

Alewife Scenarios Public Workshop

February 8, 2017

6:00p – 8:30 pm

Tobin School Cafeteria

Meeting format

This workshop is focused on discussing different scenarios for the future development of Alewife. Planning scenarios are ways of envisioning multiple futures. They are not recommendations but rather “thought experiments” to facilitate a discussion on trade-offs. Different inputs—such as density, land use, and the street network—can produce different outcomes. The scenarios will guide decisions about future land use, regulations, and economic development strategies. Each scenario tested a different use mix between commercial, residential, retail, and industrial uses at different densities. Drawings for each scenario were presented on boards for members of the public to study.

Workshop participants also took a visual preference survey. Images of various building types relating to the different land uses were placed on a table and participants were asked to indicate their preference through a red (dislike) or green (like) dot. The results of this survey are compiled by the planning team and will be a valuable resource while refining the scenarios.

The consultant team presented four different development scenarios for the Quadrangle. Thereafter participants were asked to gather in smaller groups around tables dedicated to discuss one of the four scenarios. Below are summaries of the public discussion and smaller group discussions.

Q and A after presentation

- Participants requested additional precedents or renderings to visualize how the 4' plinth would work at street level and options to show plinths of lower heights. They also suggested that the planning team compare the proposed street network to those of other “good” areas of Cambridge and adopt best practices from there.
- Participants asked about the timeframe for development of each scenario – are they likely to be built out by 2030, 2050, or later? They also wanted to know how the scenarios would evolve over time, considering that there may be long-term residents in the Quadrangle in the future. They were concerned about the long-term predictability of these plans and asked if new zoning would be sufficient to dictate a site’s use, or if it would have the flexibility for developers to adjust the desired outcomes through special permits.
- Participants wanted to know how the impacts of each scenario would be assessed, particularly school-going children. They found it hard to weigh in on scenarios without the hard data of how much new traffic, population, etc. is expected. This was seconded by many in attendance.
- They asked that expenses for public infrastructure consider future needs for community uses such as libraries and schools.
- They expressed a desire for the scenarios to be interactive such that they could change the use mix and densities through Lego blocks or other such similar activities.
- Participants brought the following environmental concerns to the discussion:
 - The quadrangle borders a 150-acre urban wild

- There is a border with a major water body that must be kept clean
- The quadrangle has contaminated soil The plan must consider the future of Blair Pond
- Existing underground infrastructure is decaying and needs to be addressed to protect groundwater and future investment
- Need a full environmental assessment / planning review before any plan is adopted.

Small group discussions

Optimized Baseline Scenario

- Participants had a few clarifying questions about this scenario:
 1. Why do existing buildings have very little setbacks?
 - Consultant team response: These were Special Permit buildings. Current scenarios are trying to get back to achieve uniform setbacks across the district.
 2. Why are there only ground-floor retail?
 - There is a market for this type of retail that would be desirable in this region; the team did not want to represent something that is not desirable or not feasible.
- Participants were interested to see what a down-sized scenario would look like and how the planning process can test varying heights and densities as part of the same scenario.
- Flooding remained a concern for this group, too. Participants wanted more information on flooding's impact on infrastructure, transportation, and emergency services.
- They strongly felt that the City has a responsibility to be creative in how they use the budget to fund public amenities. Private commercial development agreements and taxes are potential sources for funds.
- Some participants felt that this scenario is not right for the district and will not be feasible. They felt that the amount of residential use in this scenario was too high for the district because it would bring in too many people and vehicles. This would negatively impact the environment (natural habitats, wildlife, etc.) Any type of development in this area needs to consider its environmental impact. They suggested that the planning team refer back to all the studies that have been done about the impact of development in this area.

