

October 12, 2000
Cambridge City Council
795 Massachusetts Ave.
Cambridge, MA 02139

To the Honorable, The City Council:

The North Cambridge Stabilization Committee would like to thank Councilors' Michael Sullivan, David Maher and Timothy Toomey for attending the October 11th meeting held at the North Cambridge Senior Center.

We would like to take this opportunity through consent communication to comment upon Manager's Item # 2 submitted to you on October 2, 2000 referred to as "a response to Awaiting Report Item No. 00-72." This Item refers to the response compiled by the Community Development Department concerning public meetings held with respect to the disposition of the VFW Hall on Mass Ave. in North Cambridge.

The report itemizes a series of meetings at which representatives from the Community Development Department made presentations concerning proposed uses for the building.

The report itself reflects an obvious lack of professionalism. It omits specific dates, times, locations, attendance sheets, description of outreach, decisions, and summaries of what actually transpired. This deficiency is characteristic of all meetings listed. In addition it is not clear and is nowhere stated in the report who specifically from city departments was at these meetings and what in essence was presented.

At a North Cambridge Stabilization Committee meeting held this week at the North Cambridge Senior Center (October 11, 2000), it was related by John Howard of the Porter Square Neighborhood Association (PSNA) that the proposal was presented twice to the PSNA, and that on both occasions (Spring 1999 and May 2000) the PSNA did not formally endorse any plan or proposed use. Mr. Howard stated that the PSNA had many questions about the proposal and it was unclear whether the proponents of the proposal had answered all questions satisfactorily.

Apparently, the sum total of meetings sponsored by the CDD was 7. Of these meetings, two were with the PSNA, two were with North Cambridge Arts (NoCA), and three were at the North Cambridge Senior Center. The last meeting referred to as "August 2000" was held by the North Cambridge Stabilization Committee at 45 Yerxa Road on August 11. The tone of this meeting was decidedly confrontational, and it was clear that Senior Citizens were upset with the process or 'lack thereof' provided by the city's Community Development Department. A large number of questions were asked and it was determined that the many recommendations forwarded by members of the community for alternative uses for the building were substantially ignored and dismissed without reason.

It is clear that this building would serve a multitude of community uses and is ideally situated for such. It is repugnant that alternatives have not been seriously considered. But is far more repugnant that the Senior Community in North Cambridge has been dealt with in such a coarse and cavalier manner.

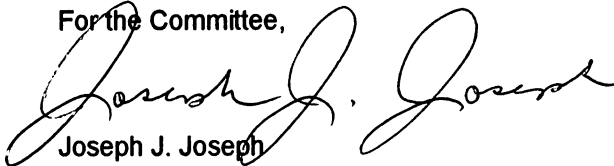
Although the most desired use of this facility may not be as of yet determined, it is clear that the current plan is not acceptable to either the senior community in North Cambridge or to the many abutters who have joined the Seniors in opposition. We would ask that the Council submit a companion order to request a clearer and more complete description of the planning process as developed and implemented by the Community Development Department.

We would further recommended that until this reasonable request is met by all affected departments that the matter referred to earlier as "Awaiting Report No. 00-72" be left on the table. This request should include meaningful, descriptive, and complete summaries of all meetings, decisions made, dates, locations, City representatives in attendance, and comments made by the Community at large. Ideally it should also include justifications for meetings with particular community associations and not others. This would apply to the Senior Citizen Community, neighborhood associations and local art groups. This request is only reasonable given that the Council must be substantially informed before disposing of municipal property to the Affordable Housing Trust Fund or any other entity. This would fulfill the minimum requirement expected of any elected official when deliberating upon such matters.

We are submitting along with this communication two descriptions from attendees of the meetings in question. Given the lack of any sort of accurate representation of the substance of those meetings tendered from municipal departments, these should be an adequate substitute should such additional information be not forthcoming.

The in excess of 40 **taxpayers** at the August 23rd North Cambridge Stabilization Committee meeting would sincerely appreciate a new public process concerning disposition of this publicly owned building. We look to the Council to initiate this on our behalf.

For the Committee,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Joseph J. Joseph".

