

Cambridge Housing Authority

Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

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March 2, 1976

Mr. James L. Sullivan
City Manager
City of Cambridge
City Hall
Cambridge, Mass.

Dear Mr. Sullivan:

I have received a resolution of the City Council of February 23, 1976 requesting information concerning vacancies in the properties of the Cambridge Housing Authority.

At the present time there is a total of 3,222 units under the jurisdiction of the Authority. Of these, 570 are in privately owned properties under the Leased Housing Program. 174 of the units under the Authority's jurisdiction are presently uninhabitable: apartments in the elevator buildings at Roosevelt Towers and Jefferson Park, together with scattered instances of fire jobs and a very few severe roof leaks. 125 units are habitable but are vacant. This represents 14% of the habitable public housing stock in Cambridge. While such a vacancy rate is well within the acceptable range by private housing management standards, it need not and should not exist in public housing.

The number of vacant units is a reflection of the unacceptable delays which occur in the preparation of a vacated unit for a new occupant. The Authority is taking steps to drastically reduce turnover time and thereby reduce the number of vacant units in the Authority's stock. It is the Authority's present policy that units no longer be provided to new tenants in a dirty, disorderly condition. It is a basic principle of housing management that the condition of an apartment that a new tenant moves into does much to shape the attitudes of the tenant toward the care and protection of Housing Authority property generally. This obviously adds considerably to the turnover time, but is essential to long-term improvement in the management of public housing in Cambridge.

The major step in reducing turnover time is to speed the painting of vacant apartments. The Authority's painting staff

Mr. James L. Sullivan
March 2, 1976
Page Two

has recently been centralized under the supervision of a Lead Painter, responsible for regular reports of the productivity of the painting staff. In addition, the Authority has acquired a spray painter and spray painting of vacant apartments will shortly commence. I expect to see the results of these changes reflected in a reduced vacancy rate over the next 3-4 months.

Every unit that is properly prepared for re-occupancy is immediately offered to one of the Authority's 864 elderly applicants or 994 applicants for family housing.

The Authority is discussing with the Department of Community Affairs the availability of funds for rehabilitation of the vacant buildings at Roosevelt Towers and Jefferson Park. I would like to emphasize, however, that even if funding is obtained for rehabilitation of these units, only a very small proportion will be rehabilitated for use by families with children, since it is the overwhelming experience of this Authority and almost every other, that elevators and children are a combination that frequently produces disaster.

Eighteen of the uninhabitable units are in the building located on the corner of Harvard Street and Windsor Street. That building has been undergoing rehabilitation by the Authority's own staff and CETA workers during the last few months. Occupancy of that building will likely begin within the next 4-8 weeks.

I hope this data responds to the City Council's inquiry. I would be happy to provide any additional data that may be requested.

Sincerely,

CAMBRIDGE HOUSING AUTHORITY


Lewis H. Spence
Executive Director

LHS:vn



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

678 MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02139
TEL. 681-0400-0401-0402-0403-0404

RENT CONTROL BOARD

J. Kenneth Griffin, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Peter D. Stanton, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

March 2, 1976

James L. Sullivan
City Manager
City Hall
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

Dear Mr. Sullivan:

In response to your letter of February 25, 1976 concerning the order of the City Council of February 23, 1976 requesting a report on the number of vacant rent controlled units I must report that the Rent Control Board has no accurate count of the number of rental units under its jurisdiction which are currently vacant.

I have enclosed information on vacancies from the Harbridge House, Inc. report prepared for the Legislature in the Fall of 1975. In addition I have enclosed information from the Rent Board's records of a mailing made in November, 1973. Since 1973 the Rent Board has made three additional mailings city-wide to controlled rental units. No study was made of the vacant units as a result of the three mailings made in 1975. However, for the Council's information I can supply the following information:

<u>Date of Mailing</u>	<u># of units involved</u>	<u># of units vacant</u>
April 3, 1975	15,943	N/A ¹
July 2, 1975	18,645	N/A ²
August 3, 1975	18,645	106

¹As a result of this mailing 567 envelopes were returned for various reasons including returned because of improper address, addressee unknown, unit vacant, etc. but no count of vacant units was made.

