

Standing up against racism in Harvard Square

**Economic empowerment applicants debunk redlining attempts that
are targeting a proposed Black-owned business at 57 JFK Street,
Harvard Square, Cambridge, MA**

The following is an open letter to the Cambridge community from the founding team of Blue Enterprises, a Black-owned and operated business, and supporters of economic empowerment. In it, we respond to attacks against Blue Enterprises levied in a recent, semi-anonymous letter disseminated to elected officials by opponents of economic empowerment.

Thursday, October 22, 2020

Dear Cambridge residents, elected officials, and allies of social justice,

Blue Enterprises is a mission-driven, sincere, focused, and positive local team with members who were born, raised and educated in Cambridge and in Greater Boston. We possess a deep understanding of the inequities in Cambridge and of the negative impact that the War on Drugs has had on Black and poor communities, including in Cambridge.

Together, we are committed to launching a business that will provide substantial community benefits, including but not limited to workforce development, employment, and investment in social services programs.

Our team, Blue Enterprises, HSMA, DBA Cookies Cambridge is a state-certified economic empowerment applicant seeking a special permit from the City of Cambridge to open a regulated, zoning-compliant, adult-use recreational cannabis store at 57 JFK St., Cambridge, MA 02138. Cookies Cambridge is a business that is owned, operated, and controlled by people of color.

A small group of local organizations who oppose economic empowerment (EE) and who fail to grasp the deep levels of inequity that exists in both land ownership and business ownership in Harvard Square recently distributed a semi-anonymous letter to various elected officials outlining a range of concerns, all of which were adequately and previously addressed or which are contrary to the facts of our proposal.

Members of this group of EE opponents have repeatedly made deeply harmful and racially insensitive comments in opposition to our proposal. In an effort to whitewash those comments, they have recently mounted a cynical public relations strategy to reframe their previous racist comments and prejudicial opposition as somehow being justifiable through a range of strawman arguments regarding our zoning compliant business plans and location.

In doing so, this group has further demonstrated the lack of credibility within their arguments, making assertions that run counter to the authority of the Cambridge Planning Board. They have attempted to exert political influence to sway what should be a non-partisan exercise in approval, based on the merits of our proposal.

As such, we are compelled to respond to their attacks in the public arena through this open letter, and will be receiving the support of others who find the actions and comments of the economic empowerment (EE) opponents to be objectionable.

What follows in the addendum below are key excerpts from the previously mentioned letter by the economic empowerment opponents, along with annotations made by our team, including critical, clarifying facts in support of economic empowerment as well as our teams' expressed opinion on each of the matters raised.

Since the EE opponents began circulating their letter to officeholders and others, we have been fortunate to receive the support of a growing number of community members, elected leaders, and community allies.

Those allies include the Real Action for Cannabis Equity coalition (R.A.C.E.), composed of other economic empowerment applicants in the cannabis space, who have launched a petition in support of our project, and are planning other public communications to help us make Harvard Square a place where equity is put into practice through sound policy and planning decisions, not just in slogans.

To sign that petition, please visit: <http://bit.ly/RACECambridge>.

Thank you,



Damond Hughes
Owner/Operator
Blue Enterprises

ADDENDUM:

Please review below the responses from our organization to the attack letter circulated recently by EE opponents. Thank you for taking the time to read about our clarifying facts and our outlook on these unconscionable, blatant redlining efforts by the EE opponents.

Economic empowerment opponents claim:

...The Park will be a natural “landing spot” for people exiting the marijuana dispensary looking to consume their recreational products nearby, and Cookies, despite its best efforts, will have no way to truly control the consumption of marijuana outside its front door. At best, the Park will require increased security and policing to ensure customers do not use the Park to consume their products. That increased security presence alone would transform the Park and deter some individuals who currently use the Park from feeling comfortable and using it in the future. At worst, even despite increased security and policing, the Park will become a place where individuals consume their Cookies products after exiting the facility. Families with young children, individuals with respiratory illnesses, the elderly, and many others who do not wish to be exposed to cannabis will be deterred from using a Park that was once so welcoming to all. Meanwhile, underage high school- and college-aged students who continue to frequent the Park will now be exposed to cannabis use. Finally, at a time of heightened tensions around the United States, the simple need for increased policing to mitigate these issues will create the possibility of more frequent police-public confrontations...

