2017-11-27

**Envision Cambridge Advisory Committee #12**

**Committee Members Present**

Tom Sieniewicz, Ruth Allen, Robert Winters, Tom Stohlman, Zeyneb Magavi, Josh Geber, Frank Gerratana, Risa Mednick, Jon Alvarez, Ebi Poweigha

**City Staff**

Stuart Dash, Melissa Peters, Gary Chan, Chris Cotter, Jeff Roberts, Erik Thorkildsen

4 members of the public present

**Summary**

The consultant team presented revised goals and new indicators, directional targets, and actions for the Community Interaction and Urban Form focus areas.

**Community Interaction**

City staff and consultants noted that the development of draft goals and actions was a joint effort by the consultant team, City staff (including the Department of Human Service Programs, the Public Health Department, and the Cambridge Arts Council), and the Advisory Committee at their August meetings. The process was iterative, the consultants and City drafted the first set of goals, which were reviewed by the committee, and then edited based on that feedback.

One committee member noted the first three indicators (diversity, economic mobility, and diversity of city elected officials, committees, commissions, etc.) were important, but that it may be difficult to reach the directional targets. For instance, parity in economic mobility may be a moonshot goal. Also, the city is becoming less diverse as it is. Is there something more concrete that City can shoot for and hope to achieve? Another committee member suggested it could be more relevant to target interaction, rather than just diversity.

One member stated life expectancy is a challenging indicator, since the City may not be able to affect it in this time frame. Perhaps a shift in life expectancy? They also suggested tracking per capita spending on learning, libraries, etc., rather than overall spending. Consultants noted overall, the indicators are moving toward high-level indicators that do not track specific programs or funds, but the actual progress.

That committee member also stated that the impact on future generations should be considered in every City policy. Lastly, they noted the last indicator (tracking cultural activity) would miss grassroots meetings. They suggested tracking the booking of meeting spaces, and perhaps as a requirement of booking those spaces, the group would have to give their number of members. The City could then use that administrative data to track engagement in community life.

One member asked what social cohesion is. Consultants stated it is the idea that the city does not just include diverse people in discrete communities, but that these people form bonds across demographic lines, becoming one big community. The member suggested renaming to social adhesion. Cohesion is stickiness behind like-minded things; adhesion is stickiness between unlike-minded things.

One committee member was happy to see more emphasis on urban planning and design, compared to the list of existing actions presented in August.

Some members felt some goals were too “preachy," implying the City would look like they are forcing people to live healthy, learning-filled lifestyles.

* They noted that grassroots activities, separate from city efforts, contribute to social cohesion, citing Central Flea, and privately organized Little Leagues.
* They suggested the City should perhaps be in the business of facilitating rather than leading.
* One committee member agreed there should be tracking of the size of community groups (such as booking of picnic tables/fields), citing Robert Putnam’s “Bowling Alone” metrics. Another member noted the City maybe should not be requiring the booking of picnic tables at all, since this imposes an inequitable cost—that this is an example where the City could step back.
* One committee member felt the language is not preachy, that it already focuses on facilitation, rather than prescription, of choices.
* Another liked the “preachy” language, stating it was aspirational.

One member stated there should be a Youth Committee, and the City should do more to promote youth activity, that no one would be turned away from any program.

One member suggested more explicit support of existing institutions, including the faith community.

There was a discussion regarding neighborhood associations. Several members felt they were not representative of the actual neighborhoods, as they relied on people able to make large time commitments One member suggested tracking the demographics of neighborhood associations to ensure they are representative (and duly weighting their input in public decision making). One member noted the most successful groups provide services, and the associations could be reworked to encourage that service provision. One member noted these groups often form in a reactionary way, when people feel they are not represented, but that service might be a more positive and sustainable way to organize.

One member noted some existing actions will need expanding.

One member noted that designing for social and racial equity—designing for those most in need—is most effective at ensuring diversity and social cohesion. That these goals are linked.

