

2017-05-17

**Envision Cambridge Advisory Committee #7**

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**Committee Attendees**

Ruth Allen, Alexandra Offiong, Ruth Ryals, Tom Stohlman, Tom Sieniewicz, Robert Winters, Zeyneb Magavi, Josh Gerber, Zuleka Queen-Postell

**Staff / Consultant Present**

Staff: Iram Farooq, Melissa Peters, Gary Chan

Utile: Tim Love, Meera Deean

**Committee Members Absent**

Marlinia Antoine, Naia Aubourg, Jeff Kiryk, Risa Mednick, Frank Gerratana, Ebi Poweigha, Joe Maguire, Bill Kane, Bethany Stevens, Matt Wallace

Six members of the public present.

**Meeting Overview**

Tim Love provided a short process and Alewife planning update. Tim Love and Iram Farooq led a discussion about what role the corridors could play in achieving Cambridge's goals. (Presentation available [here](#).)

**Committee Discussion**

**Alewife Update**

- Members wanted to know how the proposed plan for the Quadrangle would affect current businesses and property owners and about the proposed locations for new housing. Consultant team said that existing property owners could remain until they wished to sell or redevelop their property.

**Corridors**

- A committee member asked, given that Cambridge is such a desirable place to live, why are we not looking growth as a regional issue; and if Cambridge is such a desirable place to live compared to region, won't building more mean more people come. They noted that there is more housing in the development pipeline than needed for the highest growth scenario, but if all new units are one-bedrooms, and families that want to live in Cambridge can't, the housing need will not be met.
  - City staff responded that if you limit supply, then the question becomes about who gets to access supply (which is usually the person who can pay the most.) Increasing housing supply might change that equation and lower housing costs.
  - City staff also explained how MAPC develops their projections - the projections are calculated based on "appropriate share" in region. It does not fully factor in things like desirability, etc. Considering this, there might be an even higher demand than is projected.

- A committee members suggested that the simplest thing Cambridge could do to create a continuous active retail corridor would be to change the zoning. A lot of areas on Mass Ave and Cambridge St are residentially zoned.
- Another committee member commented that on corridors such as Cambridge Street, what were previously retail spaces are now offices. Ground-floor retail spaces cost less than commercial spaces, so companies are renting retail spaces. Further, they felt that the City has not done enough to incentivize well-being of small independent retail.
- A committee member wondered about how to maintain “the flavor of Cambridge” – the character of the city - amid the new development. They wondered if Cambridge could be the city that plans for the middle class, and expressed concern about the livability of Cambridge. They asked if the community wants families and people who will be here for multiple generations.
- Members asked if while looking at corridors livability is an important aspect and should be understood as serving the needs of the community within a walking distance. They would like to see the distribution of services in different neighborhoods, noting that a distribution of amenities and services makes the city more walkable.
  - For example, they said there are plenty of restaurants, daycares, and dentists, but things like the gym may be farther away. If there are two daycare centers on a single block, that means there is demand across city, and is that need being met?
  - Members would like to see the needs of a neighborhood mapped in a better way, perhaps through a map of life needs and access, or intercept surveys.
- Several committee members brought up the need for family housing. One member mentioned that the corridors are only a few key streets, and that in the neighborhoods there is more housing for families.
  - City staff noted that the corridors are not the only place where our goals and needs will be met and that we should focus specifically on what we want the corridors themselves to be. City staff also noted that a retail study is ongoing and the presentation is available online. This presentation has emerging recommendations about the viability of retail and what retail needs to survive.
- Committee members discussed that one-story retail frontages work in some areas, for example in parts of Mass Ave between Porter and Harvard. In other areas, 5-over-1 construction makes sense. The corridors cannot be treated as monolithic. They have to be studied at a finer grain.
- A committee member asked the group to identify a few things Cambridge is in danger of losing. If Cambridge is in danger of losing family housing, they asked if the City could incentivize three-bedroom units, or senior housing or community spaces for the older population.
- Committee members noted that the group needs to be more bold and forward thinking. We need to think about future urbanism through more growth around transit nodes, e.g., wondering if development around Porter Square should be 400’ tall.
  - Consultant team said that new developments should add up to make whole parts of the corridors better, rather than every project being a one-off. Consultant team asked about incentives for public realm improvements, such as a building can go higher if the developer also builds this plaza or public open space or contributes to mobility improvements. City staff commented that it is more about form and guidelines than uses and height.
- Committee members said that the corridors need to be studied with more granularity, noting that the Central Square Advisory committee spent two years coming up with a detailed plan for a fairly small place. Consultant team and city staff suggested that we look at the corridors overall and think of character zones.
- Public space along corridors was a point of discussion. Members noted that near Porter and the Common, there is very little public / sidewalk space along the corridors.