Economic empowerment supporters respond:

To presume that the clientele of our Black-owned and operated business will require additional policing and that they are not capable of following the law by consuming their purchases in private residences are further examples of prejudicial and racist assumptions on the part of the EE opponents.

To use the proxy threat of additional policing against a proposal to have a regulated, legally zoned, Black-operated store in Harvard Square is, on its face, insulting to both local law enforcement agencies in its presumptions and to the economic empowerment applicants. It also heavily discounts the legal realities and frameworks set forth in current laws, as approved overwhelmingly by voters.

In 2016, Massachusetts residents voted to legalize the recreational use of cannabis (marijuana) for people 21 and older. Cambridge voters supported this measure overwhelmingly with 71% in favor. Furthermore, adults age 21 or older may not legally consume cannabis anywhere in Massachusetts except on private, residential property.

Use of cannabis is prohibited in any public place including workplaces, parks, restaurants, bars, streets, and sidewalks. Violators can be fined up to \$100 per incident. As legal businesses regulated by the state, cannabis dispensaries are being established in proximity to many public areas. Furthermore, this will not be the first cannabis dispensary to be established near a public park in Cambridge.

So, for the EE opponents to assume that the patrons of a Black-owned store will not be able to self-regulate or be law-abiding in the consumption of its products -- versus the patrons of other previously approved white-owned dispensaries in proximity to public spaces -- presents itself as inherently racist and biased.

The EE opponents' argument is undermined further by the fact they have stated that they would support the store if it were relegated to the "basement" of the exact same location, which would have equal proximity to the park.

In one breath they say they are fine with the business being located at this exact address, but only if it's in the basement, and in the next, they say the address is going to lead to more "police-public confrontations" so is thereby objectionable. It is clear that their problem is not with the address or proximity to the park whatsoever, as they are OK with us being in the basement of 57 JFK Street.

Furthermore, the proposed store location is fully on the opposite side of a buffering pedestrian lane in a privately owned and commercially zoned property at 57 JFK Street. The proposed entrance to the store is across the pedestrian lane, set back from the park, on Winthrop Street, instead of on JFK Street, because we believe it is the safer option for pedestrian traffic and allows better egress for pedestrians and for people with disabilities -- two, key priorities that are consistent with our values of supporting public safety and equity for people with disabilities.

In our opinion, the EE opponents are reverting to old, fear-based and coded language to create an imagined scenario in which Winthrop Park is suddenly overrun with smoke and illegal activity by irresponsible customers of a Black-owned business. These fear-based tactics are a racist dog whistle. Cambridge can and should do better.

The EE opponents' argument is also based on the flawed assumption that former medical customers from the temporarily closed, white-owned Healthy Pharms facility, located approximately 100 feet away from Winthrop Park, are more responsible cannabis users than those of our facility, another prejudicial assertion against our Black-owned business and our future customers.

Essentially, the EE opponents are using fear-mongering and dubious attempts at speculative fiction to undermine the good intentions of a values-based, socially conscious business venture. The inappropriate use of substances in Harvard Square requires a unified community- and public health-based response and our team, given our Cambridge roots and own personal appreciation of the Park, are ready to be a part of that approach, including by taking significant steps to educate our customers on what will constitute responsible and lawful consumption of our products in their private residences, and through other mitigation efforts.

