



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
INTEROFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

To The Honorable, The City Council

Date December 7, 1987

From Joseph E. Connarton, City Clerk *JEC*

Reference

Subject Attached comments of William Morris

Enclosed you will find a copy of the written comments of William Morris, relative to the hearing held by the City Council on November 16, 1987 with regard to the premises numbered 149-151 Putnam Avenue.

JEC/mh

Enclosure

RECEIVED BY
OFFICE OF CITY CLERK

1987 NOV 20 PM 2: 53

CAMBRIDGE MA. TESTIMONY OF WILLIAM MORRIS
CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL NOV.16,1987

I became involved with the Inspectional Services Department when I assumed chairmanship of the Public Health Committee of the Cambridge Health Policy Board in April of 1987. My first direct interaction came about when I responded to Commissioner Cellucci's concern over the inability of many of his inspectors to write reports well enough to stand up in court. I volunteered to work on this problem in light of my profession as a teacher of writing. Circumstances prevented this program from reaching its reality as, after spending several exploratory sessions with Mr. Pasquarello we were unable to implement the training planned because of short-handedness of the department due to the suspension of several inspectors.

While reviewing reports with Mr. Pasquarello, I came to notice more than the writing deficiencies of the reports; it was clear that departmental policy seemed to allow for overly-extended delays in enforcing regulations by permitting several, sometimes dozens of postponements in court. There were clearly patterns of certain property owners being allowed months and years of delay in responding to often extremely hazardous conditions in their properties.

Because of this experience, I began to look more closely into the operation of the department and found my suspicions confirmed. Policy was clearly allowing many hazardous conditions to continue unresolved.

My involvement with the issue became much more intense in the last week in June when I received a call from Tim Connor, a tenant at 151 Putnam Ave. He informed me that an inspection on that day had indicated that demolition of the laundry at the rear of the building was endangering the porches at the back of the house and, further, early work on the project had exposed several barrels of unidentifiable chemicals at the abutting vacant lot. I pursued his call with a visit to the site with my wife who took photographs of the property and the substances strewn about the now exposed laundry building. In the course of my tour of the property, I met Mr. Shepard Spunt, a realtor with an office facing the site on Elmer St. He pointed out the intakes for several underground tanks and told me of the ongoing struggle to get the owners of the property to obey city and court rulings, in addition to providing me with written documentation of his claims.

I went to Inspectional Services the next day and found a report filed the previous day by Mr. Courtney. His report accurately reflected what I had seen the previous evening, but I was astonished to find a notation on the report saying that the commissioner stated the issues considered to be irrelevant or already addressed and that the file was to be closed.

Because the immediate problem seemed to be primarily the

chemicals, I called the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Engineering (DEEE) and arranged for my wife and Mr. Oliver Farnam, a neighbor to the site to meet the DEEE representative at the Putnam Ave. location, while I attempted to pursue the issue with Mr. Pasquarello and Mr. Courtney.

Being told that the commissioner had decided that the case was closed, and knowing that the chemical aspect of the problem was about to be addressed by DEEE, it was apparent that next concern was the condition of the porches, labelled as unsafe by both Mr. Courtney's report and by the direct comments of the demolition contractor when I visited the site to meet DEEE.

The state did their sample collecting and indicated the presence of carcinogens and several underground tanks, and indicated that they would be in touch with the city in order to seal off the property.

That having been done, I met with Mr. Connor and he decided to file a complaint the next morning as regarded the porches. He did so and informed me that the commissioner was not going to follow up.

My ongoing involvement has been around the issue of getting ^{action} from the agencies involved and attempting to air what I deemed to be unconscionable neglect on the part of Inspectional Services.

My visibility on this issue resulted in a steady flow of contacts from private citizens and members of the department who had tales of other examples of outrageous neglect on the part of the department.

The first of these calls was from a tenant at 145 Magazine St. who indicated that an inspection had been done on the premises and that, while several life-threatening problems had been detected, the inspectors advised her to expect no redress of them because of the political connections of the owner.