- Committee members also commented that street furniture should be part of perfecting the corridors. The outdoor café spaces in Central Square are very popular, but there are almost none in Harvard Square. Other street furniture, such as news boxes and trash and recycling containers, could be better regulated or arranged, which would help make parts of the corridors better.
- A committee member commented that putting utilities underground would go a long way to decluttering the public realm.
- Another committee member said that snow removal should be part of the City's planning – not just plowing snow, but removing it from streets.
- A committee member said that more attention needs to be given to street trees, such as watering them and caring for them after planting. Someone pointed out that the new trees along Western Avenue have better-quality tree pits, which allow water to infiltrate and roots to grow.
- City staff urged the committee to think creatively about the future. Will there be a big game-changer that will radically change the city? Will retail no longer exist? Will there only be restaurants in all our retail spaces?

### **Goals Discussion**

- Committee members said that the draft goals are all completely agreeable but the question is what tools the City uses to achieve these goals. For example, form-based zoning might be a better method. Committee members also suggested incorporating performance criteria for new development, such as maximizing solar orientation. City staff said that if form-based zoning is introduced to Cambridge, it should be combined with performance, such as energy usage.
- Committee members mused about the challenge of planning for the future. A committee member commented that if planning in the 1940s, one would have assumed that everyone would move to the suburbs and cities would be abandoned, but now cities are thriving. With driverless vehicles, some suggest that there might be a reversal: you might not need to live close to the city – you might have more people living further outside the city.
- A committee member recalled that, in Cambridge specifically, there was a moment when biotech companies wanted to move to the city but residents were concerned. The City created a committee and created guidelines for these new industries moving to the city. That was proactive planning and led to Cambridge's strong economy. The city could do the same right now with height. The city could measure every site and consider its solar gain potential, proximity to transit, and so on, and create guidelines for sites based on these criteria.
- A committee member was concerned about balancing neighborhoods, with daytime and evening users. Encouraging a synergy of uses should be part of the plan. Certain types of uses support other uses, e.g., dense residential with dense office with retail. We can see these mixes working well in parts of Cambridge, failing in other parts of Cambridge. It should be a goal.
  - Members asked if the City could incentivize more affordable rents in certain parts. For example, they mentioned the “around the corner phenomenon” where the corridors have more expensive retail spaces and around the corner, just off the corridor, has slightly cheaper rent.
- Another committee member advocated creating balance within the community by creating spaces for teenagers to hang out, as well as young families, and seniors.
- Committee members wondered how to maintain the social fabric of the city and how many families is the right number, and whether there are enough three-bedroom homes for them. They noted that the school population is growing so the issue is not a lack of kids in the city, it's affordability.

- Another member said that in 1985 one could be working in construction and afford a triple decker; the spillover effect of new housing in Union Square might moderate the Cambridge market.
- A committee member suggested that the goals should include providing single-family and multifamily housing for the middle class, particularly in Alewife, increasing accessibility to all forms of transport; and using historic smaller buildings to keep the “flavor” of the city.

**Public Comments**

- A member of the public asked, even with more prescriptive zoning, what would prevent someone from going to City Council or Planning Board to ask for additional height?
- There was a comment about a recent trend of developers building more three-bedrooms in Cambridge. City staff said that anecdotally they have heard from developers that three-bedrooms are more market viable now than two-bedrooms.
- A member of the public urged that the planning process consider green spaces and urban wilds, especially connecting these for safe, low-stress routes.
- Another committee member asked if we can increase the visibility of art and design throughout the city.