

Dear Cambridge City Councillors,

We, the governing bodies and leaders of the Cambridge Neighborhood Groups listed below, write to voice our shared concerns with Policy Order 4.

This policy order sadly is taking a one-sided view of one situation in one neighborhood group and extrapolating from it. We as neighborhood groups have long underscored the importance of having inclusive, representative neighborhood associations. We believe that neighborhood associations are a vital part of city life and have a meaningful role as independent organizations that build community and advocate for the neighborhoods. We realize that our neighborhood associations themselves do not always reflect the demographics of the communities they serve, but as in the past, remain committed to demographic diversity. That said, we hope you recognize that diversity and inclusion will not appear only because of changes to rules and regulations, as suggested in this order. This is ongoing work for everyone, and we are small grassroots organizations run by volunteers.

The references to any neighborhood group, including ECPT, in the policy order are inappropriate; they distract from the larger issues here. ECPT is the oldest neighborhood association in the city, and in our observation, it has been fairly and thoughtfully run, including during the recent events, which are now being mischaracterized. The ECPT board member who made the offending comment has apologized and resigned, the board has apologized, and ECPT has taken further action to calm this down, including changing its list serve from a discussion group to an announcement only platform. All references to the East Cambridge Planning Team and/or this one specific incident should be deleted from the policy order.

Most leaders of neighborhood groups have no way to provide the City with demographics. Our work is often on-line and we may never see some of the individuals. We don't know where they live, their ethnicities, or whether they own or rent. We do not think our members would take kindly to us asking for those details.

Our meetings are open to all; in fact, we beg folks to come. We spread information far and wide, try to let folks know what is happening and allow them to comment on those happenings. Some of us don't even have a formal way to sign a letter saying our membership stands for this or that. True, we sometimes take an unscientific poll, and many speak up, but at the end of the day any authority our leaders have garnered comes from being seen as honest brokers. We do not claim to represent anyone but ourselves, although we do our best to think of the interests of all of our neighbors.

All of our neighborhood groups would love to attract a wider range of membership, more non-white members, more renters, but we cannot force anyone to be interested in what we do or make the time for it. Alas, it is left to those of us who show up to do this largely thankless work to improve our neighborhoods, provide a platform for discussion, and help in larger and smaller ways to make the city more livable.

We hope that you recognize the hundreds of hours of volunteer time it takes to run neighborhood associations, and that the City will recognize our intention to be positive and productive partners in the enormous project of community building. We ask that this conversation stay focused on the work of building exemplary neighborhood associations.

While we may ask for the City's help on occasion, it is important that we be independent of the City, as we sometimes represent our members against them. We act in the best traditions of our First Amendment right to peaceably assemble and petition the government for redress of grievances. It is problematic that the policy order claims the City has the right to tell us specifically how to do so. We want to come to this conversation as independent city bodies, not combatants.

The governing bodies (Boards and/or Executive Committees) of each of our Neighborhood Groups each have voted to support this letter. We and other neighborhood groups may also be writing to you separate letters of concern.

Cordially,

Association of Cambridge Neighborhoods  
East Cambridge Planning Team  
Harvard Square Neighborhood Association  
Inman Square Neighborhood Association  
Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association, Presiding Officer  
Porter Square Neighborhood Association