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CAMBRIDGE MA.

38 Essex Street
Cambridge, MA 02139
May 11, 1994

Honorable Michael Sullivan
Cambridge City Council
Cambridge, MA 02139

Dear Councilor Sullivan:

Last fall, prior to the elections, I sent a letter to the members of the City Council concerning rent control. Only three councilors acknowledged my letter--only one a CCA councilor.

Enclosed is a copy of that letter, being sent now to the new councilors elected in 1993.

I am concerned with the prospect of the complete elimination of any rent control regulations. At the same time I am concerned--as my letter indicates--with the serious inequities in the present antiquated rent control ordinance, and the injustices being caused by that ordinance. I hope the members of the Cambridge City Council will have the wisdom and the political courage to create a fairer and more humane law along the lines I have detailed in my letter and not wait for a statewide referendum in the fall.

Cordially,



Robert L. Hilliard

38 Essex Street
Cambridge, MA 02139
September 13, 1993

Cambridge City Council
Cambridge, MA 02139

Dear Councilors:

This is an open letter to the members of the Cambridge City Council.

I do not own any rental property in Cambridge.

I have worked for affordable housing and equal opportunity in housing for more than forty-five years, and have been a strong supporter of rent control.

I am a past member of the Board of Directors of the Cambridge Civic Association, which strongly supports rent control.

I am concerned, however, that while the rent control policies in Cambridge have helped many poor families and individuals obtain housing, the present status and application of the policies--now 20 years old--have also deprived many poor families from obtaining affordable housing. The policies as they are now constituted have also inadvertently resulted in some serious injustices to a number of other families and individuals who are property owners, but are not the wealthy realty-holding companies from whom the rent control policies were designed to protect Cambridge residents.

I am concerned that the present rent control policies in Cambridge have lost sight of their original purposes and are like runaway horses--moving swiftly to their destinations but trampling many guiltless persons in the process.

It is time to review the Cambridge rent control policies for the purpose of being certain that they continue to serve their societal purpose but do not continue to hurt innocent people.

I have respect for the citizens of Cambridge who serve on the City Council. They expend enormous amounts of time and energy to serve the people of Cambridge. I find them to be dedicated and compassionate. They care about affordable housing and respect human rights.

That is why I believe it is time for them to take another look at what appears to be an outdated rent control ordinance, with a view to amending it to reflect the reality of the present-day

housing market, needs, and ownership, and better serve all the people of Cambridge with fairness and equity. Ralph Waldo Emerson surely would support the principle of rent control, but if he examined some of the injustices wreaked by the present policies in Cambridge, he would just as surely call the continuation of those policies without emendation a foolish consistency.

Please read the following with an independent mind and a sense of objectivity. Restudy the current rent control laws and their application. I hope, and believe, you will then agree to amend the rent control laws before this coming November's election. Given the political commitments of some Councilors, this is a hard thing for some of them to do, I know. It sometimes takes courage to act with compassion and fairness. But I am convinced that the majority of the members of the Council will put the needs of Cambridge citizens as a whole before politics.

Let us examine some of the injustices that require emendation of the current rent-control policies.

Means test.

There is at the present time no means test for occupants of rent-controlled housing.

1) In some cases housing unit owners whose incomes are less than those of given tenants are being forced to subsidize those tenants' housing. That is patently inequitable and discriminates in favor of those with more money and against those with less money.

I am aware that there are many students in Cambridge who need affordable housing. I have been in that situation. As a university student I first worked at five different part-time jobs each week in order to be able to have food and a roof over my head, as well as to pay tuition. Later on I was able to continue my education through the G.I. Bill and other part-time jobs. I sympathize with the students who truly are needy. But under the present rent-control policy there are many housing unit owners whose incomes are far less than those of the parents of the students who live in the rent-controlled units. In point of fact, the Cambridge rent-control policies are forcing many landlords of moderate means to subsidize students of higher income families. Is it fair for the Cambridge government to require landlords of moderate means to provide, through rent-control, subsidies for children of wealthier families? In all equity, it would appear that in such cases higher-income parents should be required to subsidize their own children.

One solution: a city rent-control board should approve eligibility for all rent-controlled units by examining the previous three years' federal tax forms. Banks do it for loans. State and

federal housing subsidy programs (i.e. section 8 and section 707) require income eligibility. It would appear, therefore, to be appropriate to do so for rent-controlled housing, a form of subsidy. Eligibility cards or letters can be issued in a manner similar to that of state and federal housing certification.

2) What has been happening in Cambridge without a means test? Many middle- and even upper-income individuals and families--who can afford market-rate housing--have rented rent-controlled units. This has effectively taken those units off the market and away from lower income families and individuals. The latter are the people the rent-control policies were designed to help, but in their present form the policies are actually harming many of these needy people.

Private property.

