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To: Cambridge City Council
Re: Proposed signage for 364 Broadway over the public way

I am a direct abutter to the site of the new café (Dwelltime) that will soon open at 364 Broadway. I have lived next door at 366 Broadway for over 33 years and have enjoyed a cordial and cooperative relationship with my commercial neighbors who operated the F.B. Hubley & Co. Auction Galleries going back far longer than my arrival on this block.

I was asked by the operators of the café to comment on their proposed signage. I also passed along this information to the Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association (MCNA) who discussed the proposed signage and submitted their own response.

The City Council hardly needs to be reminded about how controversial signage can be in Cambridge. Indeed, the City has taken its arguments against billboards all the way to the Supreme Court. Last year there was an unprecedented petition campaign that led to the City Council's rescission of new amendments to the Sign Ordinance. At the most recent Planning Board hearing on the proposed Hubway bike share system, the primary point of controversy was the provision that would permit advertising signs on the bicycle stations. It should surprise no one that a neighborhood association (in this case the Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association) might raise questions about the appropriateness of building signage extending out over the public way.

In the current case, though it is completely understandable that a new business would like to advertise its presence as much as possible, it seems quite unnecessary to do so with a blade sign protruding out over the sidewalk on Broadway. This is a small mixed residential/commercial zone and this building lies between two residential buildings, so there is no argument that can be made for distinguishing this business from a sea of surrounding businesses. Other businesses on the block have simple signs mounted flat on the building façades. Protruding signs once existed at these other locations, but all of those signs were removed over the years. The only nearby place with signage extending over the public way is the venerable Broadway Bicycle School on the north side of the street which has an awning to shield itself from the sun as well as structures to display bicycles available for sale.

Note that the rendering (below left) that was used in the application for the City's Façade Improvement Program indicates no signage protruding out over the public way. At right is the new rendering.



As the years have passed in this neighborhood and in other Cambridge neighborhoods, protruding signs over the public way have decreased significantly. Large protruding signs are now almost nonexistent.

It's interesting that the case is being made that a protruding sign at this location is appropriate for historical reasons. The recently removed Hubley's sign (below right) is not historically significant. Indeed, it replaced an especially tasteless sign (below left) that existed until at least 1969. It appears that the size and location of the more recent sign was chosen simply to take advantage of the support structure of the previous sign and arrived with what everyone has recognized as a truly horrendous façade that has now been removed to make way for a new façade that is far more consistent with the original.



I do not see the proposed signage as necessary to the health of the business. It seems that mounting the same sign flat against the black background of the new façade would serve just as well while avoiding visual clutter. There is also the potential for unintended consequences – specifically the likelihood that other establishments on this stretch of Broadway will ask for similar signage and thus amplify the visual clutter.

I don't have especially strong feelings about the proposed Dwelltime sign. My intention is not to be overly critical of this specific sign. I do, however, feel that it is unnecessary and that there is no historical significance associated with preserving a protruding sign at this location. I am also concerned that this may lead other establishments on the street to seek similar signage and that this would lead to very objectionable visual clutter on a street that appears to be enjoying some small revival.

Sincerely,

Robert Winters
366 Broadway