



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date: June 7, 2017

Subject: Cockrill, et al., Petition on Short-Term Rental Housing

Recommendation: The Planning Board does NOT RECOMMEND adoption.

To the Honorable, the City Council,

On May 23, 2017, the Planning Board held a public hearing on this petition by Latoyea Hawkins Cockrill, et al., to create a definition of and requirements for “short-term rental,” defined as “the accessory use of all or part of a residential dwelling unit by rental for temporary occupancy for dwelling, sleeping, or lodging.” No presentation was made on behalf of the petitioners (Ms. Cockrill was present at the meeting but did not speak as an organizer of the petition). The Board reviewed material provided by CDD staff, and heard testimony from members of the public. At the same meeting, the Board held a public hearing on a zoning petition by the City Council, which addresses the same topic but is a separate petition, for which the Board has made a separate recommendation.

With the current growth of online platforms that facilitate the renting of residential properties to guests for short-term stays, the Board believes it is important to make clear in the Zoning Ordinance whether or not the short-term rental of a dwelling unit (as distinct from principal use transient accommodations such as tourist houses or hotels) is allowed, and what limitations and regulations apply. The Board believes that now is an appropriate time to enact a policy, as this type of unregulated activity is becoming more widespread. Such a policy could be changed in the future if it is found to have adverse consequences or if the City’s goals change over time.

The Board broadly supports the rights of residents to use their property in a fair way and agrees that short-term rentals can provide benefits, including additional income for residents with underutilized living space and new ways to welcome visitors into the city. The Board also understands that the “sharing economy” is an emerging reality made possible by new technologies, and will likely continue to grow and evolve in the future. But the Board is concerned by the potential for widespread conversion of long-term housing to short-term accommodations, effectively converting apartments into unauthorized hotels, which could drive up property values and thus housing prices, and potentially put the safety of guests at risk if not regulated. The Board is particularly concerned that the growth of online short-term rentals appears to be negatively impacting on the city’s already low rental housing vacancy rate. It should be noted that the Zoning Ordinance currently has rules allowing for transient accommodations, such as hotels and bed and breakfasts, in a regulated manner.

In balancing the rights of residents and the aforesaid concerns, the Board determined that it does not support the allowance of purely commercially-operated short-term rentals. Therefore, the Board does not support this proposal, as it would allow the continued conversion of long-term housing into such commercially-operated short-term accommodations. The Board also finds that some of the language in the petition is unclear and too generalized, and does not establish explicit standards and requirements that would be appropriate and customary in a Zoning Ordinance. It is also unclear how some of the provisions of the petition would work in practice, such as the limitation of short-term rentals to 180 days per year, without clarity as to how such dwelling units would be used during the remainder of the year.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "H Theodore Cohen", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

H Theodore Cohen, Chair.