

2017-06-15

**Housing Working Group #2**

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Committee Attendees

Leonardi Aray, Mark Boyes-Watson, Kelley Brown, Steve Cohen, Lauren Curry, Lee Farris, Monique King, Margaret Moran, Cheryl-Ann Pizza-Zeoli, Susan Schlesinger, Ellen Shachter, Robert Winters

Staff / Consultant Present

**City Staff:** Iram Farooq, Melissa Peters, Gary Chan, Chris Cotter, Cassie Arnaud, Cliff Cook

**Utile:** Meera Deean, Nupoor Monani

**HR&A:** Shuprotim Bhaumik, Sara Brown

Committee Members Absent

Kathryn Carlson, Anthony Galluccio, Bob Flack, Esther Hanig, Sean Hope, Jesse Kanson-Benanav, Tom Lorello, Eva Martin Blythe, Deborah Morse, Zuleka Queen Postel

Four members of the public present.

**Meeting overview**

Sara Brown led a facilitated discussion of revised goals, existing City policies, and new strategies and actions.

**Committee Discussion**

**Goals Discussion**

Goal A: Housing diversity

- Members asked for this goal to be expanded to clarify it is serving people at different income levels.
- Another member also asked to clarify the role of government subsidies in meeting this goal and to explore options to expand this through strategies.

Goal B: Increased overall supply

- Members wanted to this goal to be simplified so it would become easy for the public to understand. They recommend introducing the phrase “continue to produce new affordable units...” and end with “...in Cambridge in all neighborhoods.”
- Another member thought this goal was unachievable only through production of new housing, without a mention of preservation.

Goal C: Affordable housing

- One member was concerned about the distribution of diverse communities and suggested adding “... more evenly distributed among neighborhoods” to the goal language.
- Another member commented that this is also an aspirational goal. They encouraged the group to think of zoning as an effective tool in making this actionable.

Goal D: Housing stability

- One member noted that this goal only alludes to housing production and asked if strategies within this would include human services programs that support housing stability. They suggested

combining it with goals E or F to expand the scope. A few other members seconded this thought and reiterated their request to more evidently tie it to social services.

Goal E: Livable and sustainable communities

- One member suggested making the message clearer by rephrasing the goal to “... without increasing the cost burden...” and the working group agreed.
- Another member compared this to the goal presented in the previous session and remarked that the language has not changed. They asked the team to point out how the group’s feedback had been incorporated. They suggested that the goal could be changed to highlight that energy efficient buildings being easier to manage and more affordable in the long term.

Goal F: Neighborhoods of opportunity

- Several members were unclear about the motivation behind including this goal. One remarked that Cambridge is a high-service city overall, but there are disparities within neighborhoods which should be addressed here. They would like the goal to reflect the idea of making opportunities (housing, jobs, amenities, services) in every neighborhood accessible to all.
- This followed a discussion of whether the proposed revisions to goal A would encompass this sentiment. Members proposed to consolidate “Neighborhoods of opportunity” with “Housing diversity.”
- Another member pointed out that schools and healthcare were noticeably missing from the list of services.
- The consultant team tried to identify the intent by asking the group whether the issue is to distribute services more evenly or to provide more affordable housing in neighborhoods with opportunity. The group chimed in to suggest that the focus could be narrowed down on new neighborhoods like North Point, and ensuring that they are being planned with an adequate balance of affordable housing with urban amenities and services.
  - Another member suggested a slightly different direction, which was to focus on encouraging a mix of incomes in new neighborhoods.
- There was a desire among some members to arrive at a specific definition of “opportunity.”
- The discussion ended with a suggestion to focus the goal on creating access for individuals into neighborhoods of opportunity through affordable housing.

**Strategies and actions discussion**

Goal A: Housing diversity

- One member noted that the grouping focuses on only City programs but not policies or tools. They would like to see this be included as well.
- Some additional strategies suggested by the group were:
  - Encouraging home ownership among middle-income households such as providing technical support for alternative ownership models in small buildings, sharing sample legal agreements, and creating resource banks.
  - Supporting right-to-own programs to allow low-income households to transition out of this bracket.
  - Allowing ownership shares in cooperative houses.
  - Using zoning as a tool to provide housing at scale and encouraging accelerated production in the open market.
- A member provided a different perspective on this goal. They noted that city-led conversion of affordable housing creates competition with middle-income jointly owned housing. They would like

to see City-owned parcels used for housing in a balance with other priorities such as providing playgrounds and tot-lots.

