

The Case for Extending the City of Cambridge Demolition Delay

We plan on filing a Citizens Petition to extend the demolition delay in Cambridge from 6 to 12 months. We come before the Cambridge Historical Commission to seek your support and guidance before filing said petition.

We come to this issue as two smaller, older houses in our immediate neighborhood (2 Chetwynd and 60 Stearns) were sold and new owners sought demolition. Faced with these events, we began to investigate the issue of tear downs in Cambridge. After some research, we wanted to see what we could do to encourage renovation and retrofit rather than demolition.

The City of Cambridge's Demolition Delay Ordinance (Chapter 2.78, Article II of the Cambridge Municipal Code) allows the Cambridge Historical Commission to delay the issuance of demolition permit up to six months. The delay allowed, often encouraged the new owners to work with the Commission and neighbors to consider alternatives to demolition. Perhaps knowing that they might face delay, developers reconsidered their plans.

This ordinance was adopted by the Cambridge City Council in 1979, the first such demolition delay ordinance in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Since Cambridge passed its ordinance, about 200 of the Commonwealth's cities and towns have adopted demolition delay ordinances. Most of the towns called for 12-month delays, and some have set the delay period at 18 months.

In the last few years, as the Cambridge real estate market became extremely hot, the pace of "tear-downs" of houses in the city has accelerated. In our neighborhood, Taylor Square, located on the back slope of Avon Hill, new owners sought to demolish smaller, older houses and replace them with larger and far more expensive houses that don't fit into the streetscape. The new houses are often lavishly designed with copious bathrooms, In one case, creating a net zero house was used as a rationale to demolish an older house rather than retrofit.

For the most part, Historic and Conservation districts are immune from this issue, but venerable houses that decades ago housed working-class families and now make up vibrant neighborhoods are under threat. In many of these houses, like those in the Taylor Square neighborhood, families over the years have bought them renovated them, added on to them, raised families and preserved the fabric of the neighborhood. The current tear-down trend makes this much more difficult .and is replacing these family homes into m

Extending the demolition delay by itself will not solve this or other housing issues in Cambridge, but it is one more tool that may help efforts to preserve the character of this city.

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