

2017-09-13

Envision Cambridge Advisory Committee

Committee Attendees

Alexandra Offiong, Frank Gerratana, Jon Alvarez, Josh Gerber, Robert Winters, Ruth Allen, Ruth Ryals, Tom Sieniewicz, Tom Stohlman, Zuleka Queen-Postell

Staff / Consultant Present

Staff: Stuart Dash, Melissa Peters, Chris Cotter, Lisa Hemmerle, Susanne Rasmussen, Stephanie Groll, Seth Federspiel, Sue Walsh

Utile: Tim Love, Nupoor Monani, John McCartin, Cory Berg

Committee Members Absent

Bethany Stevens, Bill Kane, Ebi Poweigha, Joseph Maguire, Marlinia Antoine, Matthew Wallace, Risa Mednick, Zeyneb Magavi

Approximately fifteen members of the public present.

Meeting overview

John McCartin presented an overview of the Working Group process, and proceeded to share the working groups' recommendations in the topic-areas of Housing, Economy, Mobility, and Climate and Environment. Respective City staff presented the strategies and actions ranked in order of priority by the working groups, and shared their own insights from the process. This was followed by a discussion of potential synergies and conflicts among the recommendations of different groups facilitated by Tim Love. The presentation is available [here](#).

Committee Discussion

Comments on working group recommendations

- One member was concerned that strategies to support small businesses, like the provision of affordable commercial space and mitigating price pressures to support small business and community purposes, were not ranked higher.
- One member observed that density bonus incentives were being proposed as a tool to achieve many different objectives like incentivizing net-zero emissions buildings, affordable housing, and retention of light industrial uses. They noted that it would be challenging for the City to manage the height resulting from an aggregation of these bonuses relative to urban form goals.
- One member identified the mobility strategies as their top priority. They said strategies like reducing automobile dependency and increasing access to transit could open up many parts of the city to receive new development and support increased density, thereby achieving other parallel goals.
- Another member pointed out that congestion on the parkways was one of the concerns that led the City to undertake the citywide planning process, and were surprised not to see it rise to the top in the Mobility Working Group. They observed that the recommendations of this group were heavily skewed towards bicyclists and pedestrians.
- One member commended the City and consultant team on designing an engagement process that was well thought out, with a clear correlation between the City's existing efforts, new actions and overall goals. They also raised a concern about overtly relying on public process to formulate the plan, and worried that the group lacks the expertise needed to carry the recommendations through to City policy.

- One member raised concerns about the Mobility goals. They felt that the views of people who drive were not adequately represented in the material presented, for example the Vision Zero goal and strategies seemed to imply that there should be no cars on the street, and that public transit wasn't thoroughly discussed. They were disappointed that the survey didn't provide an option to disagree with any of the strategies or actions. They would like the working groups to be truly representative across all interests.
- Another member noted that there is a big gap in the mobility strategies and actions. Cambridge needs consistency in design of pedestrian controls, crossings, and bike lanes so that we create a continuous high-quality network for those using all modes.
- Another member called attention to the Charles River. They would like the plan to focus on enhancing the experience of Cambridge being a city on the Charles through programing, safe access, and improved quality of paths along the river.

