



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

CITY HALL, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02139

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Alfred E. Vellucci
Mayor

REPORT OF THE BLUE RIBBON COMMITTEE

ESTABLISHED BY THE CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL ON MAY 11, 1987

MEMBERS:

Vincent J. Panico, Atty., Chairman
John Fresina
Anne Marie Jarosiewicz
Gerald McDonald
Richard McKinnon
Robert Trow



City of Cambridge

17.

IN CITY COUNCIL

May 11, 1987

VICE-MAYOR VELLUCCI

ORDERED: That His Honor, the Mayor be and hereby is requested to appoint a "Blue Ribbon Committee" comprised of members of this City Council and other municipal officials as may be deemed appropriate, to review the operation, staffing and space requirements of the Inspectional Services Department and to report back to the full Council upon completion of its work.

In City Council May 11, 1987.
Adopted by the affirmative vote of 8 members.
Attest:- Joseph E. Connarton, City Clerk.

A true copy;

ATTEST:-

Handwritten signature of Joseph E. Connarton.

Joseph E. Connarton, City Clerk.

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PROLOGUE

On May 11, 1987 the Cambridge City Council established a "Blue Ribbon Committee" with the task of reviewing the operation, staffing and space requirements of the Inspectional Services Department (ISD), and to report back to the full council upon the completion of its work.

In July of 1987 Walter J. Sullivan (then Mayor of the City of Cambridge) appointed a six member commission to implement the charge contained in the May City Council resolution. The Blue Ribbon Committee is chaired by Vincent Panico and includes the following individuals; Gerald McDonald, Ann Marie Jarosiewicz, Richard McKinnon, John Fresina, and Robert Trow.

The Committee has been meeting with various representatives from city agencies and departments, knowledgeable professionals in and outside of the city of Cambridge, and conducted a public hearing in which there was participation from individual citizens, employees of the city, elected and appointed public officials and representatives from a variety of citizen groups.

Early on in our deliberations it was the unanimous decision of all members of the Committee that the group's task would be centered on studying the operation of the Inspectional Services Department with a view towards developing recommendations to improve its functioning and provide for improved quality of life for the employees of the city and its citizens. All members of the Committee felt strongly that their task was not to be an investigatory body to examine the specific work performance of individuals; but, rather the department as a whole. Therefore, our mission was to learn about current operations and to develop recommendations to improve the operation of the Inspectional Services Department.

The members of the Committee want to personally thank the individuals who cooperated so willingly and freely in helping the Committee complete its task. Many of the recommendations contained in this report came from those closest to the situation: the competent and dedicated employees of the city of Cambridge and their elected officials. The testimony from City Councilors and citizen's groups provided invaluable guidance and assistance.

In developing our recommendations the members of the Blue Ribbon Committee understand and appreciate the importance of having this report discussed candidly among the community and with members of the Inspectional Services Department. Therefore, we urge that this report and its recommendations be shared with members of the Inspectional Services Department, elected and appointed city officials, and the citizens of Cambridge so that we can all benefit from their further advice and counsel. Providing a constructive environment for the review and analysis of these recommendations will provide untold benefits for all.

The Blue Ribbon Committee felt that there were three overarching issues that any study of the Inspectional Services Department must address:

1. Realistic courses of action to insure the life safety of residents and visitors
2. Objective and uniform enforcement of all applicable codes and regulations
3. Efficient and expeditious service to all who come in contact with the Inspectional Services Department (e.g. citizens, employees of other city agencies/departments builders/contractors/developers, etc.).

INADEQUATE FACILITIES

Both through conversations with employees of the city, individuals who utilize the services of the Inspectional Services Department, and first hand observation by members of the Blue Ribbon Committee it is apparent that the facilities and non salary resources provided to the Inspectional Services Department have not kept pace with the growing demands placed upon that organization. The Committee could have developed a lengthy list of specific examples of the inadequate, existing facilities. We would, however, like to highlight some issues. There is no space for quiet and thoughtful plan review; there is no desk or work area to spread out plans for review with individuals who come before ISD; there are no quiet meeting rooms; there is no waiting area; there is no information counter, and there is no way for people to talk to each other privately or in small groups.

