

Alewife Focus Groups

In July 2017, the Envision Cambridge Team worked with the Cambridge Community Engagement Team (CET) to hold a round of focus groups designed to reach the City's underserved Cambridge families, including members from immigrant communities (Bangladeshi, Chinese, Ethiopian, Haitian, Somali, Spanish and Arabic speaking). The goals of these focus groups were to present and receive feedback on the vision and goals of the Draft Alewife Plan, and the ways in which the plan achieved or fell short of those ideals. This input and feedback will inform the citywide planning process.

Approximately forty (40) members of the public participated in the focus groups in total, which were held as follows:

- July 13, 2017 at the Fresh Pond Apartments
- July 18, 2017 at the Peabody School

These sessions were focused on getting feedback and additional input from the participants on the Alewife vision and draft scenario. Some of questions asked were:

Does the vision capture what Cambridge means to you and what it should always try to be? What are the major concerns and issues in Alewife? What are ideas for making this area better? What are your thoughts on this proposal? Are these the right types of jobs and retail opportunities? What type of opportunities to start your own business would work best here? What community services get used most often by your community?

A Vision for Alewife

There was a sense that Alewife should strive to be unique – unlike any other place in the City and certainly unlike any other place in the region. One participant even expressed the desire that the future Alewife look and feel nothing like Assembly Row in Somerville, to which many other participants agreed.

Major Concerns

Participants made it clear that the overall inflated cost of living in the City is a burden; affordability is not unique to just housing or food. This concerns is made worse by the difficulty in finding a decent job that provides living wages in the City. For some, it's difficult to find work close to their residences. Many of the employment opportunities in the City seemed to be catered to non-Cambridge residents and/or those with high levels of technical skills and educational attainment (i.e. Masters or PhD degrees). Getting to, from, and around Alewife is also a major concern. Public transit is convenient from Rindge Tower because Alewife is within walking distance, but getting to Concord Ave or Vassal Lane can take a very long time because of the infrequency of the busses that service those roads. Traffic also imposes a substantial threat to mobility, even to those who ride bicycles. It's difficult for seniors and people with disabilities to run errands or even go for a walk due to the unsafe environment created by traffic and the lack of connectivity. Other comments were as follows:

- It would be nice to have more visitor parking at Rindge Towers. The apartments only have limited parking and they are reserved for residents. Even the parks and open spaces have limited parking spaces.
- It seems a lot of the people that live in the new apartment buildings in Alewife are only here for a short time before they leave. I would hope that people would stay for a little longer and maybe try to raise a family and contribute to the existing community.
- While there are many great opportunities in and things to love about Cambridge, in terms of recreation, looking for things to do can be very difficult in Cambridge. Many times, you must drive or take the T into Boston for certain kinds of activities.

Areas for Improvement

In both sessions, there was an overwhelming desire for community and recreation centers for the residents of Alewife. These centers would serve both young and old, and members of various racial, ethnic and religious groups. An emphasis was also placed on indoor spaces for recreation and community interaction, so this would be a year-round facility. Regarding the former, many of the participants are parents and would see spaces for their children where they can play and have birthday parties. Such a space would also create opportunities for teenagers to keep busy, especially during summer months when they're out of school. For older Alewife residents, this sort of amenity would provide opportunities for retirement parties, yoga, bingo, and related activities. Additional comments are as follows:

- Affordable food options are scarce in this area. Whole Foods and Trader Joe's are both too expensive. A farmer's market would be highly desirable.
- More affordable housing options and less waiting time for affordable units. But, not more density. Five-six story buildings are ideal. We don't need more Rindge Towers in Alewife.
- Open spaces for children and more swimming pools are needed in this area. The existing one is outdoor only and busy all the time. Furthermore, when it comes to public swimming pools, it would be nice to have culturally and religiously sensitive programs and timetables that allow for women and girls to swim alone.
- A community center where people can gather and interact with each other (maybe for a small fee), or where people can celebrate their culture and ethnicities.
- We need job training centers to get people ready for employment opportunities around the city, and computer centers that will allow people to develop technical skills and access information, and more health clinics.
- It's difficult to get across Alewife Brook Parkway either by walking or biking.
- There are not enough buses that service this area — you either walk to Mass Ave or to Alewife Station. Bicycle infrastructure is needed in the area — the streets are narrow, and it's unsafe for bikes and vehicles. There have been several instances where people have been hit.
- There must be a way where we can have the transportation infrastructure to support diverse groups of people — cyclists, vehicles, pedestrians, mothers/fathers with strollers and small children.

- In a big city like Cambridge, we shouldn't still have basement units. For one, it's not an ideal living condition, especially for children. Air and light circulation can be an issue and cause health issues in children. Also, it's a resiliency question. In an area like Alewife that is prone to flooding, basement units are a significant safety concern.
- A YMCA that provides family membership.
- More choices in internet and TV providers than Comcast.
- A bookstore.

The Proposal

After the participants were shown the proposal for the Alewife Quadrangle, they provided some feedback. The following summarizes their comments:

- I like the approach towards diversity in employment opportunities. I can imagine some of the large biotech companies opening small plants here in Alewife and those jobs would be exclusively for residents in the area. Maybe the City could even provide incentives for this kind of arrangement. Kendall Square is more research oriented. We could have the manufacturing component located right here.
- I like the idea of a diverse innovation job sector. Finding work in Cambridge is already difficult because of the qualifications for most of them. This proposal gives people an opportunity to make more money and stay in the City that they love. People have been here for so long and they still want to stay.
- The proposal is missing a community center that can service the entire community and allow for a variety of activities that cater to diverse groups and meet a variety of needs. Where are the areas for indoor and outdoor recreation and community interaction in this proposal?
- Where are the places where we can celebrate diversity? We could have many different celebrations for a variety of communities and religious beliefs. It's a way to maintain our diversity but also expose other cultures to each other.
- I really like the idea of food manufacturing. Working in food manufacturing is something that I would be very interested in.
- Crossing Alewife Brook continues to be an issue. The proposal should incorporate more pedestrian connections across this major thoroughfare.
- The proposal is also missing affordable food options. Many people travel to Market Basket in Somerville to shop for groceries. Trader Joe's isn't a bad option, but there's still a need for even more affordable places to shop for groceries.
- The proposal should consider low-income/senior citizen populations, as well as plans and policies for affordable home ownership. With the wages that most people make, they can never really save.
- There's no real mall in this area of Cambridge. It's more of a business center. There used to be a bigger mall and number of stores that people loved and used that have since moved elsewhere.
- We don't need taller residential buildings. It would be better to keep the density low to lessen the impact on traffic. It's also a safety issue. When there's a fire, it's too much to make it down to the first floor from the 15th floor, for example.

Opportunities

The participants were asked about what they would like to see in Alewife in retail and employment opportunities, especially opportunities to start their own businesses. There was an almost unanimous desire to bring back the type of diversity in retail that once existed in Alewife. Many recall, years ago, when there was more than just a TJ Maxx in the Fresh Pond Mall. Now, one would have to travel to the other side of the City to go to a mall. In terms of employment, the idea of keeping industrial jobs in the area was favorable. The bakery, for example, was well received because of the idea that people that live in the area could be employed. There was also an appreciation for the possibility of owning one's own business. Many people have skill and experience in making clothes in their home country, but they don't have those opportunities when they come here. Creating opportunities for immigrants to do what they once did in their home country is a great way to promote diversity and learning across ethnicities, and maintain families in the City.