Synergies and conflicts

- One member made a few observations about Porter Square – they noted that this area has a lot of one-story retail, surface parking, and extremely wide streets, all of which detract from the walkability and form of that neighborhood. They asked what the City would need to do to build higher and utilize some of that area for open spaces to make it attractive for families.
 - The consultant team responded that it would be easy to use a combination of land use regulations to incent this type of development. They pointed to the proposal for Fresh Pond Mall as an example in the Alewife district plan.
- One member questioned the cumulative effects of all these strategies. An overarching goal of this planning process was to simplify the regulatory process for new development and businesses, and they were concerned about implementing these without creating more complex systems. They also called on the City to carefully consider which actions should be mandated and which should be offered as incentives.
 - Another member seconded this perspective, saying affordable housing and net-zero emissions should be required from all new development.
- One member suggested decking over the tracks at Porter Square and allowing pedestrian movement across them. They separately noted that automobiles provide a source of freedom for many people and should not be marginalized in the mobility strategies.
 - The consultant team chimed in and said the strategies encouraging different modes provide options and make it easier for people to make their own choices, so that the right-of-way is freed up for people that choose or need to drive.
- One member strongly felt that the housing and economy actions proposed were inadequate to move the needle on affordability. Separately, they see Envision Cambridge as an avenue to rethink the way residents and businesses interface with the City, and would like to make these interactions simpler and more efficient.
- Another member pointed out a conflict between housing production and net zero goals. They commented that the current tendency is to approve market-rate units even if the benefit is a very small number of affordable ones. They also commented that nothing is said about middle class housing, pointing out that these are the most consistent long-term residents of the city. They encouraged the planning team to think of ways to keep the city family oriented, and not to “zone the charm out of Cambridge.” They commended the City of Somerville for instituting the right policies to keep the charm.
 - Consultant team and City staff explained that the middle-class housing falls within the affordable housing umbrella and should be addressed using similar subsidy tools. Because the demand in Cambridge is so strong, the City can make more demands from developers and investor.

- City staff from the Housing Division said they have tested programs and service for middle-income households at 50%-80% of the Area Median income (AMI.) They found that the demand for assisting these groups is lower than that for low- and moderate-income households. They elaborated that there are ongoing discussions about this in the region to determine whether middle-income housing should be regulated like City-assisted affordable housing or provided as “naturally-occurring” affordable housing by increasing overall supply to bend the cost curve.
- City staff from the Environment and Transportation Division called attention to two challenging issues. The first, determining future mobility patterns that will enable people to move across the region and open newer areas to add housing density. They stated that supporting new and improved bus routes is the best way to achieve this given the MBTA’s funding and capacity issues. They recognized new technology as the second challenging issue. Increased usage of app based ride-share services the growing presence of delivery vehicles, and autonomous vehicles cannot be regulated singularly through City control. They said the City is engaged in planning for a future with parallel systems but it is very complex given uncertainties of the future.
- City staff from the Economic Development Division reiterated the City’s existing and continued focus on small businesses. They pointed to existing resources such as workshops, grants, classes, and training available to support small businesses. They also pointed out that the City can invest in growing small businesses because of the tax revenue generated from core sectors.
 - The consultant team seconded this point, adding that small businesses are vital to the quality of life, urban form, public realm of Cambridge.

Public comment

- A member of the Mobility working group pointed out that emissions should be considered a regional issue. Removing carbon emissions from Cambridge is not enough if it moves somewhere else.
- Another member supported the idea that middle income housing should be required and treated as a form of affordable housing in the short term, to get a high buildout rate while there is still some capacity in the city to accommodate this. They would like the universities to make a commitment to increase their supply of graduate student housing, noting that if 7000 students were removed from the market, it would add a huge number of units to the citywide stock. This member supported incentives for 100 percent affordable housing developments, and said it is necessary to bring the supply up to speed.
- A member of the Economy working group saw value in the process even if it may not have been perfect. They reminded the committee of an additional focus of the working group which was to identify what makes businesses works in Cambridge and point to the right balance of different types of businesses in the community.
- One member asked the Environment and Transportation staff if the City currently offers any incentives for rehabilitation of existing owner-occupied homes to align with net-zero and resiliency policies.
 - City staff mentioned that these initiatives are developed in detail by the Climate Change Preparedness and Resilience plan based on future vulnerabilities. It will outline a range of strategies for existing homes to address flooding and increased heat, including rehabilitation.
- One member of the Climate and Environment working group seconded the idea of focusing on the river as a resource. They also wanted the team to focus on housing for artists and other strategies to promote the arts.
- One member strongly opposed the addition of new jobs to areas like Kendall Square, stating that this conflicted with the affordable housing goals.

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- The consultant team closed by saying it is important to determine what the City has in their toolbox and what needs regional advocacy or collaboration. Going forward the plan should be clear about what the City can do, limited by abilities and policy jurisdiction.