²As a result of this mailing 1,665 envelopes were returned but as was the case in April no count of the vacant units was made.

Respectfully submitted,

J. Kenneth Griffin
J. Kenneth Griffin
Executive Director

VACANCY RATES

The primary measures of the vacancy rate for rent units are (i) postal vacancy surveys, (ii) U. S. Census, and (iii) studies commissioned by special-interest groups to investigate limited market areas. The postal vacancy data is derived from reports by mailmen, and its conclusions are generally believed to be lower than the "true vacancy rate." A postman's observations concerning apartments depend too heavily upon false impressions. His report is affected by (a) whether he thinks a resident is on vacation or at home; (b) whether or not he thinks a newly-constructed apartment is available for occupancy; (c) whether or not he thinks a substandard unit is clearly labeled "condemned" or is boarded-up; (d) whether or not he thinks two units share one mailbox (e.g., a roomer-boarder subleasing part of a unit without obtaining a separate mailbox). The postal vacancy survey is taken by individuals with no consistent sampling method.

The U. S. Census figures also tend to be biased due to the observer's unfamiliarity with the status of each individual rental unit. The census considers an abandoned unit as vacant, as long as there is no indication that the unit is unfit for occupancy. In addition, a newly constructed unit is recorded as available for habitation as soon as it offers protection from the elements. Thus the census vacancy figures tend to overestimate the number of available units.

Studies performed by nongovernment agencies draw contradictory conclusions. Some surveys rely upon newspaper advertisements for vacancy data, although many highly desirable units are rented quickly without the benefit of such ads. Several studies project a vacancy figure from a sample, thus magnifying any biases inherent in the original sample.

A search for alternative methods of obtaining vacancy data proved unsuccessful. Telephone connections cannot yield data specifically for rental units, especially for units without telephones. Utility meters, such as electricity and fuel, are unreliable measures of vacancies because: (i) the relationship between meters and residential units is not one-to-one (one meter may service the entire building; and (ii) utility connections in rental units cannot be distinguished from other residential units.

Despite the lack of an accurate measure of vacancy rates, the numerous studies agree upon one trend: the rate is low enough to create a significant impact on the price of rental housing.

EXHIBIT XIII
APARTMENT VACANCY RATE POSTAL
VACANCY SURVEYS
(PERCENT OF TOTAL APARTMENTS UNOCCUPIED)¹

City/Town	CIRCA 1966	CIRCA 1970	CIRCA 1973
Arlington	0.7	0.2	2.6
Boston	2.8	1.9	3.5
Brookline	3.3	0.7	0.6
Cambridge	1.6	0.6	1.2
Chicopee	2.3	2.1	3.1
Framingham	3.5	0.1	3.4
Lynn	4.3	2.7	N/A
Malden	1.7	0.5	1.0
Medford	0.6	0.9	0.7
Newton	3.3	N/A	1.1
Quincy	2.0	1.7	1.8
Somerville	1.6	N/A	0.8
Springfield	4.7	5.0	5.9
Waltham	4.9	N/A	1.1
Weymouth	1.1	2.7	5.3
Worcester	N/A*	2.0	2.8

*N/A = Not Available.

¹ Postal Vacancy Surveys were not conducted in any of the three years displayed above in Brockton, Fall River, Lawrence, Lowell, New Bedford, and Pittsfield. All available data from the Postal Surveys for the cities mentioned on this page have been presented above.

