

Mayor Walter Sullivan
City Councillor
Cambridge, MA

49 Winslow St.
Cambridge, MA 02138
Nov. 29, 1986

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CAMBRIDGE MA.

Dear Councillor:

The story in the Tab about the mistreatment by the police of Mr. Nassirnia, the Iranian who was arrested after he put up a sign for a peace rally in Central Square, is distressing. It also points out how the law about posting handbills in Cambridge creates a grotesque situation of conflict between honest citizens and the police and is a ready made setup for allowing this kind of bigotry and viciousness to find expression.

Most of us in this city expect to find out some of the information we need to know about community events from signs put up on the streets by the people who sponsor such events. These people are usually public-spirited, civic-minded people; and a large proportion of their notices concern events the public is better off for knowing about. And yet there is some kind of law--no one I know understands exactly what the law is, they only know the custom, which is evidently against the law--which gives armed police permission, perhaps even encourages them, to threaten and abuse these good citizens whenever they feel the whim.

I belong to a charitable group which educates the public and raises money annually by means of films, yard sales, and other events. We feel it is our duty to publicize these things in the most effective way possible, because the amount of public awareness we can generate and the amount of money we can raise directly relate to the alleviation of human suffering through this charity. We use the newspapers, but everyone agrees that for many events street signs are by far the most effective, and most customary, way of getting the word out.

I used to put up the signs. I always used to make it my policy to go around afterwards and take down all the signs I could find. I also removed other out-of-date notices that I came across to make up for any of mine that I might have missed, so that after our events there was a net gain in city neatness. I knew too that nails and staples in telephone poles are a problem for linemen, so I always used tape.

Our signs are still put up with exactly the same enthusiasm by other group members. However, in recent years I have had several ugly experiences of being harassed by policemen over the affixing of these signs, so that now, I am ashamed to say, I have become too fearful to be willing to do it much any more. The first time it happened I was, in accordance with time-honored Cambridge custom, taping a sign to a post near my house when I was called to by a policeman. Unaware that I had committed major crime and had changed from a conscientious citizen into the filth of the earth, I went over to him smiling friendly, thinking he wanted to ask directions or something. I was shocked when he shouted at me, in a voice I can only say would be abusive to a dog, "You take down that sign!" He also said he could arrest me. I am used to personal interactions where I am assumed to have a minimum amount of human dignity, and I had not in fact committed murder; so I was quickly reduced to altercation, anger, and tears and was shaken for a long time afterwards.

I realize that the police are expected to do a terribly difficult job. If I am threatened by an armed intruder I expect a policeman to come and put his life on the line to help me. It shakes my confidence in that relationship, though, when I think a policeman is going to kill me because I taped a sign to a lamppost.

In Harvard Square last spring I saw a policeman walking around with a young male student in his custody who had an armful of posters advertising a classical music concert. The policeman was saying, "...and now we'll go and find another sign you put up and you'll take that one down too..." The youth was so humiliated as he cringed along beside the policeman that he had tears in his eyes; it was a scene that I found so sadistic that I had to look away. I wanted to say to the policeman, "You know, I enjoy knowing about concerts like this, and I enjoy being able to find out about events from poles and posts and construction boards as I do my shopping." I didn't dare say it, though, because I thought if I seemed to notice the scene at all it would be too much and the student would actually begin to cry.

Most of my acquaintances are not aware of the law against putting up signs until they learn about it from someone like me who has reason to know it exists; and then they are rather surprised and shocked that such a law not only exists but is often enforced. All of them assume that signs stuck about on the streets advertising events of public interest are part of the ambiance and character of Cambridge and the best way to find out about these things. All of them assume that if they lose a dog or find a dog, putting up notices on posts in the neighborhood is the only hope of getting results. "Nobody looks in the newspaper," they say.

I wonder if you on the city council, or if the police and their wives and husbands, never use or enjoy these signs--never advertise for a pet, notice an upcoming concert, public meeting, or other event, or never even go to a yard sale because of a sign. I wonder if the majority of the people in the city really want to live in a town that lacks this life and vitality, that looks like the sterile suburb of a sunbelt city.

I am a homeowner and I pay taxes to the city. I assume that some little amount goes to pay people to go around and take down these signs at intervals. I am happy to support this activity--it provides jobs and gets rid of obsolete signs and keeps the city at some minimum level of cleanliness. I have been told by a policeman that my signs raise his and my utility rates, since the utility companies take them off their poles and charge the cost to their customers. Perhaps I and he do pay a few pennies for this service; I think it is money well spent.

The problem is that putting up signs is a Cambridge custom. The signs contribute to the city's interesting character and are civically useful. Nice people put up the signs; and they will probably keep on doing it unless they are put in prison for it. Better than the license for casual abuse of good citizens that the law's enforcement now entails, it seems to me that the city would profit from a more tolerant and laissez-faire attitude towards the sign-posting custom. Why not put out some public information about types of harmful sign-posting, such as with nails in telephone poles and trees? That isn't done now, I guess, because to point out that some sign posting is bad implies that some is acceptable.

If secret sunbelt-envy requires that the law exist, why not leave its enforcement alone, or limit it to an occasional ticket from a non-gun-carrying person, like, for example, the parking meter people?

I don't think this law, whatever it is, or the implications of its enforcement have been at all thought through by the city council. I don't think most citizens here want all those signs of life to disappear. And furthermore, that the police must enforce it encourages the most ill-tempered or sadistic among them to harass, and it appears from Mr. Nassirnia's experience, even physically abuse good people whenever they feel like it. In the minds of the police these people become categorized as lawbreakers and therefore as scum, along with the muggers and murderers. We who have put up signs feel uncomfortable in that company, and the city is the worse for it.

Sincerely yours,

Virginia Savage

Virginia Savage

Copies to City Councillors, CASA, and The Cambridge Tab.

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S-676

Comm. from Virginia Savage, 49 Winslow St.,
Re: the recent story in the TAB on the arrest of Mr. Nassirnia after posting a sign for a peace rally in Central Square & the law on posting handbills in general.

In City Council,

December 15, 1986

Placed on File
Copy to City Manager

Copy sent to the City Manager
12/17/86 amb