The vast majority of the interaction between members of the department and the public takes place in a hallway. Given the fact that there are four or five conversations going on at the same time, undivided attention, service and confidentiality to clients is all but impossible. Members of the Committee were, in fact, amazed at how much business is able to be conducted under such adverse working conditions.

We feel that a facilities master plan should be developed for the Inspectional Services Division using a minimum square footage in the range of 100 - 150 square feet per employee including hallways, non assignable space (e.g., passageways, etc.). A limited number of client/staff meeting rooms for plan review and discussions, a waiting area, and a secure file/storage/record facility must be provided along with a controlled library for legal/reference/code books, etc. The work environment, given the volume of activity and the emotionally charged issues that arise should have adequate lighting, ventilation, air conditioning and furnishings to help create a professional working environment.

MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS

In order for the Inspectional Services Department to provide for the required, secure management of plans, permits, certificates, citations, inspectional reports and to insure consistent tracking, follow up and follow through, the manual file card

system must be updated through the introduction of on-line computerization. The information needed by the Inspectional Services Department, other city agencies and clients lends itself to computerization. A citywide data-base, available to the public on a user fee basis, can and should be established. This data base should include information such as zoning, rent control status, historical designation, applicable codes for designated property, record of complaints (present/past), variances (granted/denied), inspection reports/due dates and all other essential information. In effect, there is no one place that needed information is readily available.

The building department currently maintains a hard copy file card system that is, to be charitable, woefully inadequate. Plans, documents, record keeping and other valuable documents are not kept in a secure environment. This manual system does not lend itself to the almost impossible task of tracking/locating needed information.

The lack of even such basic equipment as word processing causes a breakdown in service to clients. The vast majority of ISD tasks can be standardized. Whether it is letters to applicants, follow up on citizen complaints, routine inspections and follow up for health sanitation, informing clients routinely as to the status of applications/complaints is made almost impossible due to the manual method and systems presently employed. It is clear that standardization of the business practices of the department is urgently needed and lend themselves to computer/word processing applications.

Integrating the word processing functions into the management information system suggested above would allow, for example, a client to go to a single source and have immediately available the status of any action, complaint, inspection, or inquiry; know when it was received; where it was forwarded to; when it was forwarded; and what action has/has not been taken. The issue of creating an integrated management information system is an urgent priority. If the city is going to be able to service present and emerging needs brought on by the enormous demands and continuing economic development, an MIS program is needed. The installation of a computer system would provide, to all members of city government, instant access to information so that they may better serve Cantabrigdeans. We also recommend that a terminal to the system be available to City Councilors, the City

Manager, and other elected and appointed officials on an as needed basis. In that way, additional steps can be taken to help insure improved constituent services.

TELEPHONES

The mere act of calling on the telephone to the Inspectional Service Department can be difficult and frustrating. An examination should be undertaken to insure that there are adequate and dedicated phone lines to each branch of the department. Consideration must be given to surveying the current number of telephone instruments. Each employee should have a phone or easy access to one. This is now not the case.

PERSONNEL

The essence of any organization are its people: those charged with carrying out the mission. Clearly, the staff of the Inspectional Services Department are key custodians of the life safety of the city. They bear the enormous responsibility of insuring that policies and procedures are translated into realistic courses of action. As the vast myriad of rules, regulations, policies, procedures, codes and laws become more complex, the duties and obligations of the staff in Inspectional Services Division become more onerous and burdensome. Changes, occurring at an ever escalating rate, put incredible pressure and demands on individuals.

