the country.

Councillor Duehay stated that he wants to hear from the Cambridge Housing Authority and the neighbors. He wants to know if there is a possibility of working together for a solution. He also noted that the Cambridge Housing Authority does not have to listen to the City Council. Councillor Duehay then invited Dan Wuenschel, Executive Director of the Cambridge Housing Authority, to address the Committee.

Mr. Wuenschel stated that for the Cambridge Housing Authority the issue is not just Worcester Street; it is about affordable housing throughout the city. The reason the Cambridge Housing Authority proposes to build on Worcester Street is the tremendous need for affordable housing. Area Four has experienced a reduction of public affordable housing. There were 150 units lost from Washington Elms, through the rehabilitation of that project, and another 14 units from Newtowne Court.

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The Cambridge Housing Authority has funds in hand which it has had since the early '90's. There has been a construction site search throughout the city which has been unsuccessful. Cambridge Housing Authority then turned to the Worcester Street site because the Cambridge Housing Authority owns the site. By packaging it with another development in the Agassiz neighborhood, Garfield Street, the Cambridge Housing Authority can realize economies of scale.

Mr. Wuenschel then addressed the issue of process. He said that CHA's intentions regarding Suffolk Street were widely publicized. Neighborhood meetings began in November. Meetings included Saturday meetings. The neighbors suggested rehab of vacant buildings and the CHA is looking at this, but the cost is much higher because the CHA does not own those properties. In addition, the cost of the gut rehab would exceed the cost of new construction.

Mr. Wuenschel stated that the Cambridge Housing Authority finds it very hard to understand why the construction of approximately 5 units would be so disruptive to the neighborhood. He said that it was comparable to the CHA development on Hingham Street. Mr. Wuenschel stated that the City Council's action seemed to come at midprocess. The Council's intervention tips the scale in favor of the side it assists. If it is the City Council's position that Area Four should not have more affordable housing, this position has not been clearly enunciated. This position would make sites in other areas more expensive. Mr. Wuenschel stated that if the CHA were a private owner, it would build these units of right without engaging the community in discussion.

Councillor Duehay stated that there is a question of whether there is money in the Affordable Housing Trust or elsewhere that could put together with the Cambridge Housing Authority to accomplish the rehab of the blighted buildings instead.

Mr. Wuenschel said that it is not clear that the church that owns the building at 345-347 Washington Street is interested in selling the property. The other site at 370-372 Washington is owned by an individual. That site is very tight. There is no parking and yardspace. The cost issue is the issue of total development cost limits. On Worcester Street, four units would cost \$400,000 while rehab of a four unit on Washington Street would cost \$500,000.

Councillor Duehay asked how much time there is to discuss the alternatives before there is the chance of losing the money altogether.

Mr. Wuenschel said the Cambridge Housing Authority is moving forward on Garfield Street, without waiting for the resolution of this issue. The rescission package proposed in Congress would affect new development funds and there is no clarity as to when this would happen. The way to avoid the consequences is to have a contract. The rehab process will take longer.

Vice Mayor Russell asked if the money is only for new construction.

Mr. Wuenschel said that it could be changed to rehabilitation.

Mayor Reeves stated that the big question is when is the opinion of the neighborhood and its elected Councillors sufficient to end this. Mayor Reeves provided some details regarding the history of the neighborhood. He added that the complex quality of the neighborhood must be taken into account. This neighborhood needs a confluence of new and upper things. There is a real question as to whether Area Four should have more affordable housing. He believes that for a while there should not be more affordable housing in Neighborhood Four. Mayor Reeves asked what it would take to convey a request not to do this.

Mr. Wuenschel said that the Cambridge Housing Authority feels that there has not been enough dialogue for the Council to understand all of the possibilities, such as the possibility of scaling down the site. Sixty years ago there were four houses on the site. Washington Elms and Newtowne Court are an improvement over the housing that was there before.

Councillor Born stated that she had to leave but was very interested in hearing from any neighbors that she has not talked to. Councillor Born said that the City has a huge need for affordable housing; however it is a tremendous mistake for a housing project to come into a neighborhood that universally does not want it. There is already a great deal of affordable housing, there is a lack of green space, and there are dilapidated buildings in need of repair.

Vice Mayor Russell stated that she is anxious to hear from the neighbors. She asked Mr. Wuenschel whether there were any other sites that he knew of. Mr. Wuenschel stated that he did not know of any.

Councillor Galluccio stated that he is troubled about the Cambridge Housing Authority's criticism of the timing of when the City Council got involved. This is not a neighborhood that deserves to be embarrassed about saying no to more affordable housing. He went to a meeting at the request of neighborhood residents. When he asked the Cambridge Housing Authority at the meeting whether the project was going forward, he was told that it was. The CHA was merely telling those present what it was going to do. This was not a negotiating stage.

