

City of Cambridge

STUDENT HOUSING RESOLUTION

In City Council,
September 28, 1970.

WHEREAS:-

Cambridge has experienced an 81% median rent increase over the past decade, and

WHEREAS:-

50% of all one and two bedroom units rent for more than \$150 a month, and

WHEREAS:-

There exists a 1% vacancy rate coupled with a waiting list of 500-1,000 families for public housing, and

WHEREAS:-

4/5 of all low-income residents of Cambridge are subjected to rents of over 35% of their incomes,

We propose that the Cambridge City Council:

- a) Institute a massive scattered-site public housing program
- b) Immediately appoint two women residents of housing projects as representatives to the Cambridge Housing Authority
- c) Designate some body to implement the rent control legislation, providing for maximum control of rents

Referred to the City Manager for report.

A summation

We propose that the Cambridge City Council:

- a) Institute a massive scattered-site public housing program
- b) Immediately appoint two women residents of housing projects as representatives to the Cambridge Housing Authority
- c) Designate some body to implement the rent control legislation, providing for maximum control of rents.

Submitted by Stephen Gay, Debby Johnston,
Steven O'Leary, David Adams, Frank Ricardo, Cathy Hoffman and
Geraldine Blitzman

September 28, 1970

RESOLUTION TO CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

INTRODUCTION

On July 15 a group of Cambridge high school students was organized by the Education Warehouse which included Steven O'Leary, Stephen Gay, Debra Johnston, David Adams, Frank Ricardo, and Cathy Hoffman. Geri Blitzman was the advisor and the purpose of the group was to find out about the housing crisis and what to do about it. We had scheduled a program enabling us to visit people and places involved in Cambridge housing. We were exposed to facts and ideas that we never thought existed.

We worked very closely with CEOC. With them we helped organize a Riverside and Cambridgeport housing caucus. A visit to the Urban Planning Aide gave us some hard, cold facts about the kind of housing that really exists in Cambridge. Other field trips included: the B.R.A., Boston Housing Inspection office, Oliver Brooks of the Cambridge Corporation, South End Urban Renewal, South End Tenants Organization, C.R.A., C.H.A., and Model Cities.

Through our experiences we encountered both good and bad people. They enlightened us and made us realize that building houses is far from easy, but at the same time is not as difficult and impossible as some people would like us and the people of Cambridge to believe. It is with this faith that our group addresses you who have the power and responsibility as city officials to better the living conditions of those who have no choice but to hold on, hoping that someone cares.

THE NEED FOR HOUSING

Although the desperate shortage of housing is evident to all those directly involved, we, as concerned high school students, have compiled some basic facts to prove this need and offer general solutions to ameliorate the crisis. This is done with the sincere belief that the City Council will consider our thoughts seriously and act upon them.

A first indication of the housing shortage facing Cambridge is a vacancy rate of 1% for all housing.

The rent spiral reported in the August 20 Cambridge Chronicle is further evidence of the situation. Cambridge median rents have increased 81% over the past decade, three times the 26% median increase for the Boston Metropolitan area and six times that for the cities across the nation. More specifically only 17% of all rental units are available at less than \$100. Fifty percent of all one and two bedroom units rent for more than \$150 a month. If the pressing demand for more housing were being met these uncategorical increases would not be tolerated.

These statistics coupled with an increasing surge of residents into the Cambridge area attracted by the universities and/or general student atmosphere create a housing situation of immediate and critical urgency. The universities, Harvard in part, give no indication that they will help the residents of Cambridge, a course they should be made to take as they draw on all the benefits of Cambridge but put out nothing. If Harvard continues to speculate and buy up property in the residential areas of Cambridge causing rent and land increases, it should at least be willing to give a portion of its tax-exempt land to residential communities. If the problem is left unattended, the grim predictions of Cambridge as a middle class university town will easily become unfortunate realities.

While the shortage of housing affects all present and perspective residents in the area, the greatest blow is struck among the low-income residents. Constituting a disjointed majority, ~~(67% of all household heads have an income below \$4,000)~~ these residents hold the most legitimate claim to homes in Cambridge as they have lived here the longest. For these families to be ousted by the influx of transient college students is completely unjust. Truly alarming are the outrageous rent demands made on these low-income families which result in their removal.

Government agencies suggest a fair rent to be 20-25% of

a tenant's total earning power, with variations for income level and family size. Yet four-fifths of low-income residents in Cambridge (below \$4,000 income) are subjected to rents of more than 35% of earnings. In some cases this figure reaches an unnatural 80%. The university push is particularly real and painful to these people as they are unable to meet paralleling land and apartment increases. If they are not forced out of Cambridge, they are temporarily forced into substandard living. Any possibility of relief through public housing is thwarted by a waiting list of 500 to 1,000 families in similar predicaments. In a country like ours the right to a decent home ought apply to rich and poor alike.