JOB DESCRIPTION

Each position in the department must have a clearly defined job description developed from a realistic assessment of the current complexity of each position. The position description must be carefully developed for each job and include a review of required minimum qualifications. We recommend that examination of existing local, regional, and national standards for such positions be undertaken. The salaries paid should be determined in keeping with the revised position description/qualification statement and be competitive and equitable across the department. Salaries should be determined based upon level of responsibility, accountability, complexity, scope of responsibility and market conditions. The honesty and integrity of individuals working in the Inspectional Services Department must be above reproach. Internal personnel management is a critical task before ISD's supervisors. In order to insure and maintain appropriate levels of morale, the equitable and consistent application of city personnel policies and procedures must be insured.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Given the ever changing nature of the tasks before the Inspectional Services Division, a commitment must be made for continuing professional education. The Inspectional Services Department should make available funds for its employees to attend seminars on topics such as code enforcement, building regulations, health inspection issues and other appropriate issues to insure personnel are current and up to date; Internal

"workshops on interpersonal relationships and communication skills would play a constructive role in the department's ongoing operations.

The critical need for intra and inter department communication cannot be overstated. The relationship between the Inspectional Services Division and other agencies and boards such as those dealing with rent control, historical commission, community development, public works, and the police and fire departments are critical to the well being and efficient running of city government.

DEFINITION OF RESPONSIBILITY

The Committee recommends that a legal opinion be obtained defining the specific authority of each city department that interacts with Inspectional Services Division as well as ISD itself. The development of a clear set of legal boundaries and responsibilities for each agency and department would establish a framework for ISD operations. Given the workload of the city's law department and the need to accomplish this task expeditiously, consideration should be given to engaging outside counsel for this purpose. The Committee feels that clear jurisdictional definitions would facilitate improved service and ultimately save the city untold hundreds of thousands of dollars, i.e. legal fees, etc.

INTER DEPARTMENTAL COMMUNICATION

The Committee feels regular monthly meetings should take place between departments such as building, rent board, historical commission, community development, and ISD chaired by a Deputy City Manager. These meetings should have a formalized agenda and include the specific review of interdepartmental policies and procedures as well as current topics of contention. The goal of these meetings would be to resolve current issues before individual agencies. Authority to resolve disputes should be vested with the appropriate manager. We feel that the coming together of these departments in a routine, yet formalized manner will provide savings in time, manpower and legal fees. It would be prudent if the attorneys representing each of these boards would be required to expeditiously develop defined operational parameters. All agency/departmental attorneys should be mandated to work cooperatively in this undertaking.

STAFFING LEVELS

We feel there needs to be a ratio of staff to client service/workload developed. There are standards that can be gathered from other departments/agencies and national organizations such as BOCA to help determine reasonable levels of staffing for professional, secretarial and support personnel. Inadequate staffing along with poor working conditions affects morale. Staffing levels must be flexible and adjust to the ebb and flow of permits, etc.

The Committee recognizes that there will be ongoing need for specialized consultants (i.e., structural, electrical, mechanical, sanitation, etc.) that should be retained. Allowance should be made for these specialists in the departmental budget.

DEPARTMENTAL MORALE

It was evident from the Committee's work that morale in the department was at an undesirable level. While there may be many interpretations of why this is the fact, the Committee has the following observations: there has been an unusual amount of conflict within the department - we feel that clear and consistent chain of command policies and procedures would help to alleviate conflict.

We have previously mentioned the physical work environment, the need for appropriate job classification review/equitable pay and the development of staffing ratios based on workload. Along with these, it is clear that the department needs additional professional expertise through the addition of a licensed architect and the establishment of a position such as Assistant Commissioner who would be charged with the day to day administration of the department, the operational liaison with other city departments and daily supervision of personnel. The Commissioner's role should be one of policy development, policy enforcement, planning, budget, personnel management including staff training and development (a critical need) and the establishment of job performance outcome system. The coordination with other city departments on policy would also be the purview of the Commissioner.

The Committee recommends that the office be closed to the public one day a week to allow the staff quiet time to review plans, etc. and discuss problems.

INTERNAL POLICY AND PROCEDURES

The Committee recommends that, within the Inspectional Service Department, an internal policy and procedure committee be formed from the staff of the department. All areas should be represented (e.g. electrical, plumbing, building, health, etc.) to codify, develop and periodically review consistent departmental policies and procedures.