Enclosed is a poem in The Senior Times by Cambridge resident Julia Low. Please take a moment to read it. Can you not feel compassion for such persons who suffer under the present rent-control policies? There are too many people like Ms. Low in Cambridge today. What is especially insensitive about a rent-control policy that literally takes a person's home away from them is that in too many cases the tenant has a higher income than the housing unit owner and can more readily afford market prices than can the person who owns the unit and who is being forced to find housing on the market after being dispossessed from their own home.

Think about that! How ludicrous the implementation of the Cambridge rent-control policies have become in some instances. The policy must be made more equitable, to permit a home owner to take a long trip or, especially in the current economy, to find a job in another part of the country for a period of time, without having their home commandeered as it might be by a totalitarian government. As strange as it may seem, under the present Cambridge rent-control policies, a university professor might not be able to accept a semester or year's teaching or research appointment abroad (i.e. a Fulbright award) or in another state without returning to find that her or his home has literally been seized by the Cambridge government and even rented at a rate that no longer permits decent property maintenance or even meet mortgage payments.

Under the current Cambridge rent-control policies a home-owner can even be jailed for refusing to allow squatters to take over a living unit in her or his home. As incredible as this sounds, this has actually happened in Cambridge!

The present Cambridge rent-control policies permit the seizure and use of the homes and property of some housing unit owners, reminiscent of the seizure of the homes and property of Jews in many countries in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, giving those homes and property to those favored by the State.

Big vs. little landlords.

In New York and in other parts of the country where rent-control laws have been enacted, the purpose was not only to provide affordable housing for poor people, but to prevent gouging by real estate syndicates or owners who controlled many units and had the monetary resources to hold out housing units for the highest prices. The rent control policies were not designed to financially punish small property owners, those who own only a few housing units. These small property owners, in many instances, can barely afford to maintain their property even with market prices. They do not have the deep pockets, as multi-property owners do, to continue to be solvent when they have a tenant who does not pay rent for a month or more, or who destroys property requiring repair beyond that provided in a security deposit, or who finds that taxes, water and utility bills force the use of savings, insurance and retirement funds to continue to subsidize tenants whose incomes would permit market rate rents. Some of these landlords are elderly or retired or handicapped and are merely trying to supplement their social security income by renting units in their homes because they are unable to work.

It would appear that a compassionate, realistic policy would exempt owners of six or fewer units from the rent-control laws. Many of these owners are clearly trying to survive while providing housing, to hold on to their property and small investment, and do not have the resources of large scale landlords to continue to subsidize tenants.

Proposals.

The following are modest proposals, based on the above commentary:

1. Establish a means test for entitlement to rent-control units, with market-price steps, if feasible, based on tenant-landlord income comparisons.
2. Establish a reasonable period of time--certainly, at least a year--for owners to be away from their own occupied units, and require that the unit has clearly been abandoned on a long-term basis before seizure of that property for use determined by the government.
3. Exempt from rent-control landlords who owns six units or less.

As a long-time advocate of and worker for strong rent-control, I believe the adoption of these proposals will simultaneously maintain strong rent control, make affordable housing more equitably available to those who need it, and eliminate some of the inequities and injustices noted above. Action now, before the

election, will mean far more to the people of Cambridge than rhetoric about what may be done after the election.

I know that the members of the City Council have the fairness, compassion, and integrity to amend the rent control laws to reflect these current needs. I believe that, even in an election year, you also have the courage to do so.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Hilliard

c.c. Cambridge Alliance, Cambridge Civic Association, Cambridge Rainbow, Cambridge Tenants Union, Small Property Owners Association, Boston Globe, Boston Herald, Cambridge Chronicle, Cambridge TAB.

AUGUST- 1993

FROM THE READERS

Have something to say? Do you enjoy writing prose or poetry? Send your written word to : The Senior Times, attn. Editor, Suite 814, 1102 Pleasant Street, Worcester, MA 01602-1232.

MY HEART BELONGS TO CAMBRIDGE

*I followed the Freedom Trail to Massachusetts
On the Blizzard Day of '78
Young child by my side,
No one I knew, no place of my own.*

*Harvard Square steals my soul,
Nations learn to live in peace,
Charles bank is my place to stroll;
My heart belongs to Cambridge!*

*Hard work brings me my own place, only
I cannot live in my own home*;
Strangers come and go as they please,
My place is their home 'way from home.*

*Time flees and life is short,
Child is grown, still no place of my own,
If home is where the heart is,
Please give me back my home sweet home.*

Cambridge is where I choose to live.

**Cambridge ordinance prohibits owner occupancy
in some condo units.*

**Julia H. Low
Cambridge
Independence Day, 1993**

Consent Comm. # 7

S 250

Comm. from Robert Hilliard regarding a
letter in reference to rent control.

In City Council,

May 23, 1994

*Referred to Rent
Control Committee*

*5/25/94 Copy sent to Rent
Control Committee @*