A visit to the site with my wife and two other individuals; tenant activist William Noble and Putnam Ave. resident Lawrence Butler, made it clear that the tenant was not exaggerating the condition of the building. The cause of greatest concern was the furnace, a converted coal-burner which was separated at the juncture of top and bottom segments by a matter of several inches. Reports on file at Inspectional Services indicated that several inspectors had indicated the condition to be ~~life~~ ^{life} threatening and urged immediate enforcement of code. These events occurred during the first week of July and the department is still seeking delays each time it goes to court. In late September, my wife received a call from an inspector whom she knew who proceeded to turn the phone over to another unidentified inspector who indicated that he felt the delays on this case could prove fatal. At this time, past experience and frustration caused me to believe that my best avenue for quick redress of this situation was a council hearing and that is part of the reason for the November 16 session.

Another cause for concern appears to be the property at

55 Trowbridge St. This is an eight unit rent-controlled building which has been converted to a two-family, one unit home for the principals of an institution called the Erikson Center. The city's chief building inspector has been working with the principals of this property for seven months, according to testimony. During that time he has assisted them in that he suggested to them that the conversion could be made, but they have never attempted to obtain removal permits which indicates his complicity in the illegal removal process. Further, the building has three permits from Inspectional Services totalling \$40,000 but the owner testified to ~~doing~~ ^{doing} \$400,000 worth of work on the property.

Because the building had been vacant for some time and because I pass it each going to and coming from work, I was curious when I saw a permit and the beginnings of massive rehabilitation. I checked at the department for permits at the time (early June) and found only a \$6,000 permit to repair drywall. Because the work appeared to exceed the permit by a tremendous amount, I brought it to Mr. Pasquarello who called the inspector over so that we could discuss my concern. He professed to the two of us that he had no knowledge of the property but would look into it.

Last month, he testified at the rent ^{board} in order to help the landlord's case for removal and testified that he had been working with the owner very closely since April and that the zoning specialist agreed that it should be a two-family dwelling. The records and the zoning specialist indicate that no such ruling had been made.

One factor of concern is that the institution connected with this house includes on its board the chair of the recent blue ribbon committee investigating Inspectional Services who also appeared at the initial rent board hearing on the property.

Thus the inspector, has misrepresented the true status of the building, under oath, has indicated that he was working with the owner for two months prior to the date when he denied any knowledge of the property and in spite of his professed connection with the property, has allowed it to be under-permitted to the tune of \$360,000.

Another property of concern deals with the property on Cambridge St. housing Cambridge Lock Co. In a visit to Inspectional Services in September, I was advised that two inspectors had been in touch with the owner who was seeking their help with getting the tenants out of the building and that he felt that something was going to happen soon in connection with this property. Two weeks ^{later} a fire of suspicious origin did sufficient damage to the building so as to necessitate removal of tenants. The person assigned to the department's mandatory inspection of the property was an inspector-in-training who was not qualified to make such an inspection and had never before done one.

The final property which I would like to discuss is a multiple use building on Mass. Ave. Extensive work at this property has included many overt building and safety

violations including sealing off air and light from what had been the front apartment and second means of egress from the rear apartment. While I realize that not all violations can be detected immediately, this situation has existed for several months on the city's main artery.

These represent but of few of the improprieties of which I have been informed. As a private citizen with full-time employment and other issues to deal with, I have had neither the authority or the opportunity to investigate everything which I hear of, even though most appear quite serious in nature.

I do not pretend to believe that individual councillors have the time to pursue these charges but collectively the council does have the authority to do so and I would urge a most zealous investigation as soon as possible.

City of Cambridge

S-762

Comm. from Joseph E. Connarton, City Clerk,
transmitting for informational purposes a copy
of the remarks of William Morris relative to
the hearing held by the City Council on Novem-
ber 16, 1987 on 149-151 Putnam Avenue.

In City Council,

December 7, 1987