

2017-11-28

Environment Working Group #4
Meeting Notes

Attendance

Committee: Maggie Booz, Maxwell Cohen, Henrietta Davis, Sophia Emperador, Cynthia Hibbard, Zeyneb Magavi, Mike Nakagawa, Julie Newman, Steven Nutter, Abigail Regitsky, Julianne Sammut, Claire Santoro, Juliet Stone, Henry Vandermark, Jules Williams

City: Susanne Rasmussen, Melissa Peters, Wendell Joseph, Bronwyn Cooke, Seth Federspiel

Consultants: Chris Rhie (BuroHappold), John McCartin (Utile)

Summary

Wendell Joseph reintroduced the working group process. Chris Rhie explained the priority categorization process for actions, then facilitated a discussion on the overall categories and the categorization of specific actions. Melissa Peters then described next steps and adjourned the meeting.

Prioritization Categories

There was a discussion on difficulty ratings and the effort to categorize generally:

- City staff and consultants noted difficulty ratings were based on political and technological feasibility, as well as the anticipated burden on City staff and fiscal resources.
- One committee member said the “Major Projects” definition sounds like they are a lower priority and asked why projects with major impacts would be a low priority. Consultants said the thought was to focus on high impact but information on implementation ease is important to consider given limited fiscal and staff resources.
- Another committee member said political feasibility should not be a criterion for the committee or even necessarily the plan itself, that the committee should make recommendations on their merits, and let elected officials make the determination about political feasibility during implementation.
- The committee asked if there would be a schedule for reassessing priorities. Staff noted the schedule was not set, but a typical reassessment would occur every 3-5 years.

Actions Discussion

No Brainers

- The committee asked if commercial waste development reporting would require City approval, and who would manage that. City staff said the details were still being assessed, and it may require an ordinance. Technically there are already recycling and organic waste mandates, but private developers don’t always plan for the necessary infrastructure.
- Staff clarified for the committee that the proposal on EV is not to require EV-*ready* infrastructure, but EV infrastructure itself. They said there is demand, and the presence of the infrastructure would likely enable more demand to be realized. They also noted, from a legal perspective, it is oddly more feasible to require EV infrastructure itself, rather than try to preempt the building code. Staff also clarified that the present proposal doesn’t address the cost of charging.
- One committee member noted the adaptive planning requirements might leave too much to developers if they are required to do flood analysis (or similar tasks) themselves. Staff clarified these would be prescriptive requirements. The committee member noted this same concern could be shared across other actions, such as the commercial waste planning requirements.

Major Projects

There was a discussion about the speed of charging at EV charging stations at metered parking spots and the relative usefulness of those stations.

- Some committee members felt it would not work to have long-charging EV infrastructure at on-street spots, which are meant for circulation. Others noted not every stop needs to enable a full charge, but could help to “top up.”
- City staff noted the fastest-charging infrastructure requires a lot of space, so it would not be appropriate at on-street metered parking spots, but likely elsewhere. The distribution of these infrastructures will need its own specific plan.
- Potential edit: charging stations should be “publicly available,” not just metered spaces
- Staff noted there is also potential for charging infrastructures where buses often lay over, enabling more electric buses.
- One member suggested pursuing more public-private partnerships, like the current Porter Square partnership.

There was a discussion about Parking Benefit Districts (PBDs):

- City staff clarified PBDs collect revenue from parking meters and set it aside for public realm or sustainable transportation improvements in that district. They noted while they do not seem difficult to set up, Cambridge has never had a policy of putting geographic bounds on any of its funds, making it a unique political challenge here.
- Consultants clarified this is high impact, as the improvements may encourage mode shift, by making it safer (or perceived as safer). Consultants clarified perceptions of safety are a surprisingly large driver of pedestrian and bicycle usage.
- One committee member noted there should be adequate accounting for customer vs. employee parking, and these should be weighted differently.
- Another member stated PBDs inadvertently penalize areas that have little parking, and incentivize districts with parking to lobby for more, in order to get more funds. A different member stated it is hard to think Cambridge would adopt a “Harvard”-like model of funds distributions, where different organizations within the same entity compete for funding.
- Many committee members felt this was an issue for the Mobility Working Group. Others felt this Working Group should maintain that all policies affect the environment, and that this is about use of a private way, and therefore must be thought about in this working group.
- Consultants noted the divergence of opinions and said it’s key to ask which problem each action wants to solve, and take stock of all potential solutions.