Economic empowerment opponents claim:

...The 57 JFK location has 110 linear feet of street-level frontage, and Cookies will dominate an entire side of Winthrop Park. It risks promoting cannabis consumption to all inside the Park, including the children and adolescents who play and gather there. Cookies has suggested it can downplay its signage and put art in its windows so that people in the Park cannot look in and see its customers queuing up for its cannabis products. However, that attempt to rectify one issue merely creates another, for that approach will mean that this long span of street-level frontage — which could otherwise be activated for visible, vibrant commercial activity — will effectively become a wall to the public. Harvard Square financial institutions are now only allowed only 25 linear feet of frontage in the interest of encouraging vibrant, diverse, transparent store fronts. The proposed Cookies site would be over four times that in linear footage. At best, the proposed facility will create a large dead zone along predominately pedestrian Winthrop Street and JFK Street. At worst, the site, with its vast corner location and floor-to-ceiling windows, will serve as a massive billboard for cannabis use to anyone in Winthrop Park.

Economic empowerment supporters respond:

First, regulations clearly state that cannabis companies in Cambridge are exempted from the limited store front zoning requirements and can have store fronts in excess of 25 linear feet. Contrary to the misinformation being promoted by the EE opponents, our location has 92 linear feet of frontage. That said, the renderings of

the proposed store layout below were shared with the organizers of the economic empowerment opposition group. It is curious, but not surprising, that they opted not to share these renderings in their attack letter directed to public officials, further underscoring the cynical nature of their efforts to mislead the public and others about the true nature and aesthetics of our proposal. Their decision not to include our renderings are further reflective of their efforts to silence and marginalize the voices of Black business operators and owners attempting to access opportunity in Harvard Square.

Additionally, regarding the conjuring of scenarios in which there is undue “exposure” to products for passersby, Massachusetts law requires that marijuana products in recreational dispensaries not be visible from the street.

Our products will not be displayed in the window and will not be visible to minors. Furthermore, the full trade name, Cookies, will not be included in the signage, but rather a discreet “C” to indicate the presence of the dispensary for potential patrons who will primarily be seeking out our location online, not on their ordinary travels through the park, which is primarily a walk-through area for residents of legal age, and is demonstrably not a playground or center of activity for children under 21, despite the assertions of the EE opponents, as any casual observer of park activity can attest to.

The renderings below were shared with the EE opponents prior to the dissemination of their recent letter to public officials, which includes many falsehoods, such as those demonstrated above, on key matters like the frontage of the store. A quick glance at these renderings demonstrates that the EE opponents are not opposing our proposal in good faith, and that their opposition is grounded less in facts, and more so in “spin” and fear-mongering, all geared toward the organized exclusion of a minority-owned and operated business from the economic opportunity presented by Harvard Square.

Artwork facing JFK Street: We remain open to the exchange of ideas and creative solutions to activate the store front, extend the open feeling of the park, and to promote



commerce for the benefit of all local retailers. The rendering below reflects our vision of how to use this storefront to highlight diverse and local artists.

Discrete waiting area at the corner of JFK and Winthrop, with limited branding, and no “billboard” effect for the brand, as falsely asserted by the EE opponents: Less than 40% of the retail floor space is actually planned for cannabis dispensing, in order to mitigate queuing, with the majority of space going to a contained waiting area. Our proposed icon on the mostly blacked-out storefront marquee is less than three feet in length, as demonstrated below. The sales

process is conducted beyond the waiting area and not in a manner that is on public display, as falsely asserted by the economic



empowerment opponents. This tasteful and discrete approach removes our trade name entirely from the frontage and takes up a nominal fraction of the space on the marquee.

Economic empowerment opponents claim:

...University Lutheran Church is located at 66 Winthrop Street, less than 200 feet from the proposed location. The Church houses the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter, Sunday School programs, and multiple programs to support citizens suffering from addiction. Many of these programs represent crucial social services to the City of Cambridge. The placement of such a large recreational cannabis facility so close to a population of vulnerable individuals – many of whom are struggling to overcome addiction issues – compromises the safety and health of citizens in need and undermines the hard work that goes into offering these necessary programs...

