

2017-03-01

Envision Cambridge Advisory Committee #5

Meeting notes

Committee Attendees

Ruth Allen, Bill Kane, Alexandra Offiong, Ruth Ryals, Tom Stohman, Tom Sieniewicz, Robert Winters, Zeyneb Magavi, Bethany Stevens, Matt Wallace

Staff / Consultant Present

Staff: Iram Farooq, Stuart Dash, Gary Chan, Luke Mich, Cassie Arnaud.

Utile: Tim Love, Nupoor Monani, John McCartin.

Committee Members Absent

Marlinia Antoine, Naia Aubourg, Jeff Kiryk, Risa Mednick, Frank Gerratana, Josh Gerber, Ebi Poweigha, Zuleka Queen-Postell, Joe Maguire

Eight members of the public present.

Meeting overview

Tim Love and John McCartin presented regional population and an approach towards studying Cambridge corridors. (Presentation available [here.](#))

Committee discussion

Citywide and regional projections

- Members wanted to know what is captured by “household” in the Census definition – is it any households of more than one person per house or only multi-generational households? Does “family” imply that each of the households has children? Consultant team confirmed that it is usually any household of one or more people. City staff added that the number of family households has been levelling off for some years but the number of persons per households have been steadily declining in the last 3-4 years. (*The Census defines a family household as one with members “related by birth, marriage, or adoption.” It excludes skipped generational families (grandparents and grandkids) and same-sex married couples. It does, however, include opposite-sex married couples without children.*)
- Members thought the number of people per family household was too low in 1950 (3.25). Consultant team clarified that it is not only family households but all households which are counted in this average which might explain this.
- Question about housing affordability: Is the income threshold before or after tax? City staff confirmed that is before tax.
- Members expressed surprise that 60% of very low income households are cost burdened, implying that they seek housing in the open market and are not assisted by federal or City programs.
- Members were curious about how the Kendall Square commuter-shed map would compare to the same mapping from 10-15 years ago, and whether there have always been more people working in Cambridge than living in Cambridge. City explained that in 2000s during the last citywide planning effort the plan used a jobs-to-housing ratio rather than jobs-to-residents. At the time the ratio was 2 jobs per housing unit which was higher than most cities at the time.

- Members asked if there may be a correlation between the commuter rail and bike paths, and the commuter shed. Consultant team to explore this further.
- Members would like to see a deeper dive in analyzing people that live and work in Cambridge, and how many people who “play” here, i.e. tourists, and how many people are just passing through.
- Members raised a question – the implication of the cost burden chart was that 60% of lowest income residents are not assisted; the CDD website says “14% of households are below poverty line” and “14.7% are all housing units are subsidized.” Members wanted to know how to reconcile these seemingly contradictory statistics. City staff clarified that poverty line is very low, in the order of \$26k for a family of four, whereas the low-income threshold from the cost-burden chart extends to \$30k (30% of AMI) meaning many low-income households have incomes higher than the poverty line. This explains why 60% of low-income (<30% Area Median Income) residents are housing cost-burdened despite City statistics implying that all households below the poverty line are assisted through subsidized units
- Members asked if many housing cost burdened households are students and observed that graduate students have a desire to live off campus and that the City should be mindful of this while planning housing for this group.
- Members pointed out that the housing issue is not solely Cambridge’s to solve, but has to be considered across the region with East Arlington and Somerville. City explained that in the 1990s, 2000s the effort was to provide Cambridge’s share of the regional housing need.
- Members observed that the Kendall Sq-MIT commuter shed is distributed evenly across the metropolitan region and the city should be proud of this fact.
- Some members were surprised by modest MAPC population projection. They felt like the consultant team’s number is more akin to the growth they are seeing, and asked what is the right level of growth? What does that mean for the citywide plan? City staff explained how daytime and evening densities in Cambridge and Somerville differ - Somerville is half its evening density during the day while Cambridge is double - in past planning efforts the “quality of place” has been important to maintain.
- Members would like to know more about small businesses, jobs and the intersection of residents living here versus working here.

Cambridge Corridors

- Members were concerned about why certain streets that are pleasant to walk on show up as “bad” on the street-wall map, such as Mt. Auburn and Prospect St. Consultants explain that it the diagram does not measure good or bad, but captures only one specific metric - the presence of a “street wall” (a consistent building frontage along the sidewalk to create a positive sense of enclosure in the public realm). Members advocate to have Western Ave, River Street, Prospect Street, Mt Auburn St to be a part of the citywide corridor study.
- Members observed how early planning principles considered it good practice to have corridors and squares at the edges and corners of neighborhoods, but in Cambridge that pattern doesn’t match up with people’s identification of neighborhoods which is centered around squares.
- Members asked if knowing the capacity of infrastructure - transit, water supply, etc – can help set limits of growth. City staff explained that growth cannot be thought of as only occurring in Cambridge’s boundaries. Regional growth also affects Cambridge because it is an open city and restricting supply will create artificial scarcity and drive prices up. Consultants point out that Cambridge has almost run of developable land - it may be that “you’re done when you’re done.” Physical constraints might define the limits of growth to the city.

- Members were concerned that the analysis focuses on Alewife and corridors but there is currently no physical connection between Alewife and the selected corridors. Consultants explain that Alewife and corridors can be studied because of data that is available and decisions can be made in a much more informed manner.
- Members want to know what can be done to encourage retrofitting existing single family homes that are underutilized or have smaller families or only couples in them to allow for more density without sacrificing neighborhood character. Consultants cite the example of Portland, OR accessory dwelling unit policy. City clarifies that the City does not have many districts that only allow single family development like many other places in the country, so more moderate residential density is allowed. City explains that aging populations are trending to prefer to stay in their own homes as they become older, or at the very least their own city or town. Large developments such as North Point may help satisfy this need with elevators and amenities.
- Members concerned about disappearing middle class housing. Consultant team explains that Cambridge has a lot of 2-3 bedroom units but that are not available to families. Members concerned about growing number of condos.

Comments from the public

- Question from the public about whether students who have a low income would be included in the very low income group per AMI.
- What is the distinction between growth and demand, if demand is not a part of growth what is? Consultants explain growth projections are based on historical patterns and lifestyle choices and demand is being driven by real estate analysis.
- Concerned about plan's goals related to the hollowing middle class. Disagree with direction of analysis based on square feet as a primary tool. Should be based on resident profiles. Housing committee's decision about suggesting housing overlay over the entire city. What if the whole city got down-zoned and only affordable housing got up-zoned.
- Missing items related to rentals, specifically referring to occupancy rate of rentals on Cambridgepark Drive.