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To: The Honorable City Council

From: Tom Buffett  
Eric Grunebaum  
Ruthann Rudel

2003 MAY -8 P 4: 49

Re: Trolley Square development, affordable housing and community process

OFFICE OF THE CITY CLERK  
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

Date: May 12, 2003

We served on the CDD-run Trolley Square Committee (TSC) and have met with Mayor Sullivan, Councilors Reeves and Galluccio, City Manager Healy, and two members of the Affordable Housing Trust several times since the Council voted to delay action on the original Trolley Square disposition report forwarded to the Council on March 24. Last Wednesday night (May 7), Councilor Galluccio and Manager Healy participated in what was by all accounts a highly civil discussion regarding the new disposition report on your agenda for today (May 12).

Out of this meeting, the community generated several issues that it would like you to consider as you deliberate the fate of Trolley Square:

**1) Our concerns relate to COMMUNITY PROCESS and GOOD URBAN DESIGN, not limitations on Affordable Housing.** The city's goal of increasing the stock of affordable housing in Cambridge enjoys broad support in North Cambridge. What also enjoys broad support is creating a balanced, well-thought out addition to this important thoroughfare in Cambridge.

**2) Opportunity costs should be considered for ALL potential uses, not just affordable housing.** As you know, land acquisition is the most expensive part of any city development. The new disposition report argues that you should consider the missed opportunity to develop affordable housing units at Trolley Square as "costs" associated with the project. But the same costs exist for the missed opportunity of creating open space and community arts/retail uses (i.e. a balanced, mixed-use project.) Along Massachusetts Ave. in North Cambridge, all of the recent developments are dense housing projects, with more projects of this kind already in the works. Trolley Square represents the last, best opportunity to create a vibrant development of mixed uses.

**3) Trolley Square should provide a sense of identity for North Cambridge and a source of pride for all of Cambridge.** The TSC recommendations outline a vision for a balanced mix of uses—these will not be realized if you designate less than a quarter of the parcel for contiguous open space, do not implement additional strategies to provide parking relief and do not specify that community arts/retail must be included at a significant level. Several local arts groups have already expressed both an interest in community space and a willingness to manage it. Trolley Square has been a vacant lot for a long time—turn it into something special! The City is not likely to have another opportunity to improve Mass. Ave. on par with Trolley Square because the City owns the land. The onus is on the City to take advantage of this one-of-a-kind opportunity.

**4) At stake is YOUR valuation of community process.** Make no mistake: how you vote on this issue will reflect how much you value the voice of the North Cambridge community as well as your city planning processes in general. At the very first TSC

meeting, someone said, “You know, the City is going to do what they want anyways.” The cynicism was dispiriting, and for a year we ignored the warning. We have operated in good faith throughout this process. But what are we to tell a neighbor who asks us about getting involved in future city-sponsored planning processes? We want to be able to tell other residents that the City takes community process seriously, and that it is worthwhile to get involved because their voice matters—particularly when the results are as balanced as are the TSC’s Recommendations.

What is interesting to us is that the City invested so much time and energy in developing a neighborhood perspective on Trolley Square. There were multiple opportunities for all interested parties to express their opinion on all aspects of the project, however no one from AHT and no Councilors attended any of our meetings. Creating democratic processes only to ignore the results breeds the worst kind of cynicism because it trivializes civic participation (similar to our last presidential election).

Mayor Sullivan, Councilors Galluccio and Reeves and Manager Healy have worked hard to diffuse this cynicism by carefully focusing on Trolley Square over the past six weeks, and we are very grateful for this attention. However, as we have said to them all along, the extent to which the neighborhood believes its interests and concerns are taken seriously depends upon how close the Council moves toward the TSC recommendations. Every resident should care about this issue because, fundamentally, it concerns whether the City (you and other city officials) honor his or her voice.

In order to do justice to community processes throughout the City, and in the spirit of compromise we respectfully ask that you amend the new disposition report such that it:

- Requires the development of at least 6000 square feet of community arts/retail space (eliminate the caveat which states “if financially feasible”). This is a necessity if we are to integrate the project into the streetscape.
- Increase the minimum amount of open space to 9,000 square feet (25% of the site), and stipulate that this space should be “contiguous.”
- Change the range of housing units such that no more than 35 units are built. This number is within the range specified in the original disposition report and allows the other uses to fit on the oddly configured site.
- Extend the public benefit clause in perpetuity.
- Provide additional traffic calming and relief measures in the immediate area.

All of these changes represent significant departures from the TSC recommendations, and thus we can claim no broad support for them. Each of you must now decide how much value you place on community process—the more your comments and the Council’s collective decision reflect the original TSC recommendations, the more you value community process. Supporting democratic principles in the abstract is easy. Supporting democratic processes *even when they produce decisions that are different than you would like* is exceptionally hard. This is an important moment for you, the City Council. Whatever value you say you place on community process will remain lip service if the consensus recommendations of the Trolley Square Committee are ignored.

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**Communication #3**

A communication was received from Tom Buffett, Eric Grunebaum and Ruthann Rudel, regarding Trolley Square Development.

**In City Council May 12, 2003**

**REFERRED TO UNFINISHED  
BUSINESS #8.**