

2017-04-05

Envision Cambridge Advisory Committee #6

Committee Attendees

Josh Gerber, Ebi Poweigha, Alexandra Offiong, Tom Sieniewicz, Zeyneb Magavi, Bethany Stevens, Risa Mednick, Frank Gerratana, Robert Winters, Ruth Ryals

Staff / Consultant Present

Staff: Stuart Dash, Melissa Peters, Gary Chan

Utile: Tim Love, Nupoor Monani

Committee Members Absent

Marlinia Antoine, Naia Aubourg, Jeff Kiryk, Matt Wallace, Zuleka Queen-Postell, Joe Maguire, Ruth Allen, Bill Kane, Tom Stohman

Eight members of the public present.

Meeting overview

Tim Love presents existing conditions, issues, city policies, and goals for Urban Form. Presentation slides are available online [here](#).

Committee Discussion

- In reference to the Street Wall Oscillator map (presentation slide 26), members wanted to know if height of buildings is a consideration while measuring the street wall. Consultant team responds that the ratio of street width and building height is used in the equation. Members also asked if this is “judgement free” as some streets which score low need to have loading docks and blank facades which might lead to the score. Team explained that the map is an output of raw data and does not at this time have direct policy implications.
- Members wanted to know if 50,000 SF is a typical threshold for Design Review. Consultant team responded that it is the same for Boston.
- Member suggested that Special Permit criteria should be an outcome of the plan such that it embeds Cambridge’s current values clearly in the principles.
- Consultant team described a common occurrence in design review processes generally where the demands for “public benefit” often get politicized and creep beyond the scope of design, though less so in Cambridge. Members observe that similar complex negotiations about public benefits also happen in Cambridge. City team explained that the Planning Board focused on specific project-focused benefits and have tried to keep the policy discussions such as mitigation and exaction fees out of it.
- Members would like to know more about the tradeoffs between increasing one of the variables such as number of affordable units on others in the economics of private development. Consultant team explained that typically developers go for projects when they can be certain of 18% of ROI and all the related costs are written into their financial scenarios. Consultant team expressed that the big tradeoffs for development in Cambridge in the future are likely to be between affordable housing and net zero energy. Members would like to understand the accounting principles and see a one-page pro forma.
- Members spoke in support of special permit saying that it is important to retain the diversity of buildings in Cambridge but complained the procedure to acquire special permits is “locally

comprehensible and globally incomprehensible.” Member explained that Planning Board plays an important role in negotiating the spaces in between private development, like parks.

- Members would like to know if there are form-based guidelines in the overlay districts. City staff explains that they are qualitative. They are not explicitly form-based but may achieve the same effect.
- Members observe that none of the information presented was controversial or provocative. They would like the consultant team to present speculations such as “Cambridge lacks a space for large gatherings or protests and we need to propose it.”
- Consultant team suggests that the group brainstorm ideas for future form-based zoning on the corridors with design guidelines and design review.
- Members would like to know how much of the city is left to plan. It seems like there isn’t much room except for Alewife. Consultant team responds that the corridors and Alewife are the few remaining consolidated parts of the city which can still see new development and the urban form investigation is focused in these places.
- Members asked what “human scale” is and how it is specified. Consultant team points to the Toronto Avenues study and guidelines.
- Members comment that there is nothing that stands out in the plan and it is becoming overly utilitarian.
- Members suggest that future meetings should be 25% presentation and 75% committee conversation.
- Members express that the biggest challenge through the special permit and design review is to find where the city is willing to live with more density.
- Members suggest that key questions for the next meeting should be -
 - Is there a consensus on growth?
 - Where are we willing to live with more density?
 - What is the design and form of this density? Back Bay?
 - Where are the destinations for play in Cambridge?
- Members would like to be reassured that the input that comes from the ECAC process will be duly considered even if it goes against the grain of normative planning.

Public comment

- Are we trying to hit targets for growth or better manage what is natural growth for Cambridge? What are we doing about cars? What attractions are we planning and how do we acquire land for it?