

2017-04-27

Alewife Working Group #8

Committee Attendees

Eric Grunebaum, John DiGiovanni, James Butler, Margaret Drury, Catherine Connolly, Sam Stern, William Ahern, Geoff Wood, Jennifer Gilbert, Mark DiOrio

Staff / Consultant Present

Staff: Iram Farooq, Stuart Dash, Melissa Peters, Chris Cotter, Cassie Arnaud, Susanne Rasmussen, Stephanie Groll, Gary Chan, Wendell Joseph

Utile: Tim Love, Meera Deean, Nupoor Monani

Nelson Nygaard: Jason Schreiber

HR&A: Kyle Vangel

Committee Members Absent

Tom Ragno, Doug Brown, Karen Dumaine

Eleven members of the public present.

Meeting overview

Tim Love, Kyle Vangel, and Jason Schreiber present the vision and data for a new combined scenario for the Alewife Quadrangle. Presentation is available [here](#).

Committee Discussion

- Members wanted to know why the existing traffic on Concord Ave. is so high because the Quadrangle is not very densely developed. Consultant team explained that Concord Ave. is “everyone’s front door” and everyone currently going in and out of Quadrangle uses Concord Ave.
- Members wanted to know if the diagonal park(s) will be the only open space in the Quadrangle or if developers will be required to provide more, noting that in the Triangle the only open space provided is private. Consultant team responded that the current analysis shows where the open space should be provided relative to public right-of-way and access. Private open space will be required under zoning requirements.
- Members suggested that open spaces can be hardscaped as well as green to act as plazas and places to sit.
- Members noted that connectivity is a significant issue and think it is essential to build a commuter rail station into the plan, citing the example of the Back Bay station redevelopment as a model for how this can be realized. They noted that it’s important to provide this to make the 10,000 jobs accessible to people. The consultant team explained that the plan neither precludes the commuter station or bridge from being realized in the future. Members emphasized that they are hoping for a stronger response and intervention in making this happen.
- Members wanted to know more about the townhouse component of the scenario and asked if that is too low density compared to the amount that would need to be spent on land acquisition. Is this a realistic proposition? Consultant team says it was motivated in part by a desire for scaled transition, but the form is also productive from a revenue standpoint. They are likely to sell at rates much higher than the double-loaded corridor types. Another member expressed that they are excited to see townhouses in this area because it will attract long term residents who will be invested in its life and character.

- Members asked if there was an alternative to the current paradigm where Cambridge allows regional through-traffic to just go through the Alewife (which contributes to 81% of the traffic in the area.) They asked if the City can issue a toll on Alewife Brook Parkway or offer only one lane for through-traffic and give the rest over to transit. City staff responded that this is a State road and the City doesn't have the ability to charge tolls. The State did a corridor study and discovered that people come from many origins through the Parkway and go in many different directions. Another member weighed in and observed that the State (DCR) answers to many different communities and has to serve them all. It would be punitive to toll people passing through but not Cambridge residents.
- Members asked if it is important to talk about the connections beyond the Quadrangle so the focus of the plan is not lost. On housing, they said the issue is more complex trying to keep the balance revenue positive for the City, but at the same time creating more housing which the community needs. Ideas like creating a buffer with the residential neighborhood are good, but it's important not to lose sight of the bigger issues like improving overall connectivity. The consultant team responded that the goal is to make this a model 21st century mixed use district by rethinking connectivity, typologies, and use mix.
- Members asked about the pedestrian bridge and whether the linear park could connect to it. City staff responded that the bridge is a significant cost and the City needs to weigh it against overall City priorities.
- Members asked how much land value has increased in the last 10-15 years, observing that the area has created a lot of value and tax revenue for the city and that the revenue generated in the area should be used to fund the bridge. City staff responded by saying that the City's approach is to think holistically about city needs, and it does not designate revenue earned in one area for projects only in that area.
- Members asked if there are other opportunities for less expensive bridges or ways to connect the raised plinths so that they create safe walkways in and out of the neighborhood in the event of flooding. They asked the project team to think about "living with water" more seriously.
- City responded that no significantly less expensive options for a bridge are available largely because the bridge covers a long distance and must be spanned without building pylons on the tracks.
- City staff further responded that the Climate Change Preparedness Plan is working on Alewife area as pilot to develop physical and social strategies at the building and district scale.

Public Comments

- One attendee asked if the scenario included running buses along Concord Ave. The consultant team responded that there will be some basic level of improved connections – BRT or shuttles or commuter rail.
- Cambridge Highland resident remarked that she liked the idea of the low-density housing, but its current location abutting Santa Maria Hospital is not truly near the Highlands and does not serve as a buffer. She suggested moving it up to the north of the district close to Blair Pond. She also noted that connectivity remains an important issue. Without additional connectivity, traffic will worsen. She felt that bikes and pedestrians are important and help make it a neighborhood.
- One attendee brought up the issue of flooding noting that while the impacts will be most severe by 2070 the breaching of the Earhart Dam occurs much earlier by 2045. They asked the committee to think of the number of people suffering in the event of a 1% storm. He disagreed with the idea of restricting access for through traffic on Concord Ave. or the Parkway noting that if this is done vehicles will be forced to drive through residential neighborhoods.
- One attendee made a few points:

- The projections for Inner Concord Ave. add about 1,000 more cars during peak traffic. While thinking about the shopping center, the team should be mindful of this issue and use the opportunity to better manage the influx. She would like to see the truck routes clearly marked to understand their relationship with the residential district.
- She noted that the Fayerweather School is a long-standing use in the district and is unlikely to relocate.
- She appreciated seeing residential uses near the hospital noting that the existing public park will likely be used more.
- She was disappointed that the bridge is no longer shown as a part of the scenario noting that all the development in the Triangle was permitted on the notion of a bridge and expresses distrust in the City's promises.
- One attendee said that she like the current scenario. She emphasized the importance of increased connectivity especially across the Trader Joe's site. She asked if the diagonal park can be made thicker in sections where it narrows down.
- One attendee was concerned about flooding noting that 2045 is not far away. On heat maps, this area is shows up in red but needs to be made "green" for livability and sustainability. Consultant team remarked that it is a part of the team's urban form/design thinking and making a tree canopy plan will substantiate this.
- One attendee made a few points:
 - He does not understand the rationale for including industrial uses in the neighborhood and feels that they will be overtaken by commercial uses if the area is not explicitly zoned for industrial.
 - He noted that residential uses have less impact on traffic than commercial uses (roughly 1/4 impact of commercial).
 - He suggested that mid-rise housing is more appropriate on Concord Ave. with low-rise townhouses behind. He would generally like to see more housing in the district than shown in the scenario, noting that a critical mass of residential uses is required to make a place feel like a neighborhood and that housing is a citywide priority.
 - Public realm cannot just be in an area that is isolated by highlighting its streets. It has to be integrated with larger ideas for public space and connectivity facilities like the bridge.
 - He pointed out that existing buildings in the district will not go away, especially on Concord Ave. and they should be considered in the plan.