

City of Cambridge

COMMITTEE REPORT FOR THE CITY COUNCIL MEETING OF MONDAY, OCTOBER 28, 1996

1. A communication was received from Donna P. Lopez, Deputy City Clerk, transmitting a report from Vice Mayor Kathleen Born, Chair of the Elder Affairs Committee for a meeting held on October 16, 1996, to discuss the situation of the elderly tenants who will lose their protected rent control status on December 31, 1996.

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The Elder Affairs Committee held a public meeting on Wednesday, October 16, 1996 at 4:10 p. m. in the Ball Room, Senior Center, 806 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge.

Present at the meeting were: Vice Mayor Kathleen Born, Chair; Councillor Michael Sullivan, Mayor Sheila Russell, Councillors Anthony Galluccio and Timothy Toomey, Deputy City Clerk Donna P. Lopez; Susan Schlesinger, Assistant City Manager for Community Development; Roger Herzog; Housing Director, Community Development Department; Alvin Thompson, State Representative; Daniel Wuenschel, Executive Director of the Cambridge Housing Authority; Ann Arata, Director of Leasing and Occupancy, Cambridge Housing Authority; Eileen Ginnetty, Executive Director, Council on Aging; Nancy Daniels, Multi Service Center; Peter Shapiro, Just-A-Start Program; Kevin McCluskey, Harvard University Community Affairs Office; Barbara Burnham, Fenway Community Development Corporation.

Vice Mayor Born convened the meeting and explained that the meeting was to discuss the situation of the elderly tenants who will lose their protected rent control status on December 31, 1996.

Vice Mayor Born asked Susan Schlesinger, Assistant City Manager for Community Development, to give a profile of the tenants. Ms. Schlesinger stated that 362 elderly tenants are covered by the protected status and they are living in 320 households. Of these, she stated,

168 tenants are aged 63-70

77 tenants are aged 71-75

47 tenants are aged 76-80

70 tenants are aged over 80.

She continued that the average rent for the 320 elder households was \$535 per month. Rent increases, she stated, are dramatic, especially in the Harvard Square area. Eighty-seven percent of elder households are single person households with the remainder being two or more member households. Two hundred twenty-six elder tenants are women and 113 are men.

The committee heard from Roger Herzog, Housing Director, Community Development Department, who informed the committee that outreach was done to all tenants including the elderly and the disabled. The Community Development Department did a total of three mailings. With the Spring mailing, an application for Section 8 housing was included. In addition, he stated that outreach is being done to all property owners who have low income tenants living in their units.

Mr. Herzog stated that the Community Development Department was holding a Housing Resource Fair on Saturday, October 19, 1996 at which twenty local organizations that provide housing would be available to address the elderly about their needs. The Housing Authority will address the Section 8 Housing Assistance. Mediation and dispute resolution services will be provided.

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Finally, Mr. Herzog stated that the Community Development Department has a proposal to develop the Harvard Manor Nursing Home site into twenty-one low income elderly units to come on line in 1998.

The committee heard from Daniel Wuenschel, Executive Director, Cambridge Housing Authority, who stated that in 1994 the Housing Authority made preferences and priorities for persons who were displaced by Rent Control. In 1995 the Housing Authority opened the waiting list and 1,000 applications were received within the first half of the first day. In the Spring of 1995, a mailing was done to encourage tenants to apply for Section 8 housing. In 1996 a brochure was prepared and distributed through extensive mailings. In July, 1996 Mr. Wuenschel stated that 6,000 Section 8 applications were received and the list was closed. Mr. Wuenschel stated that the Housing Authority was 1300 units with a turn over rate of 110-120 units per year. He urged the elderly to apply, the sooner the better. Since January, 1996, 400 applications have been received from tenants who were formerly protected by Rent Control. Of these, he stated, 110 were elderly. There have been 51 certificates for vouchers have been issued to former rent control tenants and 16 more were in process this week. These included 22 elderly and 18 disabled. Ten elderly and ten disabled were placed in private housing. There were 215 elderly waiting on public housing lists and received preference as former rent controlled tenants.

The committee heard from Kevin McCluskey, Harvard University Community Affairs Office, who stated that Harvard has an agreement with the city to provide continued protection for all its protected status tenants. Mr. McCluskey stated that Harvard has made a commitment to work to seek to develop programs to protect the city's most vulnerable persons and will continue to be involved with this issue. He said that Harvard University Housing Assistance Office would be available to provide assistance. Seventy-eight households will be provided protection by Harvard University. In addition, the University is selling one hundred units to the city at a below market price for use as affordable housing.

