

Housing affordability in Cambridge, Mass + Main

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City Clerk Agenda

To:City Council <CityCouncil@CambridgeMA.GOV>;

Cc:Lopez, Donna <dlopez@cambridgema.gov>;

I know that the council is heavily committed to the goal of preserving diversity in the city, and that a critical part of that equation is focussing on housing affordability.

As many of you know, I have worked as an architect here for 30 years with my work focused more or less entirely on designing all kinds of housing in Cambridge. From this experience I can categorically state that it is hard, very hard, to obtain permits to build housing. In my opinion is far too hard, in fact so hard that despite the strong desire of developers to invest in the city, not enough new housing is being permitted and built here. As Barry Bluestone has pointed out, this throttling of new housing supply means that well to do, moderate income, and low income folks are all competing for what is a too limited, too static resource.

I believe that the public discourse on this subject has been distorted by voices that are more opposed to change than they are committed to affordable housing. One of the bows in their quiver is to suggest that housing developers are responsible for the affordability problem, and that developments should either be stopped or be obliged themselves to solve the "affordability crisis."

This is not solely, as some would have it, a problem of the failure to build enough affordable housing. This is a problem of not permitting enough housing, period. Every unit is very expensive to get permitted and built, so the new housing is inevitably expensive. However, each and every unit permitted and built here relieves pressure on the existing housing stock.

There is a dangerous fallacy being put forth in the public discourse that proposes a false choice between "new luxury housing" and "new affordable housing". Construction of both improves overall housing affordability.

The Mass and Main proposal has both a substantial number of affordable units and it is also broadly consistent with the goals established in the K2C2 process which seeks to alter the zoning code in the heart of Cambridge to encourage new housing in Kendal and Central Square, with additional height granted for provision of additional affordable housing units. The Mass + Main project proposes the construction of 47 affordable units with a value of 20-30 million dollars at no cost to the City. It would be a small step in the direction of increasing housing production for the City Council to approve the Mass + Main petition and PERMIT the proposed housing to be built.

It is my hope that as soon as this work is accomplished, the Council can move on to addressing the issues of quality of life and housing affordability that would come out of broad new zoning in Central Square following the planning goals articulated during the C2 process. It is disingenuous to suggest the Council is powerless to slow the rise of housing costs in Cambridge. Those who have control can and should address the rise in housing costs by permitting more housing to be built to meet the obvious demand. Most of us agree this increase should NOT be focussed in the residential neighborhoods but on the underutilized sites that are zoned business or industrial along the cities primary corridors and obsolete industrial sites.

We in the community cannot behave like Marie Antoinette and bemoan rising housing costs while loading up housing construction with more and more obligations while fighting each individual project that is proposed. That drives up costs and is bad for the future vibrancy and diversity of Cambridge.

Sincerely, Mark Boyes-Watson