MIT and Tent City supporters discuss congregate housing

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Stewart Guernsey, an advocate of the homeless.

MIT Campus Police removed the group of homeless people from the River Street site on Nov. 20, culminating a month-long standoff by demonstrators who wanted the Cambridge City Council to allow them to rent-controlled houses on Blanche Street. The Tent City group sought to convert the Blanche Street houses into community housing for the homeless. They had been camped on the site since the Simplex Steering Committee held a tent city rally there on Oct. 17-18. Ten arrests were made.

The River Street house was offered rent-free to the Tent City group until March 30 by owner Alan Steinberg, a major rent control landlord in Cambridgeport. Steinberg had originally suggested that the city pay the utility bills.

Activists call for MIT task force on homelessness

Representatives of Tent City asked MIT Friday to form its own task force, made up of administrators, faculty, and students, to study ways that MIT could affect the problem of homelessness in Cambridge, according to Glenn.

The group pointed out that resources of the departments of architecture and urban planning be mobilized in that effort, according to Milne.

It was at this meeting that he thought that the planning department would be interested, but that he could not speak for them.

Milne told The Tech yesterday that MIT would like to see a "broad-based" coalition to look at homelessness. He said there is a proper role for MIT to play in such an organization. "We have made some progress in this regard," he said, "...away from the demands of the activists."

As for utilizing the architecture and planning departments, Milne said that it was necessary to establish a coalition, and then decide what resources to draw upon. He added that members of those departments certainly could pursue homelessness issues if they felt inclined.

Test City representatives asked MIT Friday for a site on which to pursue a congregate, community housing project, Glenn said. In its original November proposal to MIT, Tent City argued that shelters were not adequate means of housing for homeless people because of the regimented lifestyles they required and their general oppressiveness. They said that more independent environments were necessary.

Milne and Sudnik told MIT that they could not alter the development plan at this time, according to Glenn, though Glenn said that they did not rule out the possibility of including such a site in the future.

Miles spoke yesterday as though the River Street house were becoming a "pilot project" in congregate housing in itself.

Miles had already committed "its principle" to playing some part in the River Street project weeks ago. Miles said that MIT could best contribute by paying the heating and utility bills on the property for the winter.

Various groups will participate in the River Street project, Miles said, including MIT, City Council, a Cambridge furniture company, and others.

The Church of the Covenant in Cambridge and the Phillips Brooks House — a privately-endowed organization at Harvard — have also provided staff for the River Street house, Miles said.

Those housed at River Street for the winter might not necessarily all be Tent City members, according to Miles.

Before the River Street plan can go ahead, Miles said, the Cambridge rent control board must agree to exempt the house from the rent rolls. Miles said he thought they would comply tomorrow.

The Tent City supporters also asked MIT Friday to provide a list of all properties it owns that are presently vacant, according to Glenn and Penn. Penn said they wanted to consider possible winter housing options using these properties. "How do we house as many homeless people as we can for the winter?" Penn asked. He reiterated that the issue involves more than 15 people.

Miles said that while MIT would provide the list, he did not see the point in using vacant buildings as shelters, since that would only cause more of what is presently available and did not address the issue of congregate housing. "Cambridge has a very adequate system of shelters," Miles said, pointing out that Philip Mangano, Cambridge director of emergency services, has stated that there are enough rooms for all the homeless in the city.

The present issue, Miles said, is getting away from the dormitory-like environment of shelters.

The Tent City representatives asked MIT Friday for permission to renovate the Blanche Street houses for use this winter, according to Penn, but were turned down. Penn said that Tent City has been offered donations of materials and labor from various sources.

Students at MIT have collected 250 signatures so far on a petition asking MIT to drop all charges and disciplinary proceedings on those arrested on Nov. 20, according to Penn. The petition also asks MIT "to support zoning changes that will allow for more low-income housing than is currently planned for University Park and to mobilize the resources of its School of Architecture and Planning to find a creative and humane solution to the problem of homelessness in Cambridge."

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