Economic empowerment supporters respond:

The Harvard Square Homeless Shelter is housed in the University Lutheran Church. For years, the shelter was run by Harvard Students as part of the Phillips Brooks House program. The shelter is a dry shelter, meaning that no one can enter unless completely sober. The homeless shelter offers refuge for up to 14 consecutive days during its open season (November 1 - April 15). The shelter is temporarily closed due to COVID-19. Adults who are committed to using a dry shelter for up to two-weeks have already exhibited a level of self-awareness and self-discipline that should be acknowledged as an asset. In addition, adults who are receiving services for addiction from programs offered at the Church have taken a tremendous step forward in their personal commitment to self-discipline and well-being. It is arrogant and presumptuous of the EE opponents to imply that these adults will experience a relapse in sobriety due to a cannabis shop in close proximity to the location where services are received. It reflects a profound lack of respect for the inner strength of those battling with homelessness and addiction. The broader challenges of protecting vulnerable individuals did not prevent many of the EE opponents from voting in support of Healthy Pharms. Those struggling with addiction could also have chosen to purchase medical grade marijuana from Healthy Pharms, located just 100 feet further down Winthrop lane. When Healthy Pharms reopens under the Mission brand (4Front) it might also seek a recreational, adult use marijuana license.

We will continue to look forward to partnering with the Harvard Square Business Community to support the success of quality programs such as those offered by the HHS Shelter. To learn more about the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter or Philips Brook house, use these links: [HHSshelter](#) and [PBH](#). Please consider making a donation today. Meanwhile, it is also worth noting that cannabis dispensaries are playing a key role in reducing and combating opioid addiction:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6135562>.

Economic empowerment opponents claim:

...[Cookies] most famous cannabis strain is “Girl Scout Cookies”¹. Other strains include “Cereal Milk”, “Berry Pie”, and “Snow Man”, each of which has its own cartoon-based logo on Cookies’ product packaging and the Cookies’ website. Cookies is likely to argue that regardless of what we think of their marketing strategy, they can only legally sell their product to individuals over the age of 21... In a neighborhood consisting of more than 6,000 resident undergrads (the vast majority of whom are under 21 years of age) as well as businesses catering to customers of all ages and a historic Park, it is highly problematic to locate a business of such size in such a prominent location that can only be entered by adults and which, by definition, does not present itself as an open and inviting space for all...

Economic empowerment supporters respond:

To imply that our minority-owned and operated store is incapable of operating lawfully because of food references in our potential product names when other existing stores in Cambridge with white owners and white operators already have food references in their product names is another example of the racist and desperate double standards being promulgated by the EE opponents.

Our team is a team of local community members and parents -- a team that can and will be responsive to the unique requirements of the Cambridge community, a team that will provide the final approval of brand and marketing strategies for the Cookies Cambridge store.

Our store operator is a third-generation operator of a family liquor store business and brings a stellar track record of compliance to our operation. The sale of cannabis products to individuals under the legal age of consumption is strictly prohibited just as the sale of alcohol products to individuals under the legal age of consumption is strictly prohibited.

Product names from an existing dispensary in Cambridge might also be of interest to the EE opponent signatories. Somehow when white-operated stores market products with the name “Gelato” and “Charlotte’s Web” the EE opponents are unconcerned and silent, and yet based on presumptions of what food references may or may not exist on menu options we may or may not offer at our location,

they seek to oppose it. The double standards are rife with racism and equate to cultural gas lighting.

Economic empowerment opponents claim:

...Distance from Public Parks: Article 11.803.3 of Cambridge Zoning Ordinance indicates that cannabis retailers cannot be located 300 feet from public parks where children play. On any given day in Winthrop Park, you will find babies being pushed in strollers, toddlers scampering about on the grass, and tweens and teens sitting cross-legged on the ground together... Distance from other marijuana dispensaries: Article 11.803.1(b) asks that cannabis dispensaries not be located within 1,800 of another cannabis dispensary. Winthrop Street, a small, pedestrian street, already has a marijuana dispensary, Healthy Pharms, located approximately 100 feet from Cookies' proposed location. There are sound reasons Cambridge adopted the above regulations. Of course, the special permit process allows for these requirements to be waived when the community's best interests would be served by doing so...