There was a discussion about adaptive retrofits for existing buildings and adaptation measures generally:

- One committee member stated there is a missing piece in adapting buildings for climate change. The actions account for new and existing buildings, but should also focus on existing buildings that are being modified or rehabbed. Permits should be conditional on adaptive measures.
- One alternative would be to provide information on adaptive measures, rather than just require with no support.
- Another committee member brought up equity considerations around commercial vs. residential property.
- Others noted that these requirements could be location-dependent. Staff noted some would be location-dependent (relative to flooding) and others (such as those around heat island) would be universal. Committee noted it should be more explicit about other hazards or multi-hazard resilience.
- Another member noted adaptive measures should not just be required, but also allowed. This includes amending the zoning code to remove disincentives on adaptive measures.

There was a discussion about eco-roof requirements:

- There was some confusion about how eco-roof is defined. Was it green roofs only, or did it include solar and white roofs as well? City staff clarified there is already a white-roof requirement for new

construction. Some suggested the action should be rewritten as “cool roof” or “environmentally conscious/responsive roof.”

- There were questions about why the action is high difficulty. Staff clarified it was the phrase “require,” while acknowledging that not all building types are good for green roofs.

There was discussion about road pricing programs:

- There were questions about how to prevent traffic from moving to neighborhood streets. Would gantries be required everywhere? Some suggested limiting this just to Kendall Square.
- Others expressed equity concerns that this amounted to a regressive tax.
- Others thought that like PBDs, this may be better left to the Mobility Working Group
- There was disagreement about whether the plan should simply recommend considering this in the future.
- Some suggested moving efforts to simply reducing roadways where vehicles can drive. Others noted there is a history of planning for a car-free Harvard Square. Non-resident restrictions and retractable bollards were suggested as precedents from Europe.
 - One member stated that the city still needs to own that free parking is a subsidy that incentivizes vehicle ownership.
- Proposed revision: instead of “road pricing,” say “innovative strategies”
- One member wanted to re-emphasize the usefulness of existing strategies at making progress.

There was a discussion about property tax abatements for property owners with EV stations.

- Some worried this was inequitable, and that it “gave away the store” for very little. Some suggested a needs-based system.
- Others said this may be too specific, and should include abatements for other measures or surtaxes for private actions with negative consequences.

Some members suggested further exploration of a stormwater utility, where properties pay for square foot of impervious surface and funds are dedicated to stormwater system upgrades.

There were lingering questions on a pay-as-you-throw system, including equity and enforcement questions, including at multi-unit buildings with garbage chutes.

There was a discussion about including mature trees, in relation to the action on native plantings:

- Staff noted the urban forest master plan in the Enablers category.
- One committee member noted that the city is in a tree canopy crisis due to both natural causes, recent development, and other issues like solar power and gas leaks. This issue is being discussed by the City Council Right now. The committee member stated the City should at least be able to account for every tree, even those that aren’t subject to regulation right now (such as at small residential properties).
- There was debate about a proposal to require mature tree plantings at new development. Some believed this would ensure more tree canopy, others stated the science may point in the opposite direction (that new trees catch up and are healthier in the long run).
- City staff clarified the native tree ordinance is not a major project, since there is no agreement on what “native means.” Committee members suggested separating tree requirements out from native plantings.

Fill Ins

One committee member stated the City should do an analysis of the impact of installing recycling bins where all trash bins are.

Low impact high difficulty actions

There was a discussion about institutional GHG commitments:

- Some thought this could be reworded from “commit” to “report.” Staff clarified these figures are already reported and provided to the public as a summary and open data.