A departmental manual must be compiled. Increased coordination and communication between the divisions within Inspectional Services Department would be constructive and is needed. Obviously, policies and procedures must conform to applicable city, state and national codes in keeping with legal obligations and responsibilities. This group would also review proposed new policies and procedures for ISD and other city department for comment and incorporation of changes into the departmental operational plan on an ongoing basis. The efforts and work of this committee should be publicly promulgated in a manual for use by all department personnel and in a series of readable, user friendly brochures for clients who come before the department.

PUBLICATIONS/COMMUNICATIONS

Client/user friendly information sheets or pamphlets should be made available to the public and include step by step instructions and explanations on such topics as how to apply for a building permit, how to apply for a certificate of occupancy, how to apply to the board of appeals, how to file a complaint, the role and function of health inspections within the city of Cambridge, how to apply for an inspection certificate, and an informational guide to the Inspectional Services Department that includes divisions and offices, personnel, phone numbers and where to obtain information on appropriate topics.

EXPANDED HOURS

We feel that the Inspectional Services Department, staff permitting, should establish evening and/or Saturday hours for the use of the citizens of Cambridge exclusive of contractors and

developers. These services should be available for owners of small, residential properties.

TABLE OF ORGANIZATION

A table of organization clearly indicating job descriptions, chain of command, responsibility centers etc. should be developed and provided to all city organizations and agencies. This organizational chart should include responsibilities, assignment methods, supervision of each position and be accompanied by a detailed flow chart for each and every action/procedure (i.e., permits, inspections, appeals, complaints, code interpretations, etc.).

EXTERNAL FUNDING

There may be opportunities to obtain grants from the Commonwealth to provide training, development, help with reorganization/modernization/upgrading of the Inspectional Services Department. The Committee urges appropriate individuals within the city of Cambridge to research external sources of funding promptly. There might be opportunities, given the educational institutions within our city, for the establishment of an intern or apprentice system whereby (at little or no cost to the city) qualified individuals may be assigned to internships or practicums within ISD to help meet the increasing needs of the city.

OFFICE SPACE WITHIN ISD FOR OTHERS

Consideration should be given to assigning individuals from other city departments/agencies space within the Inspectional Services Department so that they can fulfill their responsibilities for plan review in a more coordinated and efficient manner. Plan review should take place without having documents/plans removed from ISD.

NEEDED SUPPORT DOCUMENTS

The personnel in the Inspectional Services Division could perform their tasks in an improved fashion if they were provided (on an ongoing basis) with a comprehensive, up to date, copy of the zoning ordinance and an updated zoning map. The Committee was unable to locate these two needed items. The issue of having documents such as these readily available may go a long way

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towards reducing potential liability issues that the city now confronts.

INTERPERSONAL MANAGEMENT SKILLS

We feel personnel trained in interpersonal relations should be assigned the task, within the Inspectional Services Division, of resolving minor problems and disputes. We feel the department should establish administrative procedures for dispute resolution that allows for expeditious service to citizens.

ADMINISTRATIVE DECISION MAKING

Many issues that come before the Inspectional Services Division that ultimately require action by a variety of other city agencies are minor in nature. The Committee feels that the city should establish, through the delegation of responsibility, a system for administrative adjudication of minor matters. A variety of permits and variances that come before the city and that take a tremendous amount of time and effort are routinely approved due to no objections from neighbors, no detrimental effects, etc. if granted. The city, in conjunction with the Inspectional Services Department should establish a category of issues/cases that zoning or other administrators could routinely approve without the necessity of going before the board of zoning appeals or other such body. A great deal of time, money and effort is tied up in insignificant cases that slow down the process and frustrate all involved and hinder service to citizens.

