



City of Cambridge

IN CITY COUNCIL

MAYOR VELLUCCI

May 3, 1982

ORDERED: That the Mayor's Housing Initiative #2, "Housing of the Poor" be studied for one week so that the Council may review its contents with the view in mind that at the next meeting of the City Council this Initiative will be voted on as an official housing policy of the city and sent to the City Manager for implementation.



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CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
MASSACHUSETTS 02139 • 617-498-9090

Alfred E. Vellucci
Mayor

MAYOR'S HOUSING INITIATIVES

INITIATIVE #2

HOUSING OF THE POOR



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
MASSACHUSETTS 02139 • 617-498-9090

Alfred E. Vellucci
Mayor

April 30, 1982

The Honorable, The City Council, and The Citizens of Cambridge:

I worry about poor people. I worry even more about poor people who must live in poor housing.

Fire.

The threat of fire, the onset of fire, the aftermath of fire; that period of agony after fire has struck when firefighters search through the devastated remains, and all who bear witness to this pervasive scene on the urban landscape join in silent prayer that all have escaped and none were left behind.

The prayer is not always answered; and all do not escape to safety; and some, it is learned, have again been left behind.

The tragedy of fire in terms of its human costs cannot be measured. It is beyond measure. It assaults the conscience and integrity of cities and their governments.

A city that does not seek out, identify, and then strive to remedy those housing conditions of deterioration and neglect which are the recipe for fire is a city that is not well governed.

Junk housing; slum housing; neglected housing; housing that is infected, where paint peels from the walls and odors of sewerage overwhelm.

What is it like for young children to grow up in a house like this? What does it do to that child? Regardless of the love inside the house, what does it say to the kids who grow up in places like this? How do they feel about

themselves?

Is a price not paid when the homes in which they live are falling apart before their eyes?

Think of our older citizens. Imagine for a moment what their days must be like when during their later years some wind up spending those days in places like these.

I worry about poor people who must live in poor housing? I want to do something about the problem.

I have a plan which attempts to address the problem fairly, systematically and decisively.

I intend to ask my colleagues on the City Council to adopt this plan as an official policy of the City government.

The plan, my Housing Initiative Number 2, is presented on these pages in some detail. I invite comments and suggestions from my colleagues and the public. But I urge that we move quickly and boldly towards a solution.

This city has a history of concern for the housing where its people live. Our housing programs and commitments draw national attention.

Nonetheless, pockets of bad housing still remain while other housing drifts dangerously towards disrepair. We must put our energy in this direction. We must remedy that poor housing within our city and develop a system to keep borderline housing out of trouble.

I pledge my support and the support of my office towards this task.

Very truly yours,



Alfred E. Vellucci

Mayor

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SUMMARY

- (1) The Building Department, in concert with other agencies will develop a permanent ongoing system of inspections of multi-family dwellings. The idea is to identify troubled housing and develop and maintain a new computerized inventory of our housing stock to make this easier in the future.
- (2) Once troubled housing is identified, a new public/private partnership will step in to play a helpful role. Working with the owners, tenants and local banks, a step by step program of rehabilitation will be designed and executed.
- (3) The goal is to save housing that is falling off the edge and to keep worsening housing from getting into a critical state of disrepair. We want to help not penalize; and improve trouble housing.

THE PROGRAM

Low income residents generally occupy that part of the housing stock which over the last few decades has had the least amount of money invested in it. The structures may not be the oldest in the City, but they are the most neglected and the end product of decades of neglect is the loss of these units from the housing stock for low income families. This happens because of fire, a finding of unfitness for human habitation, abandonment, demolition or conversion to middle class use through large investment. All these paths lead to loss of a vital part of our housing.

Until now, no city agency monitored the state of this part of our housing on a regular basis. Code enforcement has depended on complaints, and this tends to serve middle class people who insist on results from bureaucracy, rather than low income people who tend not to know their rights to decent housing and are reluctant to become involved with bureaucracy.

This leads to a situation in which municipal resources are misdirected, and the housing we should be watching is allowed to deteriorate.

The Mayor is determined to reverse this situation by recommending strong policies favoring investments and proper maintenance in the structures housing low income people. But such policies, however well intended, can only be effective if they are backed-up by concrete programs of action. For this reason, my second Housing Initiative involves the adoption of the following two-part strategy:

First, a systematic building inspection program of multi-family housing by the Building Department. The State Building Code mandates inspection of all multifamily residential structures every five years. The recently appointed Building Commissioner, Mr. Joseph Cellucci, intends to make these inspections on a regular basis, starting this year, focussing on conditions that are hazardous

and a specific danger to life and safety.

