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## Petition for Designation of Landmarks

We, the undersigned registered voters of the City of Cambridge, request the Cambridge Historical Commission to initiate the process of designating 43-45 Mount Auburn Street as a Landmark under Chapter 2.78, Article III of the Code of the City of Cambridge.

### **Significance and rationale:**

43-45 Mount Auburn Street features a Greek Revival double house (1846). It is architecturally significant as one of the few surviving wood-frame buildings in the Gold Coast area of Harvard Square and one of the few remaining examples of what was once a more common, working-class vernacular. The structure is also historically significant for its associations with the early development of Harvard Square.

In 1928, the Pi Eta Speakers Club added a brick addition. They occupied the building until 1992 when the organization disbanded following several decades of disgraceful misconduct and misogyny. We, the undersigned, condemn this period of history in the strongest possible terms.

Since 2001, the building has housed the Democracy Center, which describes itself as a “21st-century meetinghouse that supports organizers creating a more sustainable, just, connected, expressive, and equitable world.” Democracy Center is a vibrant hub for social justice that is home to a beautiful ecosystem of activism. Thousands of people come through the doors each year to attend lectures, panels, concerts, meetings, and other events, and to access community resources such as the activist supply closet, the zine library, and the regularly restocked outdoor refrigerator that serves unhoused people who live nearby. Several organizations have been based full-time out of the upper floors, including Cambridge HEART and Black Response Cambridge.

In April 2024, the Foundation for Civic Leadership (FCL), the building’s owner, abruptly announced that Democracy Center would close for substantial renovations on July 1. During a community meeting that followed the announcement, the FCL president specifically stated an intent to renovate the entire structure and add square footage near the 1928 addition.

The landmarking process is warranted because these recent developments threaten the distinctive character of the 1846 structure. Even if the brick addition is not historically or architecturally significant in its own right, its contrasting style and subsidiary nature complement the original structure relatively well, especially since brick is a common vernacular in the area. Additional massing could diminish the visual impact and potentially further destroy character-defining features on the east wall of the house. For example, the distinctive pediment (isosceles triangle shape) remains intact and highly visible when approaching from the east under the current arrangement. Careful oversight is crucial to preserving the remaining integrity of the original structure.

Even though this property has been under the jurisdiction of the Harvard Square Conservation District since 2000, the landmarking process offers a more proactive approach and additional jurisdiction over any potential addition. The study period can be used to determine preservation standards for the original building, including consideration of whether a larger addition on the east side is appropriate (and if so, a framework for making such a determination based on the scale and exterior appearance of any such proposal). Under the landmarking process, CHC may impose dimensional and setback requirements in addition to those required by applicable provisions of the zoning ordinance.

The landmarking process would also provide an opportunity to document the rich culture and community that has existed in this building during the first quarter of the 21st century. Arguably, there is nothing else like it in the region.

The building's current use as a social justice center for the entire community contrasts sharply with its earlier, troubled use as an all-male student social club. It is worth documenting this juxtaposition.

It is the role of the Historical Commission, guided by a report that emerges from a Landmark Designation Study, to make a recommendation as to whether this building is worthy of Landmark Designation. Therefore, we, the undersigned, request that the Historical Commission initiate a Landmark Designation Study and we urge the landmarking of this precious historic building.

**Selected quotes:**

*"The appropriate circumstances for imposing dimensional and setback reductions could include a wide disparity of scale and density between the proposed project and its surroundings, or a situation in which the proposed project would destroy or diminish the historical resources of the site" - 2000 District Study Final Report*

*"The Greek Revival House at 43-45 Mount Auburn Street is a prime candidate for a careful restoration. Improvements to this structure would greatly enhance the subdistrict" - 2000 District Study Final Report*

*"Though buildings in the Gold Coast are predominantly of masonry construction, several significant examples of wood frame construction remain. Among the most vulnerable may be...the Greek Revival house (once a student club, now offices) at 43-45 Mount Auburn Street...These and other woodframe houses contribute greatly to the rich character of the subdistrict, and their preservation should be given a high priority" - 2017-2019 District Study Final Report*

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