MIT, Cambridge spar over townhouses

By Buzz Moschetti

MIT and the City of Cambridge are debating whether or not MIT violated a city ordinance by purchasing eight townhouses this summer.

The "institutional expansion" ordinance prohibits an institution from expanding its real estate holdings into a residential area unless the property may be used by people not connected with the institution.

In March 1980, after the city formally requested the Institute to stop purchasing land in Cambridge for one year, Walter L. Milne, Special Assistant to the President for Urban Relations, declined MIT would promise the city it would wait until the study area had been recorded before buying any more property in that district.

The townhouses, located at the corner of Sidney Street and Putnam Avenue, became a subject of contention between the city and the Institute because they were purchased despite several attempts at rezoning the area failed by the Institute to expand into the neighboring residential areas.

In March 1980, after the city council declared MIT's newly purchased townhouses were outside the study area of the Cambridge Planning Board's zoning review of the Cambridgeport Industrial Area. The Cambridge City Council asked MIT on March 10, 1980 to refrain by the Planning Board in the spring of 1981, "wrote Milne. Thus, Milne contends, the area is outside the study area.

Another debate between MIT and Cambridge: In his letter of August 16, 1982 to Walter Milne, MIT Special Assistant to the President, Cambridge City Council David Sullivan '74 declared "MIT's newly purchased townhouses are within the study area of the Cambridge Planning Board's zoning review of the Cambridgeport Industrial Area. The Cambridge City Council asked MIT on March 10, 1980 to refrain by the Institute to expand into the neighboring residential areas. Cambridge has "a severe housing problem," he added, "and must have real estate prices." MIT should remain imperceptible to "any who may occupy the buildings, he said.

Although it is true that the percentage of Institute-affiliated residents of the houses MIT owns throughout Cambridge is high, Milne countered, the buildings are still considered apartments, not dormitories.

The townhouses will not be affected by the proposed amendment if it becomes law because they were protected by a grandfather clause. Persons wishing to occupy the townhouses will have to affirm they do not have a permanent residence elsewhere, he added.

To prevent MIT from buying such housing again, Sullivan proposed an amendment to the present zoning ordinance that will prevent institutions from purchasing buildings that are to be used as affiliate housing in residential areas.

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