The committee heard from Barbara Burnham, Fenway Community Development Corporation, who congratulated the City Council for the agreement with Harvard for housing. Ms. Burnham stated that 200 elderly households were identified and assisted in Boston. She stated that there were more elder elders in Boston. Boston, she said, has developed a "Covenant of Care" to give people time to stay in their units with a small rent increase. She stated that the landlords were asked to give waivers for the elderly and mediation was done between tenant and landlords. Ms. Burnham stated that in Boston people did not believe this was going to affect them. She urged the City of Cambridge to make efforts to visit the elderly tenants in their homes. She stated that this worked in Boston. Development of trust with the elderly was important and the elderly need alternative housing, she stated.

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The committee heard from Lauren Curry, 3 Concord Avenue, who stated that there is a limited number of places where people can live. Ms. Curry stated that people need to stay in the homes in which that they are currently living. It is important for the elderly to have a place to stay in the City of Cambridge. She encouraged negotiations with landlords. She stated the elderly need to feel free to go through the process, to have a buddy system and not feel disempowered by their landlords due to huge rent increases. Cambridge, she said, needs a sense of community. The landlords need to take care of their tenants because they are good tenants.

The committee heard from Mrs. Vever-Brantz, a resident of Wendell Street, who stated that she was legally blind and it would be a hardship to change her apartment. She outlined her monthly income and rent expense to the committee.

The committee heard from Bill Cavellini, 158 Brookline Street, who stated that there was a campaign to save 2,000 homes including the 1,500 protected tenants plus the 500 Section 8 and the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program, MRVP, tenants. He was confused about why tenants had not applied for protected status. Immigrants, he said, would be hesitant to file an application with the Rent Control for protected status. Initial rent increases by landlords were small and tenants have not come forward to file for protected status. Mr. Cavellini stated that three times, in the last week, tenants stated that they did not know if they were protected or not, therefore, he felt, the Rent Control figures are undercounted. He said that there may be others who are not identified who will be losing protected status.

The committee heard from Representative Alvin Thompson, who stated that there have been meetings at the State House on this issue for the last three weeks. He stated that the votes for rent and housing subsidies are hard to get because the issue of Rent Control is over.

Councillor Sullivan asked Representative Thompson if emergency legislation could be filed for state funding for these subsidies. Representative Thompson stated there would have to be a special session. He said that there is a session scheduled for November 21, 1996 and he does not know if it is possible to get this issue on the agenda.

Councillor Galluccio stated that he had filed an order which was adopted by the City Council to explore the feasibility of filing home rule legislation that would allow Cambridge to provide rent subsidies to elderly and disabled tenants living in formerly rent controlled properties. Representative Thompson stated that the home rule petition would not be heard by the legislature this year.

Ms. Burnham suggested to Representative Thompson that the MRVP Program has not been opened up for four years and the state could do an emergency order to open up the MRVP Program.

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The committee heard from Steve Meacham, CEOC, 11 Inman Street, who stated that there has been difficulty finding apartments to use with the Section 8 or MRVP Programs. He stated that rental subsidies could be set up by the city without a home rule petition. Mr. Meacham urged landlords to let tenants stay in their apartments and continue their protected status.

Vice Mayor Born questioned Mr. Wuenschel as to how many elderly have Section 8 housing. Mr. Wuenschel responded that 110 elderly have Section 8 housing.

The committee heard from Ann Arata, Cambridge Housing Authority, who stated that the people who are on the Housing Authority list are those who have taken the initiative to resolve their situation. There are over 400 names on the preference list. There were 51 certificates and vouchers issued, 22 for the elderly, 10 people were listed and placed and a number are in process. There are a total of 64 Certificates available and it takes a month to six weeks to process.

Vice Mayor Born asked if there were other localities that have subsidies. Ms. Schlesinger responded that Washington, D. C. has rental subsidies. It has found the program to be too costly and is trying to scale back the program. Ms. Schlesinger stated that it would be problematic for the city to operate a subsidy program. Mr. Herzog stated that the cost of a subsidy program would only increase as housing market rents increase and would cost between \$2 to \$4 million. Because the elderly and disabled are on fixed incomes the costs would increase.

Councillor Sullivan asked Mr. Herzog if statistics are available on how many years these tenants have been living in their homes. Ms. Vali Buland, from the Rent Control Board, responded that they did not have this information because it was not a question on the application for "protected tenant status".

In response to a question from Councillor Sullivan about fair market rent increases, Mr. Wuenschel stated that fair market rents increased 5%. Councillor Sullivan asked Mr. Wuenschel how many units were off line due to rehab, etc. Mr. Wuenschel stated that Roosevelt Towers would be back on line in 1997 and Corcoran Park would be on line in 1998. There will be 250 units coming on line in a concentrated period of time, he said.