RENTAL HOUSING ASSOCIATION VACANCY AND MARKET SURVEYS

The Rental Housing Association (RHA) conducts an annual survey of its members to determine current vacancy and market information. The survey, conducted by The Analytical Sciences Corporation (TASC), received responses concerning 22,880 units in 1971, and 30,368 units in 1972. All of the figures in Exhibit XIV were obtained directly from the RHA studies. RHA obtained its vacancy figures for 1970, however, from the 1970 U.S. Census Bureau reports on housing.

The RHA vacancy rates for 1971 and 1972, when compared with the 1970 U.S. Census figures, indicate an increase in the percentage of vacant rental units in the Greater Boston area. Closer examination, however, reveals a 1972 vacancy rate of less than 5 percent for one-, three- and four-bedroom units, which make up 80.4 percent of the total rental units in the greater Boston area, according to RHA surveys. The 1972 vacancy rate for units with a monthly rent under \$125 was 4.1 percent. The rate for units renting for \$125 to \$159 was 5.3 percent. The sample sizes yielding the above vacancy figures were 3,119 and 4,051 units, respectively. Many of the units in the sample were obtained from landlords owning large structures, demonstrated by the fact that responses were received for 30,368 units in less than 1,100 buildings--an average of more than 27 units per structure.

VACANCY RATES IN CAMBRIDGE

The results of a vacancy study conducted by the Cambridge Rent Board on November 28, 1973 indicate an overall vacancy rate of 0.48 percent in Cambridge. Further analysis reveals that 43 of the vacant units asked for monthly rent in excess of \$200, representing 9.21 percent of all units, and 41 percent of the 98 vacant units. Fifty-five of the vacant units asked for monthly rent less than \$200, representing 9.27 percent of all units, and 56 percent of the 98 vacant units.

Source: Cambridge, Rent Control Board report, March 1974

VACANCY RATES
POSTAL VACANCY SURVEY VERSUS HOUSING ASSOCIATION SURVEY

A comparison between the postal vacancy data (obtained in April 1973) and the Rental Housing Association vacancy data (obtained in November 1972) follows. The surveys attempt to characterize essentially the same rental housing situation, since a five-month interval does not generally permit significant shifts in true vacancy rates.

EXHIBIT XIV
RENTAL HOUSING ASSOCIATION AND POSTAL VACANCY
SURVEY DATA

City/Town	Rental Housing Association November 1972	Postal Vacancy April 1973	Difference
Total Boston	5.7%	3.5%	+2.2%
Back Bay	5.9	8.1	-2.2
Brighton	5.5	1.6	+3.9
Dorchester	8.8	3.0	+5.8
Hyde Park	9.2	5.5	+3.7
Roxbury	4.5	6.0	-1.5
West Roxbury	2.2	0.7	+1.5
Brookline	2.0	0.6	+1.4
Cambridge	1.6	1.2	+0.4
Framingham	2.0	3.4	-1.4
Quincy	2.4	1.8	+0.6
Stoneham	5.8	2.6	+3.2
Waltham	1.0	1.1	+0.1
Weymouth	7.0	5.3	+1.7

VACANCIES IN PUBLIC HOUSING IN BOSTON

The Boston Housing Authority provided us with vacancy statistics as of September 30, 1974 for subsidized housing. Four projects along contribute 61 percent of the vacant units: Mission Hill, Mission Hill Extension, Columbia Point and Franklin Field. These four projects experience high vacancy rates, as well as high vandalism rates; increased vandalism inhibits the influx of tenants which would occur if these projects were located in more desirable sections of Boston.

EXHIBIT XV
VACANT UNITS IN BOSTON'S PUBLIC HOUSING

Unit Size	Total Number of Vacant Units For:		
	Boston Citywide	Mission Hill, Mission Hill Extension, Columbia Point, Franklin Field Only	Boston Citywide Excluding the Four Projects
Efficiency	36	0	36
One-bedroom	523	277	246
Two-bedroom	412	263	149
Three-bedroom	266	205	61
Four-bedroom	49	36	13
Five-bedroom	8	3	5
Six-bedroom	3	2	1
Total	1,297	786	511

Source: Boston Housing Authority.