Economic empowerment supporters respond:

The City of Cambridge's Zoning Ordinance does not forbid Cannabis Retail Stores from opening at this location next to Winthrop Square, which is classified by the City as a public park and is not limited to any specific protected designation under its Cannabis Ordinance. There is also already an existing Cannabis Retail Store located within 300 feet of Winthrop Square.

Rather, the Cannabis Ordinance only restricts Cannabis Retail Stores and Production Facilities from locating within 300 feet of a “children’s playground, public youth athletic field, or youth recreation facility” as designated by the City, unless the Planning Board finds mitigating factors and grants permission [Section 11.803.3(b)].

According to the City's guides and maps, Winthrop Square is the only public park or outdoor space within 300 feet of Cookies Cambridge's proposed location. And as any Harvard Square resident not viewing the proposal through a prejudicial or biased viewpoint could attest, **Winthrop Square is not a children’s playground, public youth athletic field, or public youth recreation facility. The park is important public space for the local marketplace, residents and visitors alike, and not limited to the narrow purposes which the EE opponents falsely contend.**

They have conflated a park where children may happen to go, along with a host of others, as erroneously akin to playgrounds and athletic fields as narrowly defined in the Ordinance. The City of Cambridge's [Parks and Playground Guide](#) provides a description of Winthrop Square, along with 10 other parks in West Cambridge. In the following image, please note the inclusion of the word "play" in the description of Kingsley and Larch Road Park and the non-use of the word in the description of Winthrop Square.

In Cambridge's Guide to Parks, Winthrop Square is not listed as either a Sports Field or a Playground. Nor is it listed on Cambridge's map of Public Parks, Playgrounds, and Reservations as a "Playground," "Water Play" area or as having any of the "Athletic Uses." It is a merchant park. This is based

on review of the most current documents on the City of Cambridge's Community Development Department's website. In approving the Special Permit Application for Healthy Pharms in 2017 the Planning Board found that "that there are *no facilities within 500 feet* of [Healthy Pharms] location in which children commonly congregate, such as children's schools, playgrounds, recreation centers, child care facilities or other facilities that offer programming distinctively oriented toward children." (emphasis added) Even if the EE opponents were correct on this point -- which they are not -- their support for the Healthy Pharms location or a "basement" home for our store, would squarely undermine their argument. In fact, the fact that they are not near a place where children gather is precisely a part of why the Planning Board approved Healthy Pharms.

It is clear from the Planning Board's previous decision in the Healthy Pharms Application that Winthrop Square is NOT a place where children commonly congregate as considered by the previous ordinance. Therefore, if the old standard that the EE Opponent is trying to claim was applicable to this project, Cookies Cambridge would comply with that standard.

The City of Cambridge Zoning Ordinance also sets out a buffer preventing Cannabis Retail Stores from being located within 1,800 feet of one another [Section 11.803.1(b)]. However, this ordinance specifically excludes Economic Empowerment applicants from this buffer. The City of Cambridge wanted to

The screenshot shows a section of the 'CITY OF CAMBRIDGE PARKS AND PLAYGROUND GUIDE'. A vertical green bar on the left is labeled 'West Cambridge'. The page lists three parks:

- 3. Kingsley Park** (soccer ball icon) • 9.8 acres
250-R Fresh Pond Parkway • Open dawn until dusk
Overlooking Fresh Pond, Kingsley Park includes a walking loop, a small natural play area, and a lawn area that is popular for picnicking in warm weather and sledding in the winter.
- 4. Larch Road Park** (soccer ball icon) • 0.4 acres
119 Larch Road • Open dawn until dusk
This neighborhood park includes a sand play area and central play structure shaded by trees. Public art is displayed on the fence surrounding the park.
- 11. Winthrop Square**
83 Winthrop Street • 0.3 acres
Open dawn until dusk
With its benches and lawn area, Winthrop Square offers a respite from the bustle of Harvard Square. Once the site of a marketplace in historic Newtowne (the original name of the 17th century Puritan settlement where present-day Harvard Square is located), the park is now situated in close proximity to a variety of businesses, inviting visitors to relax, sip coffee, or eat lunch while foot and motor traffic pass by on Mt. Auburn and JFK Streets, both of which border the park.

