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**To: Mayor Davis and other members of the Cambridge City Council**

**From: Emily Dexter, 9 Fenno St.**

**Date: July 30, 2012**

**Re: Proposed changes to zoning regulations for K-8 buildings and potential renovation of the ML King building on Putnam Ave.**

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I understand and appreciate the good intentions behind the suggestion to exempt K-8 buildings from certain zoning requirements so the city can more quickly re-build and renovate school buildings that are in disrepair or are too small. However, there are significant negatives associated with this plan that I think far outweigh the positives. I also encourage you to seek a second opinion regarding the need to demolish the current ML King building that was commissioned by a previous Cambridge City Council and designed by an internationally-famous architect and city planner. Regarding the proposed zoning exemption:

**1) It is fundamentally anti-democratic to say that residents and businesses must adhere to zoning requirements or seek variances through a public meeting process, but the City does not.** (I'm sure you don't mean it to, but it sounds a little bit like "Four legs good, two legs better.") These zoning rules are designed to protect neighborhoods from problems of traffic, shadows, and excess building density, which affect neighborhoods regardless of whether the building is a school or not. As I understand it, the City can already build any kind of school it wants, it just has to go through a process of communicating with the public and hearing public opinion before being granted a variance. *Because one of the main goals of public education is to support democracy, it makes no sense for the City to create undemocratic processes to renovate or build its public schools.* The city should be modeling democratic processes and concern for the wellbeing of its neighborhoods as it manages its school buildings.

**2) It will decrease opportunities for parent, family, and community engagement in the design of school buildings.** The school department has hired a national expert to help the district increase family and community engagement in the public schools. The primary goal of the City's *Kids Council* is to increase parent, family and community engagement. It makes no sense to try to *increase* family engagement in the City and in its public schools while also *decreasing* opportunities for parents and residents to contribute to the City's decisions about school buildings, which are some of the most costly and long-lasting decisions the City will make. *This community is rich with people who are knowledgeable about Cambridge's history, about architecture and city planning, and about creating visionary educational space. This zoning exemption will decrease the amount that community members can contribute to the discussion about school buildings, and will deprive the City of this rich array of views when making school building decisions.* Also note that many parents and residents who are unengaged in the public schools become engaged though a single issue, but then stay engaged in the schools more broadly long after that issue has disappeared.

**3) It will increase mistrust between neighborhood residents and the public schools.** Only a small minority of Cambridge residents have children in the public schools. According to the 2010 census, only 17% of Cambridge households even have a child under the age of 18 living there, and an even smaller percentage have children in the *public* schools. Circumventing current zoning processes will give residents who are not CPS parents even less reason to support the public school system.

4) **It will increase mistrust between parents and the public schools.** The new middle school plan did *not* pass with the widespread consent of Cambridge parents or other residents. There were as many in public opposition as in public support of this reorganization. *Even most of the School Committee members who voted for the IA did so with trepidation, low enthusiasm, numerous caveats, and statements that they were voting for the IA not because they felt exited about the plan, but because they felt they had to do "something."* If the City implements the IA building plan through autocratic processes that shut out parent voice, it will increase mistrust, cynicism, and apathy and will give the public schools an autocratic reputation that will turn parents away from the schools and the City. Even parents who were opposed to the IA have put in incredible amounts of time and effort to support the new middle schools and deserve to be included in public discussion about these buildings.

**Please also request a second opinion regarding the possibility of renovating the current MLK building.** There is no reason to think that Eastman Associates are "biased," but different professionals come to different conclusions. *The decision to rebuild rather than renovate a Cambridge public school designed by an internationally important architect and urban planner such as Joseph Lluis Sert is the decision to undergo a heart transplant rather than the far less severe and less risky by-pass surgery: A second opinion is merited.* Please note that Sert designed the 1937 Paris Expo building where Picasso's *Guernica* was first exhibited, designed the master plan for Barcelona in the 30s, went into exile to the U.S. from his native Barcelona because of his anti-fascist, anti-Nazi views, started the first program in urban design when he was dean of the Harvard Sch. of Design, and was associated with artists and architects such as Picasso, Miro, Calder, Corbusier, Gaudi, and Chagall. I don't know the story of how the Cambridge City Council of the late 60s/early 70s commissioned him to design a public school for Cambridge, but this will may be the only public school buildings in the world that Sert designed. As I understand it, the Cambridge Historical Commission can't grant it historical status because it is less than 50 years old, but I hope the Council will honor the decision of your Council's predecessor by commissioning a second-opinion study to see if this important building and its children can be saved.

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Communications #74

A communication was received from Emily Dexter, a parent, requesting a second opinion regarding the possibility of renovating the current MLK building.

In City Council July 24, 2012

REFERRED TO THE CITY COUNCIL

**Please note:** City Council members are free to request membership to CPSparents, a district-wide Yahoo discussion group for CPS families *and interested others*. Request membership at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cpsparents/>. (As with all Yahoo groups, you must first sign up for a free Yahoo account that can be linked to your regular email account.)