Councillor Galluccio stated that the residents of Neighborhood Four who point to derelict houses and say those don't exist in West Cambridge are right. Those buildings are a slap in the face, and the neighbors deserve help in fixing them up.

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Mayor Reeves said that there is blighted housing all over the city. The building at Washington and Columbia Street was an estate battle.

Councillor Duehay stated that the Committee will ask for a quick investigation of whether Affordable Housing Trust funds can be used to rehab those blighted buildings.

Councillor Sullivan thanked Dan Wuenschel for his attendance and for the excellent work of the Cambridge Housing Authority. He stated that in this situation Mr. Wuenschel needs to understand the neighborhood's fear in dealing not just with the Cambridge Housing Authority but with the City. There is a feeling that they will not be consulted that the City Council really has to respond to. He hopes the Cambridge Housing Authority and the City can work together to find a solution that the neighborhood and the Cambridge Housing can agree on.

Councillor Duehay stated his intention to request that the City Manager look for rehab funds to put together with Cambridge Housing Authority funds to rehab the blighted buildings on Washington Street as affordable housing. He then requested public testimony on this issue.

Gerald Bergman, Elm Street, stated that he does not believe it is an either or situation. The Cambridge Housing authority suggestion for four units is also an outstanding compromise. Some people have worked on the Washington Street properties for a long time. He agrees with the recommendations, but it will take money and it will be expensive.

Mayor Reeves asked if the site not owned by the church is for sale. Mr. Wuenschel said that it is, for a price, and there is also litigation in the picture.

John Bolson, 25 Suffolk Street, asked Mr. Wuenschel about when a review of the potential rehab would be done.

Mr. Wuenschel said that the Cambridge Housing Authority must know whether there is money available from other sources.

Councillor Duehay said that if the City Council is successful in enjoying the City Manager and the Affordable Housing Trust, then the Cambridge Housing Authority can go forward with its rehab review.

John Bolson said that the community is prepared to work hard with the Cambridge Housing Authority on rehab. The neighbors want to be part of the process and want to know if the Cambridge Housing Authority changes its position from the current "on hold".

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Julia Gregory, Market Street stated that Area Four needs affordable homeownership opportunities. There are many neighbors who want to become homeowners. The Cambridge Housing Authority can help Area Four by helping with the distressed buildings. She urged looking at all the possibilities, and looking for UDAG funds to finance part of the additional costs of rehab.

Jackie Carroll, resident Area Four, stated that she feels like she is in the middle of a family fight. She agrees with everything that Julia Gregory said. Area Four needs all kinds of affordable housing. She suggested putting a committee together to work in the suggested resolution, If UDAG funds will be used, the Coalition must be involved. Area Four needs stability and security.

William Jones, Norfolk Street, stated that he has been on Norfolk Street for 62 years. They need housing there. That neighborhood is not safe.

David Fichter, Worcester Street, stated that the neighborhood was not asked whether they wanted the project; it was not real negotiation. He believes that the question of open space is very important. He lives within sight of those trees and feels that the open space is an integral part of that block. Area Four is one of the neighborhoods with the least open space. Rehabbing the blighted buildings would have an additional benefit for the neighborhood.

Quentin Jay, a resident near the corner of Washington Street, stated that he would love to see the Cambridge Housing Authority develop both blighted properties on Washington Street. He is not sure the building at the corner of Washington Street and Columbia could be saved.

Mayor Reeves agreed that the building probably cannot be saved.

Quentin Jay stated that the Cambridge Housing Authority could do a much better job developing that corner lot than a private developer.

Mrs. Dwayne, Norfolk Street, stated that there are many dilapidated buildings that need rehab.

Vice Mayor Russell moved that the Committee urge the City Manager to find other funds that could be used in conjunction with the CHA funds so that the CHA can rehab blighted buildings instead of building new units on Worcester Street, and further request a quick report back.

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Mayor Reeves asked whether the Cambridge Housing Authority is willing to commit to not going forward at this time on the Worcester Street project.

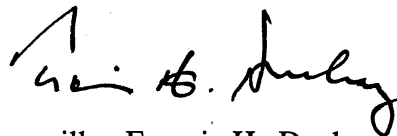
Councillor Galluccio concured.

Councillor Duehay said that the situation is not at a impasse right now.

Mr. Wuenschel stated that the Cambridge Housing Authority will not go any further without notifying everybody in some way.

Vice Mayor Russell's motion was adopted on a unanimous voice vote and the hearing was adjourned at 7:25 p.m.

For the Committee

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Francis H. Duehay", written over a horizontal line.

Councillor Francis H. Duehay, Chair

COMMITTEE REPORTS

Housing and Community Development
Committee Report regarding a public
hearing held on March 30, 1995 for the
purpose of discussing the Cambridge
Housing Authority's proposed new affordable
housing on Worcester Street.

In City Council,

April 10, 1995

*Report accepted
and placed on file*