

ENVISION CAMBRIDGE

Alewife Visioning Workshop Summary

July 21, 2016
Tobin School

Introduction

Background on the process: After a several-month-long process in early 2016 to listen to community members and research their values and aspirations for the City, Envision Cambridge began the visioning phase of the project to establish a City-wide vision to guide the planning process. The City first held a city-wide visioning meeting in June and then held an Alewife-specific visioning meeting on July 21, 2016. At this Alewife meeting, participants discussed how Cambridge's core values applied to the Alewife context.

How information gathered from this meeting will be used: Analysis of these conversations on how the City's core values are manifested in Alewife will be used to determine the focus areas on which the Alewife plan will concentrate and will inform the planning for Alewife in the Citywide plan. Those focus areas will inform the goals and strategies of the plan, which in turn will determine the actions the City will take and the indicators and targets towards which it will aim for both Alewife and the City as a whole.

Meeting format: At the July 21 meeting, Envision Cambridge's consultant team described past planning efforts in Alewife, existing conditions including traffic congestion levels, transit and mobility options, flooding risk (including vulnerability due to climate change), temperature projections, land use, and land ownership to help participants understand previous goals for the area and assess where Alewife stands on a range of issues.

Participants were assigned to seven small groups, each of which discussed one of the following core values: Livability, Equity, Sustainability and Resiliency, Economic Opportunity, Community Health and Well-being, Diversity, and Learning. In these groups, participants were first asked to describe a place, event, or activity in Cambridge that reflected the value they were assigned to discuss. Participants then discussed their perceptions the value in relation to Alewife. They then moved to discussing goals and aspirations for how Alewife might more fully match their value. Finally, participants worked to define strategies to achieve the goals they identified, by drawing on a map of Alewife any changes or developments they would like to see in the area. Each discussion group then summarized the goals they had identified and reported these summaries to the group at large. Below is a summary of these small group discussions.

Livability

Seven participants discussed livability.

Participants identified a range of spaces with the concept of livability, including many public spaces. Participants commented especially on parks (particularly Danehy Park in Alewife), places for youth to play sports, the Squares (especially those connected to the T), the MBTA broadly, and housing developments that provided a large proportion of affordable housing.

In discussing Alewife specifically, participants felt that the area embodied livability in some ways and not in others. Broadly, they commented that Alewife's potential to feel livable was compromised by its

disconnectedness and that many parts of Alewife are hard to access without a car, and even with a car transportation is difficult. They commented on the value of places such as Danehy Park and the Alewife Reservation and paths, but lamented that they were very hard to access. One commented that many of the amenities in Alewife felt as if they were designed for commuters, and not those who lived there. Participants specifically highlighted the triangle and quadrangle as areas that were not livable, saying that the developments there felt inhospitable.

Participants identified increased safety and more character and beauty in the area as goals for improving livability in Alewife. Transportation and connections within Alewife and into the rest of Cambridge were important to participants. One participant suggested a shuttle bus going around the area to increase access. Another proposed more trees and green space, especially upon entering Cambridge to make the first impression more pleasing. Several called for better walkability, including a ramp or stair from the Parkway going to the mall. Several commented on the need for more public amenities, including public art, community events, a farmers' market, and some kind of public institution, park and/or hub, especially in the quadrangle/triangle areas. On the whole, the group aimed to make Alewife an appealing destination rather than place that drivers passed through.

Equity

Six participants discussed equity.

Participants identified affordable housing, the public high school, the universities, public events and public amenities such as the Public Library as potential drivers of equity. The limitations and costs of transportation, whether public or not, were seen as obstacles in working towards equity.

Participants commented that many of the features they identified that can improve equity in the community were absent in Alewife. They noted that the limitations on transportation inside Alewife, unfriendliness to pedestrians and bicyclists, the disconnectedness of different parts of the area, and the lack of public spaces and amenities (such as playgrounds or a public square, etc.) were obstacles to improving equity.

For the group, increasing connections among areas and increasing access to amenities was a key strategy proposed to improve equity in Alewife. They suggested creating a centralized square, construction of bridges to connect areas that were isolated from each other by traffic, a public institution such as a YWCA, and more appealing commercial and retail spaces that were easily accessible by pedestrians or bicyclists. They believed that these developments would help create more opportunities for those in the area to come together.

Sustainability and Resiliency

Eight participants discussed sustainability and resiliency.

Participants commented on a wide range of ways in which Cambridge's vision for sustainability is "at the forefront of the country," including ecological restoration projects, public funding for sustainability initiatives such as public composting and recycling, good trees and parks, the Cambridge Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment, fairly good transit and a large percentage of the population walking or biking to work. They also commented on aspects of social resiliency where Cambridge was strong, including mixed-income and -ethnicity neighborhoods, inter-faith relationships, and police training on stress reduction and leadership in times of stress.

In discussing Alewife specifically, participants noted that the resiliency achieved by integrating people from different backgrounds was compromised by the structural obstacles of new developments in Alewife, which

tend to be walled off from their neighbors and other parts of the area. They also commented that there was untapped potential to improve green spaces, such as in the Russell Field area. Some commented on the lack of investment in infrastructure, especially regarding transportation and efforts to manage traffic. They felt that more attention is needed on the regional effects and impacts of traffic.

