Legal haggling, residents’ vigil mark city rent control debate

The Solicitor had asserted that “before a municipality can legally adopt rent control, it must demonstrate by expert investigation which is rational, detailed, and impartial that there is in fact in the community a public emergency of such great magnitude that drastic exercise of the police power is required to assure shelter for the city’s inhabitants.”

Mr. Cronin added that without such an investigation, rent control would be a “deprivation of property” since rising rents are large a reflection of the inflation that is rampant in our national economy. He also questioned the ordinance’s order that the City Council authorize appropriations and that the City Council can reduce but not add to the Manager’s budget.

The legal haggling occurred several weeks after the Rent Control Referendum Campaign had submitted its petition of signatures to the City Clerk. This was actually the second rent control effort of the summer, since a similarly-conceived bill authored by the Cambridge Housing Convention (a citizens group organized a year ago by the CECO, the local anti-poverty agency) was twice defeated by the City Council.

First effort

The first vote had been on June 30 when, despite a detailed brief prepared by Assistant to the Solicitor, Mr. Cronin, the Cambridge Housing Convention Development, Justin Gray, who supported the ordinance, the City Council voted down a 54-52 vote. Councillors (and MIT Professor of Humanities) Thomas Makley and Councilor Cordelia Wheeler, Barbara Acker- mier, and Alfred Velbusch in the affirmative column.

Immediately after this vote, Louis Agneta, Chairman of the Housing Convention, arose and severely reprimanded the Council for its apparent indifference to the plight of the city’s low-income and elderly citizens. The previous week, the Council had voted down the controversial “apartment stuffing” ordinance which would have limited to two the number of unrelated persons permitted to live in an apartment. The bill’s proponents had insisted that this ordinance would allow the poor and elderly to better compete against students for apartments.

Convention’s vigil

The following week, on July 7, the Housing Convention began a vigil outside City Hall. Along with placards decrying the continuing upward spiral of rents and attacking the action of the City Council, they was highlighting a case of six students—two black coffins placed on the front steps with the inscription that began “Here lie the people of Cambridge.” Besides of passing spectators, the number of citizens at the vigil seldom exceeded fifty.

The vigil continued for three weeks and disbanded after the City Council, after agreeing to reconsider their earlier action, once again defeated the rent control ordinance—on a vote identical to the first. This action aroused the wrath of the many citizens in attendance and several of the negative-voting councillors had to be escorted to their cars by police after the hectic session.

Sullivan’s reply

Meanwhile, City Manager James L. Sullivan has also responded to the housing crisis. A staunch opponent of rent control, he proposed a Rent Stabilization Board immediately after the Council’s initial defeat of the Housing Convention’s bill. Since it would have placed most of the burden for adjustment on the tenants, this proposal was quickly labeled a “hoax” by rent control supporters and never brought to a Council vote.

The Manager’s latest proposal calls for a new Housing Department which would involve a recon- organization of the city agencies involved in housing and which would have a board which would hear complaints against rents. On September 8, 8, City Council sent this proposal back to Mr. Sullivan for further work.

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