Goal B: Increased overall supply

- One member remarked that any housing that remains within the open market will remain unaffordable for low- and middle-income households and commented that housing for these groups must be provided through government support. Their greatest concern was middle-income housing noting that these groups do not have access to government-regulated affordable housing and yet cannot afford market rate homes, especially family housing.
- One member cited the City Council target to create 1,000 affordable units by the end of the decade, at the rate of 200 units a year, and strongly felt that zoning was the most effective way to move towards this target. This idea was supported by many in the group.
  - A member suggested upzoning North Mass Ave from Harvard Square to the City line noting that the existing typology of 6 story apartments with high FARs are very efficient along the corridor. They suggested extending this strategy to areas of Broadway, Main St, and Cambridge St. too.
  - Related to the above, another member complained that the permitting process is fundamentally broken. They noted that the only people who can build at scale are national deep pocket developers. They encouraged the team to think of promoting as-of-right zoning districts to more efficiently increase supply through inclusionary zoning.
- One member brought up the regional supply issue and suggested creating regional working groups to arrive at creative solutions to address this.
- Another member suggested imposing a vacancy tax on unoccupied units to generate resources for the City to invest back in housing.
- Other strategies suggested were:
  - Encouraging universities to provide more student housing.
  - Developing inter-municipal cooperation to encourage production along the edges of the city.

Goal C: Affordable housing

- One member strongly felt that more poor people included in the planning process.
- Some strategies suggested by members included:
  - Increasing the height and density limits in A and B zoning districts.
  - Creating a citywide overlay district for affordable housing.
  - Streamlining bottlenecks in the permitting process
  - Requiring 50% of all new housing to be affordable through the inclusionary zoning policy to disincentivize private developers and enable growth of affordable housing developers.
  - Creating pathways for families and individuals to move from publicly assisted affordable housing to moderate-income housing as there are many families which are at the ceiling of Housing Authority assistance programs but do not have many options in the open market.
  - Continuing the expansion of production for the lowest income segment.
  - Lowering or subsidizing fees and costs associated with developing affordable housing.
  - One member asked if it would be possible to create more flexibility in the limited home equity ownership rules.
    - The City responded that in most instances is evaluated case by case. Several members agreed that these units should not be automatically inheritable and appreciated that the City's current approach.

Goal D: Housing stability

- Strategies related to this goal included:
  - Increasing funding or creating incentives for landlords to accept Section 8 housing vouchers. Alternatively, creating a Cambridge-specific rental voucher program for those displaced in the last two years.
    - This strategy received differing feedback from the committee. One member expressed concerns about the costs associated with City funded rental programs and suggested that the resources would be better utilized for short term assistance.
  - Working with the Cambridge Housing Authority to maintain residents in their homes and think of options for redevelopment.
  - Creating a different prioritization system to determine the benefactors of units produced through inclusionary zoning. One member suggested prioritizing residents that are at the tipping point of the low-income threshold.
    - This comment led to a discussion about the scale of strategies coming from the working group and some members felt such a refinement of an existing city policy was too granular for the discussion. The discussion concluded with a member reinforcing that the group should not lose focus of people-centered ideas while homing in on unit- or housing production-based strategies.

Goal E: Livable and sustainable communities, Goal F: Neighborhoods of opportunity

- These goals were discussed together. Strategies included:
  - Educating residents and tenants of flood risk in vulnerable neighborhoods.
  - Investing in infrastructure improvements in areas where it is insufficient and cannot support energy efficient development.
  - Enabling even access to every neighborhood by every income group.
  - Creating affordable housing zoning overlay to advantage affordable housing developers.
  - Creating ladders of opportunity for residents moving out of SROs.

Key strategies that emerged from the overall discussion included:

- Using zoning to promote higher density housing and particularly affordable housing.
- Adding resources including direct government subsidy for middle-income residents, reducing housing development costs.
- Promoting housing stability and tenant protection.
- Building ladders of opportunity and providing safety nets for low- and moderate-income residents.
- Promoting mixed income housing across different neighborhoods in the city.
- Creating / Leveraging partnerships with universities and developers to increase supply.
- Creating regional partnerships to promote production along the fringes.

**Public comment**

- One member remarked that the real estate market would be different in 20 years than it is today, and that the City should create a civic research institution like the Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics in Boston, or form stable partnerships with MIT's RECenter and JCHS at Harvard.
- Another member commented that the City should also acknowledge residential neighborhoods while discussing rezoning, noting that the demand will not only be met through rezoning the corridors. Separately, responding to the discussion of middle-income housing, they wondered if the

City could reasonably make a commitment to prioritize assistance to these units seeing that the low-income units are in much worse shape and demonstrate a greater need.

- One member commented on the fact that there was no discussion of housing for long term senior residents and strategies for aging in place. They noted that the city's housing stock is very old, and this poses unique challenges for the 55 years and over demographic.
- Another member suggested that the City undertake demonstration or pilot projects to get residential neighborhoods to be friendlier to 6 story housing in residential zones.