FAST-TRACK PERMITS

We feel that the Inspectional Services Division should establish a fast track permitting system that would facilitate the bringing on line of large scale commercial and residential projects. The Inspectional Services Division should give consideration to establishing a two tier permit system where overall building envelope/major systems permits could be approved at one level and built out of that space (e.g. finishes, internal partitioning location of appropriate fire safety items, etc.) could be expedited in keeping within code requirements (i.e. corridor size, egress, fire safety, etc.). We feel this would provide added service, stimulate rateables and contribute to the well being of the city.

DISTRESSED BUILDING PROTOCOLS

The Committee feels that there needs to be a specific set of policies and procedures (clearly defined) dealing with distressed building protocols that allow for fair/timely/expeditious public hearings with the results communicated to the public and interested parties.

FEES

The Committee believes that the fee structure for permits etc., under the purview of the Inspectional Services Department should be examined. The department generates revenue in excess of what it spends on day to day operations. Consideration should be given to dedicating a percentage of fee income to the department for its operations so that as its workload increases through additional activity, it has a predictable source of income to fund needed staff expansion. At the same time, should activity decrease, funds available to the department would correspondingly be reduced.

The Committee feels not only should the fee rates be examined but that there needs to be a rigorous procedure for examining actual construction costs vs. estimates. The Committee mentioned previously the importance of interdepartmental communication. Information on project expenditures related to appearances before the rent control board should be routinely provided to the Inspectional Services Department so that they could match the cost of the permit with the alleged cost of project improvements.

Costs change once a project starts. Provided expenditures for a project do not go over a certain percentage of the initial estimate, the fees should be revised based on the new estimate and levied at the prevailing rate. However, if the estimate and the actual cost vary by a significant percentage, say 25%, then there should be a fine equivalent to treble damages for grossly underestimating costs. Though the Committee has no empirical evidence, it is our opinion as well as that of individuals with whom we have spoken to informally, that the city loses revenue through the underestimating of construction costs, particularly on large projects.

This policy may require the Inspectional Services Department to employ a building estimator or for those applying for permits to submit certified estimates from a licensed estimator along with filing certified project completion costs prior to the issuance of a Certificate of Occupancy.

The Committee feels strongly that the city needs to look at the costs of operating a professional, well staffed and well supported Inspectional Service Division in light of the demands

placed upon the department by users. Clearly, the users of the department (through user fees) should cover the direct and indirect costs of operating the Inspectional Services Division.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Given both the philosophy of the citizens of Cambridge, their elected and appointed officials and the nature of the work within the Inspectional Services Department, it is important that the staff of the department represent the makeup of the population of the city and include (for occupational and philosophical reasons) women and minorities. The department should develop an Affirmative Action program in concert with appropriate city personnel policies and procedures.

ENFORCEMENT OF POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Any work that takesplace within the city of Cambridge, must, at all times, be in keeping with all applicable rules, regulations, codes, etc. Work must be performed consistently according to the letter of the law. There is no question that (at times) work has begun in the city without the issuance of all appropriate permits. Relief should be sought through the courts immediately. There needs to be strong, forceful and consistent enforcement of all rules and regulations in an unstinting fashion. Any time there is a violation that could effect life safety, members of the Inspectional Services Department should be empowered immediately to seek injunctive relief. Applicable city policies and procedures should be amended to provide for substantial financial penalties to those taking such unauthorized action as beginning work without permits. The city of Cambridge must be known as a place where you cannot dig first and apply for a permit second.

GENERAL COMMENTS

In the course of our study, Committee members came into contact with various representatives of City Boards and Departments. In speaking with these individuals, we were impressed with their spirit of cooperation. We found a sincere desire to work together towards improving the efficiency of services to the public as well as the quality of life in the working environment.

The Committee hopes that immediate action is taken to utilize this very valuable asset.

Chairman:

Vincent J. Panico, Atty.

Members:

Gerald McDonald

Ann Marie Jarosiewicz

Richard McKinnon

John Fresina

Robert Trow

5-210

Report of the Blue Ribbon Committee Established
by the Cambridge City Council on May 11, 1987 to
review the operation, staffing & space requirements
of the Inspectional Services Dept.

In City Council,

March 28, 1988