- Committee members said this should be expanded to include transportation and waste. Staff noted it may be difficult to get that data, as most companies report it without regard to geography.
- Committee members suggested grading buildings on emissions performance like restaurants are graded. Staff noted there is the Energy STAR score for some building types, but other scores are currently in development.
- Committee members asked how to develop an action that is more carrot than stick.
- Another member suggested cataloging existing corporate and institutional GHG commitments.

There was a discussion about life-cycle assessments

- The committee asked about this categorization. Staff noted that for municipal purchasing, the assessments would be difficult to set up, the impact would be low in the city's emissions overall, and the impact on overall municipal emissions is unknown. The City also stated that it is unknown the role private purchasing has in emissions.
- Members stated that private and municipal assessments should be split into two actions. A different member stated the City should focus on the impact of waste hauling, if it needed to prioritize.

There was some discussion about a pesticide ban:

- Staff clarified that this was high difficulty, due to the ability to enforce such a ban, and its potential political pitfalls.
- Members asked if it is possible to ban pesticide sales within city limits, while acknowledging that this would be a symbolic gesture. They suggested this may be better left to private groups, such as Mothers Out Front, though it would be a good action for the city to take, regardless.

City staff clarified the role of enablers as having no direct impact, but needing to happen in order for recommendations to proceed.

One committee member asked the reason that some actions fell off the list, such as the Environmental Justice Committee. Staff and consultants stated that in the EJ Committee's case, the team feared such a committee would not be able to influence the work of other committees, and instead had proposed EJ be incorporated into all committees.

Indicators

Staff clarified hospitalization would cover all those for Cambridge residents, not just within hospitals in Cambridge.

There was a discussion about vulnerable populations

- Staff noted this should be aligned with CCPR. Committee members felt it should be less vague, defining a specific vulnerability.
- Some suggested measuring those in un-adapted buildings. Staff felt this would likely be unfeasible to measure. Members suggested insurance claims or other administrative data, though issues were noted with those datasets.
- Some members suggested adding more about social resilience. Others asked how these indicators could address the nuance in vulnerability.
- Some felt indicators should track action-level progress, not goal-level progress. Goal-level progress indicators are helpful to show overallly cumulative impact of the plan, and action-level indicators will continued to be reported at the staff level during implementation.
- Some felt it would be impossible to pick one indicator on the subject of resilience.

There was a discussion about climate change being taught in Cambridge schools:

- One committee member stated changing the curriculum is very difficult, and as is, the plan might see no change in this indicator. They suggested looking more at after school programs. Another committee member disagreed, and stated there could be more teaching and training, but it would take convincing the school system.

- Some suggested tracking other engagement, such as membership in nonprofits and partnerships.
- One member noted this indicator excludes all those who don't have children, a notable demographic in Cambridge.
- One member suggested looking at proxies for increased engagement, such as recycling or adaptive infrastructure permits.
- One member emphasized the role art could play.

There was a discussion about measuring the population within walking distance of a park:

- One member suggested being more specific, such as a quarter-mile walk.
- Some felt they didn't want the City to add small, low-amenity parks in order to change the indicator. They would rather have a large park farther away. Others disagreed, stating they would rather have a pocket park than no park.
- One member suggested measuring park space per capita, to account for growth and crowding
- Some felt this indicator would not change fast enough to be useful.
- Consultants clarified that the Urban Form focus area has a similar indicator.

There were a number of final comments from the committee on indicators:

- One member reintroduced the need to measure air quality, such as through PM2.5. They did not want to lose good and important indicators just because they are difficult to implement.
- One member suggested more indicators to track the "greening" workforce, at least within the City.
- One member asked if the City tracks solar or renewables. The City clarified it tracks solar, but not overall renewable energy purchases.
- One member felt that tracking waste-to-energy would be counterproductive. They suggested tracing the diversion rate of tons of refuse.

There were no members of the public in attendance.