Councillor Toomey asked Mr. Wuenschel if Cambridge residents had preference. Mr. Wuenschel stated that Cambridge residents have preference as long as they meet the other criteria, including income.

Councillor Sullivan stated both the tenants and the landlords need to come together as a community and that we cannot keep talking about where we were two years ago or we will get nowhere.

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Vice Mayor Born stated that there is a need for the development of an initiative to be sent to the City Council for further discussion and we need to get the property owner groups involved.

Councillor Galluccio stated that we need to look at a comprehensive strategy. There is a stigma attached to Section 8 housing. There is no incentive for landlords to use Section 8 housing. He stated that if elderly have to move they will not come back to the city. The expiring use buildings are coming up this year, he said. The federal government has to play a major role. Mr. Wuenschel stated that the federal government is choking on Section 8 applications, it is a financial burden and he did not think help would be coming from the federal government.

Vice Mayor Born stated that the city cannot afford a subsidy program. The city, she stated, needed a commitment from the property owners to the city similar to Harvard.

Ms. Schlesinger stated that after rent control, the Community Development Department wrote to the property owners requesting that vacant units be listed with the city and there was not a good response to the request. She stated that we need to foster a spirit of cooperation and develop a list of property owners who will accept Section 8.

Councillor Galluccio stated there is an assumption that landlords are going to kick their tenants out. There needs to be dialogue between the city, landlords and tenants, he said.

Vice Mayor Born posed the question of how many of the larger landlords would come to dialogue. Councillor Galluccio responded that all parties need to talk.

The committee heard from Jerry Bergman, 82 Elm Street, who asked if the 362 tenants losing protected status had been visited. Mr. Herzog responded in the negative. Mr. Bergman stated that we need to know what these people are facing, what are their needs, expenses and then use our resources creatively to help them.

At this time Councillor Sullivan submitted the following motion:

ORDERED: That the Council on Aging, in conjunction with other appropriate agencies and individuals, conduct an appropriate survey which should possible include home visits of the 320 protected elderly tenants identified in the report dated October 16, 1996 by the Community Development Department for the purpose of identifying possible displacement of individual tenants and as a result of this information propose solutions, for individual or prototypical strategies.

The motion was adopted.

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Vice Mayor Born asked if Human Services and the Council on Aging would help. Ms. Nancy Daniels, Multi Service Center, responded that she would be willing to work with others on this matter. Mr. Bergman stated he would be willing to offer his time to train responsible volunteers.

The committee heard from Peter Shapiro, Just-A-Start Program, who stated that we have to create an environment of cooperation. The approach is important, he said.

Vice Mayor Born asked how can we engage the landlords to help these tenants. Ms. Lenore Schloming, 102R Inman Street, President of SPOA, responded that the landlords need to know who the specific tenants are and what their needs are so that they can figure out how to help them.

Councillor Galluccio stated that Cambridge is dysfunctional because of rent control. Each tenant has a different need and landlords need to feel that they are doing something to solve the problem. Councillor Sullivan stated that he believed the problems would be resolved if we get together.

Ms. Schloming suggested that a city representative meet with members of SPOA. They can then approach the larger landlords regarding the "Covenant of Care".

The committee heard from Lloyd Smith, 5 Craigie Circle # 6, who stated that the approach has to be sensitive to both tenants and landlords for this to work. He asked if this effort could be expanded to include all protected tenants, not just the elderly.

Vice Mayor Born stated that she agreed that housing was a problem for all 1200 protected tenants, but that this hearing of the Elder Services Committee was to focus on the particular needs of the elderly.

The committee heard from Eileen Ginnetty, Council on Aging, who stated that some elderly do not know about the Council on Aging and the Council could list the services available to the elderly. We need survey questions which are specific for the volunteers.

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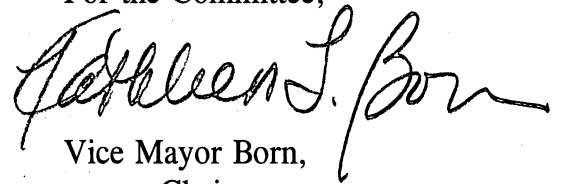
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Mr. Meacham stated that the open ended dialogue approach has a chance of being successful. Councillor Galluccio said that the dialogue cannot go back to Rent Control discussions. Councillor Sullivan agreed and said that we must go forward, we cannot vent.

Vice Mayor Born commended leadership of SPOA for taking the initiative to dialogue regarding the "Covenant of Care".

At seven o'clock and five minutes p. m. the meeting adjourned.

For the Committee,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Kathleen L. Born".

Vice Mayor Born,
Chair

Committee Report #1

S-511

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In City Council October 28, 1996

Report Accepted
Placed on file