Second, the creation of a new program to provide direct assistance to rental housing, targetted to the lower income neighborhoods of Cambridge, with the aim of upgrading and preserving rental housing for the benefit of lower income families. This new program initiative seeks to bring together in a form of a working partnership all of those who share a common interest in reversing the pattern of deterioration and disinvestment in rental housing---tenants, property owners, city agencies and local banks and businesses. I believe that it is only through the cooperation and participation of these sectors in a new program that the rental housing issue can be addressed at the appropriate level.

Currently, the Cambridge Community Development Department, in consultation with the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation (a non-profit corporation chartered by Congress) is developing a program that can facilitate this new partnership. I am prepared to lend the support of the Mayor's Office to the creation of this new public/private program to preserve and upgrade rental housing in Cambridge.

The Cambridge Rent Control Board will furnish the Building Department with a list of all multifamily structures under rent control (all structures completed before January 1, 1969 with four units or more). This list includes rent levels; therefore it will be easy to identify the structures with rent levels in the lowest quarter. This selected list will become the starting point for inspections, on the reasonable theory that the structures with the lowest rents will tend to house low income residents and, because of low rents are likely to be in need of work.

The Superintendent of Buildings intends to make the inspection without entering the residential units. The exterior and common areas would be examined

Heretofore, the Building Department has maintained handwritten records only, but the information obtained in these inspections would form the basis of a new data bank which would be accessible electronically to the Health Department (also now using manual records), the Fire Department, Community Development and Rent Control. This information will also be useful to the Assessors. Note that the Historical Commission has photographs of every structure; it may be possible to make them accessible also.

A form will be developed for these inspections to record the information about condition of the foundation, roof, gutters, downspouts, windows, siding, porches and doors, all visible from the outside any structural failures, particularly at the corners would be noted. And the form will also include data on the mechanical systems as visible in the basement including the plumbing, heating systems (if centrally heated from the basement), and electric service and panels.

Such forms have been used before and can be designed for rapid transfer of data to the Data Bank. The City is now setting up its own computer system. All of these forms will be designed to be used in conjunction with it, even if the conversion of records from manual to electronic form takes a bit longer.

If the building inspection reveals signs of serious defects, a Health Department inspection of the residential units should follow. The reasoning is simple: If the building inspection finds a properly maintained building without problems, there is probably no need to invest more inspection time on it. Conversely, if major problems are found a follow up inspection of the units by Health Inspectors is probably warranted.

Again a new form will be designed to record information about the state of the units, with particular attention to the condition of the windows, (the Housing Code mandates certain standards of weathertightness) and presence or

absence of insulation in the walls. This is important because heating fuel costs form a large and rising part of housing costs particularly for low income people. And energy conservation should be an important municipal goal. Our commitment to world peace can be demonstrated by efforts to stop the waste of limited resources. The unit inspection will record, in addition to the condition of windows, the state of the plumbing, and the adequacy of wiring. Older buildings usually have insufficient power as well as insufficient number of outlets for modern appliances, leading to overloading of wires and fires. Fires of electrical origin are increasingly common. Insulation can increase this danger because it closes off the previously well ventilated spaces in the framing and allows heat to build up. Therefore, it is important to rewire before insulating. And it is important to know the conditions as they exist.

Heating systems in apartments for low income people often consist of parlor heaters and gas on gas kitchen stoves. These are economical to operate compared with boilers in the basement, but they use air from the apartment for combustion and can present a danger when the apartment is made weathertight; there is less free air to allow the safe venting of the fumes, resulting in more combustion products in the apartment. And it is now known that even very small amount of carbon monoxide are very dangerous. Therefore the use of such heating equipment should be noted, and it should either be provided with fresh air intake at the point of combustion or replaced with a central system which does not depend upon air in the apartment for combustion, before efforts are made to make the unit weathertight.

An inspection of the unit will also reveal the condition of floors, walls, and ceilings.

All of this information from both the building and health inspectors is assembled in the data bank. Inspectors also would rate the seriousness of the conditions found looking at the building as whole. The evaluation enables rapid identification of buildings in need of work, and the assignment of priorities.

