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**Testimony – City Council, Monday, September 22, 2014
Order #6 – Community engagement in project review**

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The Cambridge Residents Alliance helped to convene and participated in a meeting on May 21, 2014 with the City Manager, who brought his senior staff from the Community Development Department, to discuss our disturbing experiences with the Planning Board. Representatives also present or party to the critique we offered were from the Fresh Pond Residents Alliance, the Neighborhood Association of East Cambridge, the James Green Condo Association and the Harvard Square Defense Committee. We provided the City Manager and his team a list of 20-some concerns and suggestions relating to the composition of the Planning Board, its staffing, its relationship to residents and more. We followed that meeting with a longer memorandum that you have received and, hopefully, have read.

One item on our list has been the lack of consistent engagement with the neighborhoods by proponents of developments. On July 10 we wrote: “Regarding the relationship between development proposals and affected neighborhoods, there is currently no enforcement mechanism for those developers who actively choose not to engage with the community. The Planning Board’s rules currently in effect state: ‘Petitioners are strongly encouraged to meet with abutters, neighborhoods and neighborhood groups in advance of the public hearing . . .’” Clearly this is not enough. We went on to say, “We request that an enforcement mechanism be created”. . . and “We suggest the creation of an ombudsman position within CDD to interface with the public on zoning-related matters.”

While we are not opposed to Policy Order #6, presumably amended tonight to incorporate the voices of concerned residents ironically left out of the proposed reform process, we are not happy with yet another “study” or “pilot” effort. We wonder what happened to the Advisory Committee you requested be formed at your meeting on July 28th to improve the Planning Board’s functions and relationships with neighborhood groups and residents. The issues raised in Policy Order #6 really belong in that committee’s purview. We have done our due diligence – where is the forward motion on the city’s part to indicate that we have real problem areas that need attention.

We want to emphasize that the Planning Board rules are really only guidelines – there is no way by Council “fiat” to “require developers to hold a public meeting in the neighborhood” or make reports -- an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance is required to achieve that. A number of us across the city have been working on some language that we will present when we have achieved consensus. But we see larger areas of deficit in our Zoning Ordinance as well, especially in the Large Project Special Permit process and criteria. We are approving projects individually without looking at the impact on neighborhoods and the city as a whole. It took active residents, for instance, to identify the disastrous condition of New Street at a point when the Planning Board said the project was just about “good to go.”

Since the rejection of the Carlone *et al* Petition without a second reading, we are concerned that the Council is asking for the creation of committees, conversations and task forces rather than addressing the very immediate consequences of how development gets done in Cambridge. We want meaningful change in the intermediate period before we can finally get down to a planning process that defines the needs of the City for housing, transportation, commercial expansion, protection of the environment (and active measures to build buildings that actively minimize greenhouse gases), open space and more.

Incidentally, the Cambridge Residents Alliance took advantage of last Friday's citywide and worldwide "Parking Day" and filled our assigned space at 351 Mass. Ave., directly opposite the 300 Mass. Ave. Biolab, with a backyard patio made of recycled wooden pallets. We invited passersby to draw a self-portrait for our gallery and write about their wishes for their lives in the City. Affordable housing came out way on top but many other ideas and hopes were raised. We appreciate Councilor Mazon for joining us that morning. We are not making our critiques or suggestions in the abstract – as I said before, we are using our precious time to participate in all aspects of city life, encouraging others to do so, bringing our issues respectfully and thoroughly to city officials, elected and appointed.