THE SOLUTION

A. Massive Housing Program

1. Scattered-site public housing:

The most obvious solution to the problem of assuring homes to low-income families is simply the immediate construction of low-cost housing on a massive scale and rehabilitation of all substandard units. Because of excessive land costs which reduce the feasibility of large low-income projects and the tendency to build inadequate, unaesthetic box-like public units, we endorse a program of scattered-site public housing. The obvious failure of large unaesthetic projects which concentrate rather than solve a problem suggest scattered-site housing as a logical and workable program. The following sites are offered as possibilities:

- a) NASA - those acres not used by the Department of Transportation
- b) Simplex - those acres sold to MIT
- c) Treeland site - 100,00 square feet
- d) 2 acres behind the Santa Maria Hospital - 495 Concord Avenue
- e) 57-59 Sherman Street - 1 and 1/2 acres
- f) 25 Lowell St. (Lowell school)
- g) City parking lots - Austin and Essex, Austin and Norfolk
- h) City parking lot - Austin and Columbia
- i) City parking lot - Green and Pleasant
- j) City dump - portion of Garden

Although many additional private lots exist the optimum solution because of high land costs would be city-owned property and/or the acquisition by the City of non-conforming land use properties. The projects could be funded under the State 707 program or Federal 236. The Cambridge Housing Authority, under the turn-key program, can and must be an active agency for the creation of new housing units. The leased public housing is another outstanding and underused program in this city.

2. Massive rehabilitation:

The desirability of rehabilitation wherever neglected but structurally sound housing exists is self-evident. It improves the condition of housing without the exorbitant costs of demolition and new construction. If done successfully it causes minimal relocation disturbance to the tenants and guarantees them an option on their own apartments. When government financed under 235, tenants pay only 23% of their income as rent with the remainder subsidized. Rehabilitation, long neglected in Cambridge, is being done at Columbia Terrace by CAST with striking and exciting results. The forty-two units are being done under the Housing Assistance plan.

3. Citizen participation:

Any possible housing solutions necessitate citizen participation. Who better than the residents of an area or their representatives can determine their specific and general needs? We therefore further recommend that construction in neighborhoods where planning teams already exist should be undertaken with the consultation and aid of such teams. In neighborhoods without planning teams, equivalent resident representation ought to be accepted. The necessity of such participation for successful housing programs is shown in two separate areas: the Kelly school site and the Columbia Terrace project.

The activities of the CEOC this summer in organizing neighborhood caucuses have advanced effectively the cause of community

participation. Government programs that designate incorporated non-profit neighborhood groups as sponsors wisely recognized the necessity of including residents in the planning and managing of their own homes. Cambridge should encourage and support the incorporation of neighborhood groups to receive seed money and insure decent and effective community planning.

B. Cambridge Housing Authority

Idealistically the Cambridge Housing Authority was formed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining low and moderate income housing; the Cambridge Housing Authority was established to help the people of Cambridge by providing some desperately needed, acceptable housing for them. This was a good ideal, and it could be an aid to Cambridge because it saved people from paying too much rent and living in sub-standard housing.

The Cambridge Housing Authority has approximately three hundred thousand dollars immediately ready that can be used for seed money to institute state housing programs, as opposed to federal housing programs, for low-income housing. There are two vacancies on the board of the CHA which means because there is no voting quorum that they can't use the money.

We therefore feel that those two vacancies should be filled immediately and suggest that in the best interest of the people who live in low and moderate income housing the appointments go to two valid tenant representatives from public housing. As there are now three men on the board of the CHA, we further recommend that the two tenants be women as women are especially sensitive to housing problems: need for day carecenters and other related apartment needs. In addition they would have more time to devote to such an important post. The gap between the CHA and tenants would be considerably lessened with two tenant women on the board. Now at least the tenants would have some voice in the conditions of their houses.

Finally, our strongest reason for this recommendation is that the Cambridge Housing Authority was established to help the people, and this move would help the CHA to truly help the people of Cambridge.

C. Rent Control

The need for rent control in Cambridge is certain. The housing shortage, now critical, and ever-increasing, is mirrored in the 81% median increase earlier cited for the 1960-70 period. The people's desire for rent control here was shown in the bitter struggle one year ago. The recent electoral victory in the state legislature is evidence of state concern. Boston has already drafted its own law and Newton, Allston, and Brookline are doing the same. The time has come for Cambridge, where the cause is so great, to draft a strong rent control measure with across the board decreases and a percentage allowance equal only to increases in the cost of living and assesment to measure legal rent increases. The establishment of a rent control board which will accompany the passage of rent control should be done immediately. Since the City Council will have the authority to determine members of this board we would hope that again they be representatives fo the tenant majority and both men and women.

CONCLUSION

The underpriveleged people of Cambridge have been greatly criticized for having brought Cambridge down, but we tend to think it is the fault of those who can do something about the crisis and have not acted. It seems very obvious that people who don't share the same dilemas of the poor cannot fully realize the need to help them.

For those unacquainted with the horrors of poor housing, the implication may not be clear. Poor housing directly results in communication breakdowns, the destruction of neighborhoods,

and prevents any sense of brotherhood among brothers. As Cambridge youth we have felt this directly and as a result implore and demand that housing be paid attention to and decent living conditions be provided for all. The burden of this demand falls on the City Council as the governing body and on the negligent universities.

Our group is bitter because some people have turned their back on mankind. These people create the injustices inflicted on those who can no longer cope with them. We think that there must be a better way, but we can't convince too many others of that theory because not many others can appreciate and feel the sorrows and anxieties of other people.

There seems to be only one solution. That is why we have approached you, our City Council, demanding that you recognize the right of your fellow citizens to a decent home. As students we intend to organize in our schools. As counselors we hope you organize yourselves to meet our housing needs.

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REPORT

from a group of Cambridge high school students organized by the Education Warehouse regarding the housing crisis.

September 28, 1970