**Urban Form**

Some members were eager to address the design and regulation of privately owned public spaces (POPS). City staff explained how the design and rules around POPS were generally negotiated with the developers and/or owners.

* Some committee members suggested the City mandate terms of access if a space is designed for public use and is the condition of development.
* The example of the POPS at the Novartis development was given as a troubling example, given what committee members noted as “defensive measures” and restrictive policies. One committee member noted these measures were a response to the civil unrest of the time.
* City staff noted there were many entities that controlled the design and development of such spaces and were meant to enforce the decided upon rules.
* Other members suggested prescriptive design guidelines might generate better spaces.
* Other members suggested that minimally there should be a centralized and easily accessible database of the spaces, the owners, and the entities meant to enforce relevant rules.
* Others suggested the spaces should simply be deeded to the City or the City should proactively take ownership of these spaces.
* Consultants noted that most of the considerations came down to ongoing operations and maintenance cost—that the cost of keeping the space open all the time was weighed against the cost of providing a high-quality space, and that the city has tried to strike a compromise between those.

One member agreed that design review is laborious, but disagreed with the suggestion that there should be a separate design review body. They stated that Cambridge’s process, while not perfect, is transparent and open to the public. They believed this transparency should be preserved.

One member did not want to grant more power to neighborhood associations, since these groups are not representative bodies.

One member did not agree with some of the specific recommendations about parking, and felt that generally, the recommendations should consider the impact of those recommendations on different user groups, such as middle-class families. These points included:

* Consideration of parking requirements should factor in accessibility, as well as how welcoming the city is to visitors
* Parking requirements at all locations must stay.
* There should not be a prohibition of parking in front of buildings on the corridors. Indeed, parking should be required for all businesses on the corridors.

Separately, that member noted that there are valuable businesses that add activity and may require storefronts over 70 linear feet, such as City Sports. Several members suggested that rule may be too specific.

Consultants noted the rules did not prohibit on-street parking, and that the municipal lot system may be the most viable way to do parking for the corridors generally.

One committee member noted there may be a better role for neighborhood advisory committees by redefining them. Though they began as a requirement of zoning, they could have an advisory role beyond zoning issues, the member said. They noted the Central Square Advisory Committee has started to take on a wider role, acting as facilitator for neighborhood groups to weigh in on pressing issues. This role could avoid the plethora of side deals developers feel compelled to make among the many stakeholder groups.

One member agreed with the idea of requiring developers to meet with the City before going to the public. That member also emphasized the City should go beyond increasing diversity on review committees. They said it would be worthwhile to find more ways to engage with people who do not have time or experience other barriers to entry. Partly, this would mean expanding development notification beyond abutters and those in the immediate vicinity.

One member suggested that strengthening existing patterns may not be a universal goal. What if the patterns are bad? It should be to strengthen the good patterns, transform the bad patterns, and invent new patterns where necessary. They also suggested an indicator that tracks how much of the underlying zoning is being used, in order to test how effective the zoning is. They also stated there should be more innovating thinking in the actions, that there was nothing in the actions about rethinking zoning. Cambridge should lean on and set best practices. They also agreed there should be more review of developments before the process has progressed too far.

One member suggested pointing to more precedents to establish and communicate good and bad urban form, where design review is working well or poorly. They suggested the Planning Board’s charge should be read before every meeting as a reminder. They also suggested there must be more thinking about connecting neighborhoods to the waterfront.

One committee member expressed that they would prefer to get rid of parking, citing a long history of unused parking in residential developments. They stated some parking should be maintained on the corridors.

That member also suggested going lower with the required retail space size, stating that 800-1500 sf would also work.

One member asked the team to think more about the future of land use and urban form considering transportation changes, such as autonomous vehicles. The consultant team suggested this innovation will likely result in a fight over curb space, recalling the pre-automotive era.

**Public comment**

One member of the public stated that another design committee may increase obstacles to good development, rather than decreasing them. Lastly, they noted that the City just hired another urban designer, adding to staff capacity.