If a building is found to be in serious trouble, the building inspector will set up a meeting with the owner and go over the problems.

A new nonprofit program, (now being developed) would then adopt the role of the county agent, who helps farmers do a better job. The basic idea is to bring together the property owner and tenants to formulate a several year program for building improvements and continued maintenance, starting with the life/safety improvements that are most urgent. The new program will then act as a resource in raising funds from banks and public agencies (where necessary) to finance the property improvements and to provide rental subsidies, where needed, for eligible tenants.

It will assist property owners in carrying out the actual rehabilitation work to ensure the best value and workmanship. The program will coordinate the improvements with the Rent Control Board.

The rent board is clearly involved in the process. Many owners have never done anything with the rent board other than register the property, and do not know that the board has rapid procedures to make rent adjustments for capital improvements and replacements.

The idea is lay before the owner and tenants of the defects found in the building, why they must be fixed, to help find competent help for the owner and

to explain how the rent board can adjust rents when the work is done. It is probably not necessary to underline the enforcement powers of the City, nor the Rent Board's power to reduce rents for failure to meet standards of habitability. This is especially true, given that the idea of this program is to help, not to penalize.

There are likely to be problems of financing, but it is important to recognize that controlled rents in many of these buildings are very low, and the tenants can often afford to pay substantially more for an improved unit.

Low income tenants almost always pay their own fuel bills, and increased energy efficiency through insulation and tight multiple pane windows will save the tenant large amounts on fuel.

Other improvements and replacements are simply essential if the unit is to continue in service. If nothing is done, the buildings will slide over the edge to become uninhabitable. I fully expect to hear the following complaint from some sectors of our community:

"If we fix up the apartment to make it safe and fit for habitation, then it will probably lead to a higher rent. We would rather leave the apartment alone and continue to pay a cheap rent".

I have heard this argument already as I worked on this program and discussed it with various people. It saddens me that the argument is even advanced. Nonetheless, I've heard it, I want to acknowledge it directly and answer it with equal directness, and in three ways. (1) The tenant is a participant in the program and so nothing is done without his knowledge. (2) Apartments do not exist as islands in the midst of the ocean. Other apartments are above them, below them, beside them and next door to them, and so on and so on. Other

people live in these other apartments, working people, children, babies and older people. If your apartment is unsafe then you jeopardize all of these others as well as yourself.

In my lifetime I have seen many fires due to faulty wiring. Two such fires come to mind as I discuss this issue. In each case firefighters came upon the same tragedy once they gained entrance to the apartments. In both cases the charred and asphyxiated bodies of young children were found curled up on pantry shelves, their young lives ended before they had even began.

No price, however great, can be placed on such a tragic loss. I will do everything I can to prevent this from happening again and I know that all life-loving and reasonable people upon reflection will join me in this endeavor. It is arguable, though I don't endorse the idea, that you have the right to endanger your own life in exchange for maintaining a low rent. It is however, unarguably true that you do not have the right to endanger the lives of others for any reason, and certainly not for the reason that you wish to pay a cheap rent rather than a realistic rent. It is further true that the City has an affirmative obligation to be protectful of your life and safety as well as the life and safety of your neighbors. (3) The City has a further obligation, the obligation to provide safe and decent housing for its citizens now and future citizens as well. If we choose to allow a bad apartment to get worse, then the inevitable result is that the apartment will be lost as a home for future generations. The City cannot be a witness to or a participant in such a process. We must actively intervene where necessary to protect our housing stock and the shelter it provides and will continue to provide for Cambridge families.

This program is designed to place the City in an active role together with

the other sectors of the community. We have the tools to do this job if we choose to work cooperatively; otherwise we will see the gradual loss of an important part of our housing stock, and the dehousing of families we should be looking after.

It is important to recognize that the City cannot solve the problem alone, but the City can take the initiative in bringing together all to the ultimate benefit of tenants, property owners and the community as a whole.



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In City Council May 3, 1982.
Adopted by the affirmative vote of 9 members.
Attest:- Paul E. Healy, City Clerk.

A true copy;

ATTEST:-

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul E. Healy".

Order # 17 F-116

Mayor Vellucci order re: Study of the Mayor's
Housing Initiative # 2 entitled "Housing of
the Poor" for review by the City Council at
its next meeting.

In City Council,

May 3, 1982

*copy of order & Initiative #2
sent to Housing Division of
Community Development Dept.
5/15/82 mh*