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## PETITION DRIVE LAUNCHED TO REPEAL CAMBRIDGE ZONING AMENDMENT THAT RADICALLY INCREASES SIGNAGE

“MICROSOFT AMENDMENT” ALLOWS LARGE ILLUMINATED SIGNS ATOP THE  
CITY’S BIGGEST BUILDINGS, INCLUDING ALONG THE CHARLES

**SEPTEMBER 30, 2010 – CAMBRIDGE, MA** – Save Our Skyline, a coalition of Cambridge citizens, today announced the start of a petition drive to rescind key provisions of the zoning amendment approved earlier this week by the Cambridge City Council. Once the requisite signatures are collected, a referendum question will be placed on the ballot, so that Cambridge voters can directly determine the future of these advertising signs and whether to allow Cambridge to be ‘corporatized’ by a proliferation of large illuminated signs atop the City’s tallest buildings.

The new provisions in the zoning law, known by many people as the “Microsoft Amendment”, emanate from that Company’s interest in erecting a corporate sign atop One Memorial Drive, the tallest commercial building along the Charles River. Prior to the passage of this amendment, Cambridge signage regulations were as restrictive as those in abutting cities and towns. Anyone seeking to install a sign that exceeded these limits had to apply for a zoning variance and had to meet a hardship test to justify a departure from the zoning laws – a test that most observers thought Microsoft would have difficulty meeting. The amendment passed this week clears a path for Microsoft to erect a sign that will “brand” the Cambridge riverfront, visible to anyone looking across the Charles from Beacon Hill or Back Bay or entering the city over the Longfellow Bridge. Further, because the newly

weakened zoning provisions are not limited to Microsoft, they open the door to a proliferation of new high-profile signs.

“It’s ironic, given the City’s long standing efforts to eliminate unsightly billboards, that the Council has chosen to dramatically increase corporate advertising in Cambridge,” said Karen Schwartzman, spokeswoman for Save Our Skyline.

“Turning our skyline over to big out-of-state corporations is bad enough, but the city isn’t even charging for it. It’s just a giveaway!”

The Save Our Skyline petition seeks to overturn the “Building Identification Sign” and “General Waiver” provisions of the amendment passed by the City Council. The petition does not affect other portions of the amendment, such as the provisions related to non-profit museum and performance spaces. Once the necessary signatures are gathered, the City Council will be required to either rescind the identified sections of the amendment or place a referendum question on the ballot so that the voters can decide.

The “Building Identification Sign” provision of the amendment eliminates the long-standing 20-foot sign height limit and allows corporate tenants of large buildings to erect signs at the roofline. These signs are not available to small and medium sized local businesses. The amendment clearly states that the intent of this provision is to allow prominent “identification of large corporate buildings” and includes size provisions that ensure that only big companies will be able to benefit. Building Identification Signs are specifically targeted at the Charles River, East Cambridge, and North Cambridge near Fresh Pond.

The other section of the amendment targeted by the petition, the “General Waiver” provision, has far reaching implications for signage across the City. In essence, it eliminates the stringent zoning variance process and replaces it with much more easily granted special permits. As a result, signs lit by previously prohibited forms

of illumination (e.g. neon) and that far exceed current size limitations can be approved at the discretion of the Planning Board. Once granted, such special permits (unlike variances) are virtually invulnerable to challenge.

In expressing his opposition to the amendment at the Council meeting, Councilor Seidel decried the 'corporatizing' of "everything we experience", saying "I don't think it's necessarily a good thing that we as a community feel the need to put a branding mark on every single surface we can find."<sup>1</sup>

"The Council's willingness to let corporate interests dictate public policy sets a dangerous precedent," said Schwartzman. "It's time for a public debate about 'corporatizing' Cambridge."

Despite the scheduling of initial Planning Board and City Council Ordinance Committee hearings during the week of July 4<sup>th</sup>, large crowds attended to oppose the issue. Strong opposition continued throughout the summer, but to no avail.

Joining Councilor Seidel in voting against the amendment were Councilor Kelley and Vice Mayor Davis. Yes votes were cast by Mayor Maher along with Councilors Cheung, Decker, Reeves, Simmons, and Toomey.

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**The Coalition to Save Our Skyline** is a group of concerned citizens of Cambridge interested in the repeal of a zoning amendment, recently passed by the Cambridge City Council, which favors large commercial interests over citizens' interests. The amendment allows big corporations in Cambridge to put up large, externally lit signs to advertise their brand at the roofline of tall buildings in Cambridge, signs that will pollute the skyline and negatively impact the aesthetic quality of Cambridge. For more information, visit [www.SaveOurSkyline.org](http://www.SaveOurSkyline.org).

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<sup>1</sup> As reported on Boston.com on September 28, 2010.