The following conclusions are supported by the data:

- Over half of the vacant one-bedroom units are within the four projects currently experiencing high vandalism rates.
- Six out of every ten vacant two-bedroom units are also in the four projects.
- Three out of every four vacant three-bedroom units are within the four projects.
- Nearly three out of every four vacant four-bedroom units are in the four projects.

WAITING LISTS FOR PUBLIC HOUSING IN 1970¹

In 1968, some 14,000 people were on waiting lists for state-aided housing for the elderly and were considered eligible. Annual admissions totalled approximately 1,700; so an elderly person might expect to wait eight years, on the average, to enter. This delay discourages many other people from applying.

In 1968, there were approximately 6,000 families on waiting lists for state-aided housing. Only 1,700 (approximately) are admitted annually--a wait of about three and-a-half years.

In comparison, for federally-aided housing in 1968, a total of 11,400 elderly were on the waiting list in 1970 and only 1,000 were admitted annually. This represents a wait of over 11 years.

In contrast, the length of the waiting list for families was six years.

CURRENT WAITING LISTS FOR PUBLIC HOUSING IN RENT-CONTROLLED COMMUNITIES

Based upon statistics gathered by local housing authorities, the following waiting lists currently exist:

- Cambridge notes 1,500 households on its list. Approximately 600 to 700 of those are elderly tenants. About 450 elderly have been offered a unit but refused it, in order to wait for a "better" unit.²
- Somerville notes an estimated 500 families and 700 elderly households on its waiting lists.³

¹ Source: Public Housing Resources in Massachusetts, Massachusetts Department of Community Affairs, March 1970.

² Source: Mr. George Hughes, Cambridge Housing Authority.

³ Source: Mr. McCartney, Somerville Housing Authority.

VACANCY RATES BY RENT RANGES

Although the 1970 U. S. Census measure of vacancy rates in rental units is considered to overestimate the actual vacancy rate, it is useful to examine the Census breakdown of vacant rental units by contract rent ranges,¹ (i. e. payments by renters directly to the landlord.) (The figures exclude one-family homes on ten or more acres.)

The vacancy rates in the following tables were obtained by dividing the number of vacant rental units in each category by the sum of the number of occupied rental units plus vacant rental units. The calculations were performed separately for rental units with all plumbing facilities, and units lacking some or all plumbing facilities. The proportion of rental units in each community which falls in the latter category is:

EXHIBIT XVI

City/Town	Percentage of Rental Units Lacking Some or All Plumbing Facilities
Boston	7.5%
Brookline	2.1
Cambridge	6.0
Somerville	3.9

EXHIBIT XVII

1970 U.S. CENSUS VACANCY RATE FOR RENTAL UNITS BY RENT RANGE

Monthly Rent Asked	Vacancy Rate of Units With All Plumbing Facilities	Vacancy Rate of Units Lacking Some or All Plumbing Facilities
<u>Boston</u>		
Less than \$40	6.2%	9.1%
\$40 to \$59	7.9	10.9
\$60 to \$79	7.7	10.3
\$80 to \$99	5.5	10.0
\$100 to \$149	4.7	7.3
\$150 or more	4.8	7.3
All Rent Ranges	5.7%	9.8%
Median Rent Asked	\$91	N/A

¹ Data in this section is based upon figures from General Housing Characteristics, Massachusetts, pp 23-40/41.