Mixed-Use Residential Scenario

- Participants expressed concern over the density in this scenario. They discussed the possibility of including more variety in the use mix and heights of each of the buildings.
- Participants appreciated the ground floor retail corridor. They felt it would be important in serving the needs of the community especially since the other nearby retail centers are not walkable from the Quadrangle.
- To enhance the sense of community, participants felt it was important for the City to encourage housing for large families.
- Some participants expressed concerns about access and usability of the mid-block open space. They advocated for the City to consider creating a shared open space as a community resource in the area.
- Some members raised a question about adding families and residents in an environmentally vulnerable part of the city considering the flooding risk and asked that the planning team think of a more balanced mix of uses.
- Overall participants strongly expressed that the densities in this scenario were too high. They cited projects in the Triangle and noted that the scale and character of these is not desirable by

the community. They stressed the need to create “human-scale” development that was focused on the residents of the community.

Mixed-Use Commercial Scenario

- Participants discussed feasibility of this scenario with respect to the current patterns of private ownership. They wondered if existing businesses would indeed relocate out of Alewife even if new zoning rules were put in place, and they raised questions about how the scenarios account for parcel owners that choose not to sell or redevelop. One member suggested to present an inventory of existing buildings and companies so they may be informed about the existing conditions better.
- Participants appreciated that this scenario creates the most revenue for the City. Some observed that even though it seems too dense, the building heights seem to be appropriate for this part of the City. Some comments expressed that the residential units didn't seem very inviting, and that living in them would feel like living in an office park because of the heavy mix of commercial uses.
- Participants expressed the need to understand what a down-zoned scenario would look like and would like to compare the data generated by this scenario with the industrial scenario.
- Participants stressed the need to create a long-term community. They felt that this could be achieved by providing public amenities like open spaces, promoting homeownership, and creating better connections within the site and to the Triangle, shopping center, and Highlands. They appreciated the first floor retail uses in residential buildings and said this is vital to creating community as well. One participant suggested considering the Planned Unit Development model to have more control over urban design and open space.
- Traffic was a major and recurring concern throughout the workshop. Participants at this table emphasized the importance of safety for all modes of transport. They strongly felt that the City should commit to constructing the ped-bike bridge across the commuter rail tracks.
- Participants noted that as there are 4,000 residential units currently in the area, it already has the ingredients to become a residential neighborhood. Still, they would like the City to create affordable housing for families and homeowners by ensuring the inclusion of larger units.
- Participants raised the issue of flooding in the district and asked whether this is the right place for any new development, especially residential development.

Mixed-use Industrial Scenario

- Participants appreciated several aspects of this scenario – less density than the baseline scenario, potentially low impacts on traffic, access to low barrier-to-entry jobs, building prototypes with a mix of commercial and industrial. They marked that this is the last remaining area for development that could create low barrier-to-entry jobs. A concentration of such jobs may also keep the area affordable overall.
- Others felt that the industrial prototypes were too large. Smaller prototypes that require less parcel aggregation and require smaller box trucks for deliveries rather than large semi-trucks are more appropriate and marketable.
- Participants asked to explore the possibility of better integrated land uses perhaps on smaller blocks along A-streets. Some raised an issue about the location of commercial uses. They suggested it should be closer to the bike paths and not residential uses.
- Participants had concerns about the feasibility of this scenario as Class A commercial uses generate the highest real-estate value. Traffic problems came up as a part of this discussion. Participants were worried about doubling the traffic because of increased density, but thought it would be acceptable if additional traffic is restricted to off-peak hours. Participants wondered if

zoning could be used to regulate the hours of operation of commercial businesses. Such a strategy would need to be applied in order to manage the traffic problem and mitigate the impacts if new development.

- Participants noted that in order to make this scenario viable, keeping the existing tenants in the district is key. Other suggestions to keep the office space affordable was to have 30-day leases in all co-working spaces.
- Participants were concerned about impacts of climate change as well, particularly the urban heat island effect. They expressed a desire for the Quadrangle to be tied into the larger network of open spaces and natural resources throughout the area.
- Connectivity was another issue raised. There are currently no bike-share stations in the area and no infrastructure for safe biking. They asked to see greater connectivity between the Triangle and Quadrangle.
- Participants would also like the nearby Fresh Pond Mall shopping center to be integrated into the scenario planning.