prevent EE applicants from being locked out of the prime retail areas, like Harvard Square, by large corporations who might get in first. **Cookies Cambridge is an Economic Empowerment applicant. Therefore, Section 11.803.1(b) does not apply.**

When the standards set out are viewed fairly and honestly, it is clear that Cookies Cambridge complies with the intent the City of Cambridge had when drafting the Ordinance.

Economic empowerment opponents claim:

...As noted, there already exists a marijuana dispensary on this small, pedestrian block of Winthrop Street: Healthy Pharms. ...Healthy Pharms is a medical dispensary. Its customers are referred by doctors for medically prescribed cannabis. As such, they tend to come by throughout the day to pick up their prescriptions for consumption at a later time and place appropriate for their condition and symptom management. This mitigates the concern that the Park might become a landing spot for consumption of cannabis by customers exiting the Healthy Pharms. ...While it had limited interior queuing, the facility was entirely appropriate for the expected demand of a medical facility where the only people who can enter have to show proof of prescription from a doctor...

Economic empowerment supporters respond:

As previously stated, the Planning Board of the City of Cambridge is responsible for assessing if the Cookies Cambridge application meets the requirements to receive a Special Permit at 57 JFK St. It is the responsibility of the Planning Board to verify that the Cookies Cambridge application meets the requirements to receive a Special Permit for adult use marijuana at the proposed location, not the Economic Empowerment Opponents'. The open letter was sent to elected city officials and state representatives. It is unfortunate that the EE opponents are attempting to use political pressure, spin, and strong-arming to influence the decision of the Planning Board without providing a full set of facts. This demonstrates a lack of integrity. We hope that the clarifying facts included in this document will help provide a more balanced view for all concerned parties.

Economic empowerment opponents claim:

...Property Owner at 57 JFK Street: Raj Dhanda is a Brookline-based real estate investor and developer who owns a number of properties within Harvard Square,

including the Galleria building at 57 JFK Street. In the last several years, Mr. Dhanda has opposed marijuana dispensaries in Harvard Square. In Sept. 2017, he filed a federal lawsuit against Healthy Pharms. Healthy Pharms was at the time owned by Paul Overgaag, a local entrepreneur who also owns two Harvard Square restaurants adjacent to the dispensary – Red House and Charlie’s Kitchen. Appendix 2 offers additional information on Mr. Dhanda’s lawsuit, but in brief: Mr. Dhanda filed his lawsuit under the RICO (racketeering) statute. The RICO lawsuit named Healthy Pharms, Mr. Overgaag, and the following individuals and entities as Defendants and “co-conspirators”: the City of Cambridge, the Massachusetts Dept. of Public Health, Maura T. Healey, Century Bank, and the unnamed provider of Healthy Pharm’s property insurance and general liability insurance. Mr. Dhanda claimed that the opening of Healthy Pharm’s medical marijuana dispensary constituted a criminal “drug conspiracy” that would reduce the value of his nearby properties by \$27 million. He sought damages of 3x that amount, or \$81 million, from Healthy Pharms. In February 2019, Mr. Overgaag settled with Mr. Dhanda out of court and sold the business shortly thereafter. Mr. Dhanda received significant funds in the settlement. Now that Mr. Dhanda will be landlord to — rather than neighbor of — a marijuana business, he says he has had a change of heart regarding the cannabis business. After accusing his neighbor of racketeering, naming the city of Cambridge and the state health department as co-conspirators, and extracting a settlement from a small medical dispensary barely visible from the street, Mr. Dhanda now wants to open a recreational shop with 110 linear feet of street-level frontage in his own building and have the rest of us overlook the inconsistency of it all...