Joseph J. Joseph
20 Kassul Park
Cambridge, MA 02140

Joe -

I attended the meetings held by John Woods and overall the tone was that housing was a forgone conclusion and that the only issue up for debate was the use of the open space. John mentioned that there was "some" open space for other purposes but there was no other mention of a process upon which we could vote on using the whole building for other than housing. The last meeting we had at the senior center was highly charged and it was clear that John did not want to consider an option that did not include housing. It seems to me that since he works in the housing department that this is understandable. But, the problem is that this tact does nothing to expand the process to other ideas. Many at the meeting -- including numerous seniors -- forcefully voiced concerns that this space should be used for community purposes and that housing should not be the only option. John said he would take that into consideration but at further meetings he summarized the group as favoring housing.

The net here is: The tone of the meetings was the group was neither for or against housing at the the VFW, they just wanted to feel that at least a few other options (senior center addition, art center, youth center, etc.) had been considered. No one feels that this is the case, even those few who favor housing.

I think we need to take this issue away from one surrounding affordable housing to one focusing on process. If after a reasonable review (including real input from the local citizens) it is determined that housing is the best option, then so be it. The frustration at the meetings I have attended stems from the fact that John Woods and the City Manager feel that the process has already taken place when it has not.

Bruce Kasrel

Hi Joe,

1. The first 3 meetings (Spring '99, June '99, Fall '99) were held without invitations to area residents and abutters. The first meeting was with PSNA, the next two with NOCA. The first meeting involving local residents was the April 2000 meeting (nearly 1 year after the "process" began) was held after plans for housing had been formulated and preliminary drawings had been created. Neighborhood residents and abutters were never asked what they thought the building should be used for, we were only asked to comment on CDD's proposal to use it for housing.

2. The April 2000 meeting was informational in tone. Six residents of our building attended (officially, we're the Winthrop Row Condo association, though people seem to refer to us as the "Russell street condos"). John Woods gave a brief overview of the building history, explained that the idea to put affordable housing there had come from within CDD (he said it was his idea), and then explained the plans for either 6 or 4 affordable units plus some space allocated to NOCA. He then asked for feedback. Because this was essentially a presentation of housing plans, the feedback was focused on housing-related issues, rather than addressing the broader question of what is the best use for this building?

The following concerns were raised:

-Lack of natural light in the VFW, plans to open up bricked-over windows raised concerns from us, as these windows would be just 15 feet from bathroom and bedroom windows in our building.

-Effect of traffic on Russell street. Residents expressed concerns that Russell street is already too busy during commuting hours, speed of cars whipping around the corner from Mass Ave makes parallel parking on Russell street a somewhat risky proposition. It was asked whether the city would consider reversing the direction of traffic on Russell street between Mass Ave and Orchard Street.

-Parking; Mr Woods admitted that they do not have 6 parking spots available; plans are to use the asphalt space between our building and 8 Russell Street as parking, and he hoped they could get 3 or maybe 4 parking spaces here. It was suggested that a better use of space might be some sort of green space to the look of Russell street.

-Air conditioners; a resident of our building asked that any air-conditioning compressors be placed on the roof rather than at ground level because of the proximity to our outdoor patios the fear that compressor noise would be annoying to us.

Most of these concerns received lip service in the disposition report, though the street reversal and green space suggestions are noticeably absent, but there is no evidence of any attempt by CDD to date to actually address any of these concerns. The report only contains a vague promise to "incorporate input from the neighborhood residents in the establishment of the development guidelines". This is not reassuring when the current perception is that CDD only seems to be soliciting input which it will then ignore.

3. I am told that the June meeting was highly confrontational (I did not attend), with Senior Center advocates expressing outrage that their interests had been ignored. Helene Corry was very outspoken in the this regard. At the end of this meeting, Mr. Woods took a straw poll asking how many "still favored housing?". Two or three people raised their hands. This meeting was attended by Thecla Ree and Bruce Kasrel from our building. I'll ask each of them to send you their recollections.

Regards,

Kevin
781-442-0995

Consent Communication #14

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A communication was received
from Joseph J. Joseph,
North Cambridge Stabilization
Committee, expressing displeasure
with the community process
regarding the North Cambridge VFW
building.

In City Council October 16, 2000

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