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15 September, 2014

To the Honorable Members of the Cambridge City Council,

I would like to express my support for allocating 80% of FY2015 Community Preservation Act funds to affordable housing.

It won't surprise the council to learn that since 1990, the number of households in Cambridge earning 50 – 80% of Area Median Income (in that income range someone would currently be eligible to live in public housing) has declined by 49%, while the number of households earning over 120% has increased by 60%.¹ For people who are lucky enough to get a tenant-based voucher from CHA, an increasing number can't find an affordable apartment to move to in Cambridge. In 2004, 93% of CHA Housing Choice Voucher participants lived in Cambridge. By 2012, it had dropped to 68%. The percent share of voucher households has decreased in eight neighborhoods across the city including a 10% decrease in Riverside.²

The cost of preservation is more expensive than it was four years ago when Homeowner's Rehab, Inc. purchased and preserved Inman Square Apartments (where I live). It's not just about the attractiveness of the Cambridge market. Because of changes to state law 40T weakening the notice provisions that apply when an expiring-use property is being sold, owners are not required to notify the city and the tenants of their intention to sell. In the case of Briston Arms, the sale was an open offering. The Department of Housing and Community Development did not select a local non-profit as its designee. Preservation purchasers were forced to bid against one another.

There are 670 units of expiring-use housing that are at risk of losing affordability protections by 2020 (710 units if you count the 49 market rent apartments at Briston Arms that are really below market). We don't want to have to triage Briston Arms, the Close Building, and Fresh Pond Apartments. Whose homes would we choose not to save?

The problem is we cannot afford to replace this housing. To tear down and rebuild Jefferson Park State, it's going to cost about \$500,000 per unit.³ The city's community development department estimates that the cost of developing a tax credit rental property on a market acquired site is in the range of \$550,000 to \$600,000 per unit.⁴

A Briston Arms tenant asked me if they were going to lose their apartment and be forced out of Cambridge for good. We are faced with a housing crisis (though unlike the 1990's, no one seems to call it that). And we are making a decision about who gets to live in this city.

Thank you for considering my comments.

Sincerely yours,

Cheryl-Ann Pizza-Zeoli
Cheryl-Ann Pizza-Zeoli

Voucher Co-Chair of the Alliance of Cambridge Tenants
Member of the Board of the Affordable Housing Trust
Member of the Board of the Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee

¹ Memo to the Cambridge Affordable Housing Trust Re: Analysis of Incomes in Cambridge since 1990, CDD Staff, 28 August, 2014

² Schultheis, Eric, "2013 Update to the Spatio-Temporal Analysis of Participant Households in the HCV Program Administered by the Cambridge Housing Authority, 1.1.2004 through 12.1.2012," 18 August, 2013

³ Jefferson Park State Resident Relocation Policies and Procedures Agreement, 13 November, 2013

⁴ Memo to the Cambridge Affordable Housing Trust Re: Development challenges, Chris Cotter, Anna Dolmatch, 24 July, 2014