Economic empowerment supporters respond:

It is important to note that the economic empowerment applicants approached no less than nine different landlords in Harvard Square over 17 months in search of a lease opportunity, all to no avail. The owner of 57 JFK Street, Mr. Raj Dhanda, was the only landlord willing to offer a lease opportunity despite an exhaustive search. The economic empowerment applicants have executed a lease agreement with Mr. Dhanda after being turned away by nearly every other major landlord of note in the commercially zoned areas of Harvard Square, including some who are affiliated with the EE opponents.

Some of those commercial owners that rejected the economic empowerment applicants are now doubling down on biased approaches, or trying to strongarm our businesses into particular basement or non-street level locations, in an attempt to thwart one of Harvard Square’s only major commercial property owners who is

a person of color from enabling the EE applicants to access a legal, appropriately zoned lease.

We question the motive behind the persistent and intense focus of the EE opponents on Mr. Dhanda's past actions, which are unrelated to the economic opportunity our team is pursuing. Several EE opponents have expressed their opinions concerning Mr. Dhanda, one of the only commercial property owners in Harvard Square who is a person of color. EE opponents, paraphrasing, have publicly stated the following general sentiments in response to Mr. Dhanda, raising concerns on whether their opposition to our proposal is in fact a grand exercise in axe-grinding and grudge-bearing against our future landlord, who has clearly stated his reasons for supporting our business in an open letter, and who was the only landlord willing to give our Black-owned and Black-operated business access to a lease opportunity in Harvard Square.

Economic empowerment opponents claim:

...We agree wholeheartedly with Cookies' local partners that Economic Empowerment applicants should not be denied prime real estate locations for their businesses. What we disagree with is that the location of 57 JFK Street is an appropriate location for *any* cannabis shop at all...

Economic empowerment supporters respond:

The EE opponents are on the record saying they would support our store being located at 57 JFK Street if our store were in the basement or on the second floor of 57 JFK Street.

Economic empowerment opponents claim:

We stand ready to support this Economic Empowerment applicant – and others – in finding locations that do not compromise the Cannabis Commission's intended goals of balancing the community's various needs and interests. Other cannabis companies arrived in the market before the current applicants, but we believe there are other Class A retail locations within Harvard Square that do not reside next to one of the city's most historic and oldest parks — a park that is regularly frequented by children, adolescents, and underage young adults from around the City. We urge the proposed operators to seek an alternative location, and we ask

the relevant city officials to deny a special permit for operating a recreational cannabis shop on Winthrop Park.

Economic empowerment supporters respond:

The shop would not be operated “on Winthrop Park.” It would be operated in an appropriately zoned commercial building at 57 JFK Street which is separated from the park by a wide pedestrian lane, as previously stated. The exaggerations and mistruths being pushed by the EE opponents are desperate and completely ignore the racial inequalities that exist in Harvard Square’s business community. Despite public support for the Black Lives Matter movement, our research concluded that there are one or two African-American owned businesses in Harvard Square, and it is estimated that there are less than 50 Black-owned businesses in Cambridge, total, a disturbingly low number. The low representation of Black-owned businesses in prominent locations in Cambridge and in Harvard Square has been the status quo for more than 40 years.

The significance of Cookies in Harvard Square extends far beyond the sale of recreational marijuana, but also goes to the heart of the historic and ongoing economic disenfranchisement of Black people -- clearly evidenced in our town, Cambridge.

Black and brown people are absent from entry-level jobs in a wide range of key Cambridge industries ranging from biotechnology to real estate development and are rarely seen in minimum wage retail jobs along the Massachusetts avenue corridor. Black and brown people are virtually absent from ownership of stores in the major retail markets of the City -- Central Square, Harvard Square, and Porter Square.