Members of the group were in disagreement about the role of housing in Alewife vis-à-vis sustainability and resiliency. Some thought that more housing was needed, but needed to be built thoughtfully to address issues in previous residential developments, while another thought that building more housing in an ecologically sensitive and flood-prone area such as Alewife was irresponsible in the first place and that more green space should be prioritized.

Participants' goals for Alewife were to create "human-scale" development that was focused on the residents of the community, not those who travelled through. They aimed for development that is more connected to open spaces, infrastructure, and amenities. They also emphasized the need to take the sustainability challenges of flooding and other issues in Alewife seriously and take bold action to address them. As strategies, participants suggested more a fine-grained network of roads and pathways through neighborhoods, especially in new developments in the quadrangle and triangle. They called for better transportation-related infrastructure, including bike lanes and traffic calming, as well as improved green space, street trees, and storm water management.

Economic Opportunity

Five (5) participants discussed economic opportunity.

Participants identified the universities, the Alewife Quadrangle, some of the Squares, and other commercial/retail hubs in Cambridge with economic opportunity for the City. Affordability and accessibility were important components of economic opportunity for the participants. In Alewife specifically, participants noted that the Alewife T station promoted economic opportunity, but that that other aspects of the built environment in Alewife detracted from economic opportunity for the area. They commented that the quadrangle catered to a niche demographic and industry (i.e. tech start-ups) and that the lack of walkability in the area proved an obstacle to opportunity.

To increase economic opportunity in Alewife, participants set goals of higher density, creative building design to incorporate green spaces, more networked neighborhoods with more character, and improved transportation. Their specific proposed strategies included a bridge over the train tracks to improve access to businesses, an Alewife-centric public transit system, City assistance and incentives to encourage businesses to come to Alewife, and promoting Alewife as a green tech and innovation district.

Community Well-being

Seven (7) participants discussed community health and well-being.

Participants identified a wide range of Cambridge places and programs with community health and well-being, including parks, community centers, youth centers and programs, conservation land, the City's commitment to alternative modes of transportation, and public spaces such as the library, squares, and community gardens.

Participants commented that many of these features that contributed to Cambridge's community health and well-being over all were missing in Alewife. They saw Alewife as lacking in attractive public spaces, walkable commercial hubs, and green space. They felt it was inaccessible to non-motorists and did not invite community. One commented that there were no places for community members to bump into one another.

They suggested developing bicycle and pedestrian pathways and perhaps a bridge to cross traffic, encouraged efforts to bring in businesses and pop-ups that would facilitate public congregating and socializing, and the location of more public amenities (such as libraries and parks, etc.) in the area.

Diversity

Five (5) participants discussed diversity.

Participants commented that for the most part, they felt Alewife did not reflect the value of diversity. With respect to retail spaces, participants commented that the limited number of options and lack of independent/small businesses meant that the options did not cater to a diverse population. They commented that the majority of racial and income diversity in the area was in the Rindge Towers, but because it was so concentrated it amounted to segregation. Participants saw the transportation system as primarily serving those with cars and commented that this presented an obstacle to non-motorists. They commented that the lack of schools in Alewife meant the absence of a typical point of cultural and racial diversity. Participants mentioned Danehy Park as an exception to their perception of Alewife, saying that it attracted a diverse set of people doing different activities.

Participants said that they aspired to improved transportation, making travel by any mode easy in Alewife. They hoped this would attract people to come to Alewife for leisure and make it easier for a wider range of businesses to open in the area. Ideally, this would lead to a more diverse and attractive set of retail options as well as a wider range of job options for people with a diverse range of skillsets. One participant suggested tax breaks or other incentives for small businesses in the area. Participants also called for improved access to Fresh Pond and Alewife Preservation, which have the potential to be destinations in Alewife. Finally, participants called for development that had a more human-scale aesthetic to be more attractive and feel more welcoming to a broad range of people. The development of a Square in Alewife was proposed.

Learning

Seven (7) participants discussed learning.

Participants identified a wide range of places, events, and activities with learning in Cambridge, including the following: school fairs, science week and public science projects (such as rocket building), the quality and range of school options, inter-generational learning opportunities (e.g. between nursing homes and schools), farmers' markets, participatory budgeting and civic engagement, public nature spaces, libraries, and public festivals, among others.

With respect to Alewife specifically, they commented that the lack of accessibility and transportation options made it difficult for people to take advantage of these types of opportunities in Alewife or Cambridge broadly. Participants considered public green spaces such as Danehy Park valuable learning spaces, and called for more such spaces and more learning offerings in public spaces.

As goals for furthering learning in Alewife, participants advocated for schools more often using outdoor spaces for play and learning, more inter-generational learning opportunities, a public gathering space (such as a square) for interaction among people, the construction of a community center, better pedestrian and alternative transportation options to facilitate connections, and a good network through which to publicize events. Participants proposed the following strategies: a circulator bus to help people get around the area, the creation of one or more squares in which the community could gather, and a cultural/ecological "walk" to activate people's awareness of offerings in the area.