EXHIBIT XVII

1970 U.S. CENSUS VACANCY RATE FOR RENTAL UNITS BY RENT RANGE
(CONT'd)

Monthly Rent Asked	Vacancy Rate of Units With All Plumbing Facilities	Vacancy Rate of Units Lacking Some or All Plumbing Facilities
<u>Brookline</u>		
Less than \$40	4.7%	This category is too small to perform valid statistical analyses
\$40 to \$59	3.1	
\$60 to \$79	1.5	
\$80 to \$99	0	
\$100 to \$149	1.4	
\$150 or more	1.7	
All Rent Ranges	1.6%	
Median Rent Asked	\$206	
<u>Cambridge</u>		
Less than \$40	2.4%	2.7%
\$40 to \$59	2.7	8.6
\$60 to \$79	2.6	3.6
\$80 to \$99	2.4	4.1
\$100 to \$149	2.6	3.3
\$150 or more	2.3	2.0
All Rent Ranges	2.4%	4.9%
Median Rent Asked	\$119	N/A
<u>Somerville</u>		
Less than \$40	1.0%	6.5%
\$40 to \$59	0.7	3.6
\$60 to \$79	2.2	3.6
\$80 to \$99	2.4	3.2
\$100 to \$149	2.4	0.7
\$150 or more	3.3	0
All Rent Ranges	2.3%	3.2%
Median Rent Asked	\$101	N/A

N/A = Not available.

VACANCY RATES MASSACHUSETTS HOUSING FINANCE AGENCY

We obtained from the management office of the Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency (MHFA) a survey of vacancy and tenant income conducted during September 1974. Several errors were found among the large volume of developments surveyed; however, the magnitude of error is relatively small.

We calculated the number of rented and vacant units, broken down by rent ranges; the vacancy rates broken down by rent ranges, and the waiting lists broken down by rent ranges. We investigated four rent-controlled communities (Somerville does not have any MHFA developments) and seven non-controlled communities (New Bedford and Worcester were excluded due to a large number of erroneous data). Four of the 17 noncontrolled communities investigated elsewhere in this study do not have MHFA financed housing at this time (Arlington, Chicopee, Malden, and Medford).

The data in Exhibit XVIII indicate a lower vacancy rate as well as a proportionately bigger waiting list in the rent-controlled communities (Boston, Brookline, Cambridge, and Lynn.) These four communities provide a greater percentage of low-income families with housing than other urban communities with MHFA housing units provide. The long waiting lists for both rent-controlled and noncontrolled cities demonstrates the need in low- and moderate-income ranges for rental units. Moreover, the low-income units by far have the longest waiting lists.

MHFA market rate units appear to be the most difficult to rent, primarily due to their relatively high rental rates in most cases. This characteristic strongly affects developments for the elderly, where potential residents may be living on pensions or fixed income. The location of MHFA units also greatly affects the rate at which units are occupied.

The developments which have unusually high vacancy rates are frequently still in the "rent-up stage," which may last as long as six to 12 months. The footnotes to Exhibit XVIII explain when vacancy rates are highly inflated due to one development still renting for the first time.

EXHIBIT XVIII
MASSACHUSETTS HOUSING FINANCE AGENCY RENTAL STATISTICS
AS OF SEPTEMBER 1974

City/Town	Occupied Units			Vacant Units			Total Occupied	Total Vacant	Vacancy Rates			Waiting List Number of Families		
	Market Rent	Moderate Rent	Low Rent	Market Rent	Moderate Rent	Low Rent			Market	Moderate	Low	Market	Moderate	Low
Boston	535	813	746	94 ¹	104 ²	29	2,094	227	15 ¹	11 ²	4 ³	55	322	1,627
Brookline	147	146	101	0	0	0	394	0	0	0	0	N/A	45	N/A
Cambridge	122	168	263	67 ³	41 ⁴	18 ⁵	553	126	35 ³	19 ⁴	6 ⁵	16	110	54
Lynn	1	2	6	0	0	0	9	0	0	0	0	N/A	N/A	110
Brockton	43	341	147	47 ⁶	10	0	531	57	52 ⁶	3	0	28	249	407
Fall River	84	367	148	23 ⁷	5	0	599	28	21 ⁷	1	0	N/A	N/A	240
Franklinham	47	95	48	4	0	0	190	4	8	0	6	N/A	12	41
Lawrence	35	-	34	1	-	1	69	2	3	-	3	18	N/A	45
Lowell	261	348	243	25 ⁸	2	1	852	28	9 ⁸	1	0	N/A	26	N/A
Springfield	-	158	69	-	7	0	227	7	-	4	0	N/A	10	125
Weymouth	124	64	63	7	0	0	251	7	5	0	0	N/A	20	260

N/A = Not Available.