The low representation of Black-owned businesses in prominent locations has been a decades long shortfall of the purported progressive and equity-based values of Cambridge. The assertion that the semi-anonymous signatories support social justice because it supported one economic empowerment application is analogous to a White person claiming that they are not a racist because they have a Black friend. The support of one applicant does not demonstrate support for real social justice, and to misconstrue it as such is inherently racist, and further proves our points made throughout this letter as to the deep and fundamental misunderstandings the semi-anonymous signatories have with regard to their own privilege --- and with regard to the institutional racism they are perpetuating.

If there was sincere support for economic justice for the Black community, then Mr. Dhanda's actions would not be used in a cynical effort to rationalize opposition to our proposal. If Black Lives Really Mattered to the semi-anonymous signatories, there would also be visible evidence of support for Black wealth accumulation, in the form of multiple, successful African-American owned businesses in Harvard Square.

The EE opponents would be able to point to examples of how they have, over the years, supported many other African-American businesses to obtain 'Class A' real estate in Harvard Square and benefit from lucrative networking opportunities. However, they clearly cannot do this.

Lastly, there would have been a sincere willingness among the nine landlords to "stand ready to support an Economic Empowerment Applicant," when they were approached by our team for a lease opportunity.

We remember the Commonwealth Day School on Brattle Street! The track-record of influential Harvard Square powerholders of 'standing ready to support' the empowerment of Black and minorities communities in Cambridge is troubling.

We are sadly reminded of the successful effort of influential community members who formed a coalition to oppose and shut down the Commonwealth School in 1989. According to a 1990 Harvard Crimson article, "The Private, predominantly minority school moved out of its 113 Brattle St. building this summer in the face of opposition from the surrounding neighborhood. Neighbors argued that the school would create noise and traffic problems and would violate city noise ordinances. In September 1988, residents collected in excess of 230 signatures on a petition opposing the presence of the school. Among the more notable names on the petition were Tyler professor of Constitutional Law Laurence H. Tribe '62, who has since repudiated his signature... A blue-ribbon commission appointed last September issue(d) a report earlier this year saying racial bias played a significant role in forcing Commonwealth Day out of Cambridge. The report also stated that during a five-week time period last summer the trash collection ceased for the school and that from June to August 1988 Inspectional Services visited five times."

The celebrity chef, Julia Childs, who is now deceased, also signed the petition. The "Not in My Backyard" rallying cry that inspired 230 prominent Cambridge residents to push the school out of their Brattle Street neighborhood over 30 years

ago echoes in the Coalition's open letter and in the way the Coalition is organizing to oppose our project.

Written communication from the Neighborhood Association indicating support for our project if the store were planned for the basement or the second floor of the same building gives us pause to wonder if there truly is a concern among the Coalition that the store will have a negative impact on the park or if the Coalition is just using the park as a justification for its discriminatory, "Not In My Back Yard" behavior.

The EE opponents current public relations messaging, no matter how breathless, can be accurately paraphrased as, "We like your team. We just don't want you in this location. And by the way, you can't say we're racist, because we supported another economic empowerment applicant in Harvard Square."

While we can certainly hope that the EE opponents will change their position and choose to use our project proposal as an opportunity to promote economic opportunity in Harvard Square, we recognize just how difficult that might be.

It will require that the semi-anonymous signatories, in their role of power-holders and gatekeepers, use the same tenacious willpower and political influence to find reasons to say "yes" instead of "no," to participate in creative problem solving with our team, and to build a broad base of support for our team and the project, instead of building a nefarious, semi-anonymous coalition to oppose our project. We remain hopeful that the signatories will grow in wisdom, in compassion, and in understanding for the greater good of Harvard Square and for the Cambridge Community. We remain open to robust and honest discussion about the merits of our project and hope to have the opportunity to serve the residents of Cambridge. Until that time, please stay safe and be well.

Damond Hughes

Damond Hughes
Owner/Operator
Blue Enterprises