¹ Fifty-four of the vacant "market" units (representing over half of the 15 percent vacancy rate) are in Brighton, with a rental range of \$325 to \$355 for one-bedroom and \$345 to \$425 for two-bedroom units.

² Forty-two of the vacant "moderate" units (representing four tenths of the 11 percent vacancy rate) are in West Roxbury, which had been renting units for only 12 weeks at the time of this survey.

³ Sixty-one of the vacant "market" units (representing almost all of the 35 vacancy rate) are at the Franklin Street Elderly development, which had been renting for only 12 weeks at the time of this survey.

⁴ Twenty-three of the vacant "moderate" units (representing over half of the 19 vacancy rate) are at the Franklin Street Elderly development, which had been renting for only 12 weeks at the time of this survey.

⁵ Fifteen of the vacant "low" units (representing nearly all of the 6 percent vacancy rate) are at the Franklin Street Elderly development, which had been renting for only 12 weeks at the time of this survey.

⁶ All of the vacant "market" units (representing the entire 52 percent vacancy rate) are at one development, which had been renting for 20 weeks. Forty-five of the 47 units are one-bedroom units renting at \$224 per month.

⁷ Eighteen of the vacant "market" units (representing four fifths of the 21 percent vacancy rate) are at one development. This development had 100 percent occupancy of its low- and moderate-units at the time of this survey, but more than half of its market units were vacant. Rental rates are \$219 for one-bedroom units and \$256 for two-bedroom units per month.

⁸ Twenty of the vacant "market" units (representing four fifths of the 9 percent vacancy rate) are at one development. Most of these vacant units were two-bedroom units renting at \$245 to \$250 per month. The low- and moderate- units in this development were at nearly 100 percent occupancy, however.

Vacancy Rates

Postal Survey - Cambridge 1973

Postal District	Total Apts. in Survey	Vacant Apartments			Vacancy Rate
		Existing	New	Total	
Harvard Square	5,374	17	22	39	0.7%
Central Square	20,352	252	29	281	1.4%
Porter Square	4,881	52	5	57	1.2%
Lechmere Square	3,163	32	0	32	1.0%
Kendall Square	477	0	0	0	0%
Cambridge Total	34,247	353	56	409	1.2%

Rent Board Survey November 28, 1973 Controlled Rental Units

	Total Units	Vacant Apartments		Vacancy Rate
		Rent in excess of \$200.00/mo.	Rent Less than \$200.00/mo.	
Cambridge	20,424	43	55	0.48%



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02139
Tel. 876-6800

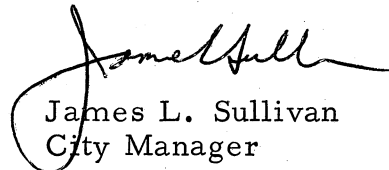
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT
JAMES L. SULLIVAN
City Manager

March 8, 1976

To the Honorable, the City Council:

Enclosed for your information are two replies from
Lewis H. Spence, Executive Director, Cambridge Housing Authority,
and J. Kenneth Griffin, Executive Director of the Rent Control
Board, relative to Awaiting Report Item No. 8 regarding vacant
buildings.

Very truly yours,



James L. Sullivan
City Manager

JLS/mbf
Encs.

Agenda #6

S-97

Re: to the number of boarded up and vacant
buildings in the City of Cambridge.

In City Council,
Mar. 8, 1976

3/8/76

Placed

on
File -