

Alewife Working Group Meeting #15

May 10, 2018

Notes

Attendance

Committee Members: Doug Brown, James Butler, Mark DiOrio, Margaret Drury, Jennifer Gilbert, Eric Grunebaum, Catherine Preston Connolly, Sam Stern
City Councilors: Vice Mayor Jan Deveraux, Denis Carlone
City Staff: Melissa Peters, Jeff Roberts
Consultants (Utile): Tim Love, John McCartin

10 Members of the public

Summary

Melissa Peters introduced the meeting and reintroduced the vision. Jeff Roberts presented the proposed zoning recommendations. The committee discussed the proposed zoning changes.

Discussion

There was a short discussion of “transfer of development rights” (TDR).

- One member asked if it applied only to single owners transferring between lots or could be transferred between owners.
- Staff said it’s happened usually as one owner or two owners who are developing in a partnership. They said it hasn’t been as effective as the City hoped, perhaps because the market found the rights hard to appraise.
- Consultant staff said it worked better in places where the base zoning was used more in practice, such as NYC. In Greater Boston, flexibility is already part of the development and approvals culture, so it’s much harder to put a price on development density.

There was a brief discussion of the public realm development standards and how they work together with flood mitigation standards.

There was a discussion about siting of structured parking. One person asked if the parking was tucked behind buildings and back against an alley. Staff said that was the idea, but each project would go through design review and it would be worked out on a case-by-case basis.

There was an exchange about mixed-use density and its effect on potential land uses.

- Staff clarified that under current zoning, residential uses are often allowed higher FARs than non-residential uses, and mixed-use buildings take the average of the two allowed densities (weighted by the amount of each use). Staff proposed revising this to allow developers to build up to the higher FAR while not exceeding the FAR of each use.
- One member said that the way the zoning is being administered allows developers to build up to the FAR max for both residential and commercial, for instance at 603 Concord. Staff said they would look into it, but they did not think that was the case.
- One member asked if there’s a distinction between commercial and active use commercial. Staff said the distinction could be made through special permit. One member said active ground floor uses should be required.
- One members said they felt the proposal as discussed would incentivize commercial (office/lab) uses over housing, though they weren’t sure. They thought if residential and commercial are put on a level playing field, the high rents of commercial uses will win out.
- Another member said the committee should remember that the commercial adds the traffic. This member was supportive of ground floor retail, but not adding lots of other commercial.
- City staff said the group had agreed on the goal of retaining low-barrier-to-entry jobs, making commercial uses critical in the light industrial district. Consultant staff noted there

are some precedents in New Haven and San Francisco. In the San Francisco case, enforcing uses so that they actually provided low-barrier-to-entry jobs has been a challenge.

- Consultant staff noted that commercial did bring tax revenue benefits, which played a role in the land use planning process. They suggested that the location of commercial uses could be more narrowly defined. City staff and consultants clarified the plan concentrates retail on certain streets to create a more urban environment.
- One member suggested adding a maximum commercial FAR within the mixed-use FAR. For instance, they said, if the total maximum FAR is 2, the maximum commercial FAR within that mixed use building would be 1.
- One member asked if active uses would be *allowed* throughout but incentivized on Wilson Road, or if it's only allowed on Wilson Road. Staff responded yes.
- One member asked if Iggy's retail is an example of this. Staff said yes.
- One member said that a lot of this plan is focused on getting the light industrial to work, and everything else flowed from that. But there are a lot of flexibility in "manufacturing."
- Staff clarified the mechanism for manufacturing. The manufacturing is exempt from FAR, and the commercial rents cross-subsidize the lower rents for manufacturing.
- One member asked if the subsidy for industrial was from just commercial above or from other parts of Alewife. Consultants clarified it's from the office on the same project.

There was an exchange about compensatory water storage in the plan.

- A member of the public asked how the necessary storage is achieved in the plan. Staff explained there are a set of requirements.
- The member of the public asked where this water is going. Staff explained it goes into large underground tanks.
- The member of the public then said they were double counting, that it couldn't infiltrate. Committee member said nothing infiltrates, all water ends up in stormwater system due to the area's high water table. Staff said they have to retain it on site and release it slowly into the stormwater system.

There was a discussion about the use of special permits vs. as-of-right zoning with conditions.

- One member thought as-of-right would deliver a more predictable result.
- They asked if anything was getting built under special permit. Staff said everything that has been developed recently is under special permit, but it isn't getting built to 105 feet in height, since it was more profitable to max out wood frame construction, rather than use steel.
- Staff said they felt the special permit process was better ensuring there would be positive public realm outcomes. It's about having clear development standards, and then using the special permit process as leverage, particularly with the raised public plinth, since you can't force a public right-of-way as-of-right.
- Staff clarified for the mixed-use residential district, the base would still allow commercial uses to conform, but the special permit zoning would incentivize residential through additional FAR.

One member asked about the current heights in the Fresh Pond Mall district and how the proposed zoning alters the as-built condition of the offices there. Staff clarified this represents a height increase over the as-built condition.

There was a discussion about Special District 3 (the W.R. Grace site), and whether more density would be necessary to incentivize redevelopment.

- One member said any contribution for cleaning up Jerry's Pond would need to be substantive.
- A City Councilor said it is likely that redevelopment will not happen if there is not an increase in density.

- Staff said the City is looking into an EPA grant with the property owner. One member stressed this must happen, since there has been very little assessment, and one cannot calibrate an addition to FAR without knowing what the actual cost would be.

In response to the plans for the Fresh Pond Parkway District, a City Councilor said there is already a good connection between Danehy Park and Tobin. One committee member said the key section is actually from Fresh Pond to Tobin.

Before Staff opened the floor to the public, committee members were given a chance to ask closing questions or give comments:

- One member stressed getting the manufacturing zoning right. They understood the overall need to balance commercial and residential, but also didn't want to unnecessarily encourage commercial. They also asked about the requirement to break a long façade every 200 feet, and said it might need to be looked at again. Consultant staff clarified this was partly a placeholder from scenario testing, and could use another look.
- One member asked how height is measured, whether it's from plinth or from street. They said the height should carry from plinth. Consultant agreed, but noted that buildings would still have to conform to the building code. Under the building code, wood-frame development cannot exceed 70 feet in height, and height is measured from the street without exception. Member said people should be penalized for resiliency. Consultants and staff agreed, and said the zoning code should allow height to be measured from the plinth, and subsequently the City could push to amend the building code.
- One member objected to requiring a small public space every 200 feet of façade length for long buildings. They thought this would only lead to semi-private places, and that public space requirement should be carefully calibrated so that public spaces are truly public and usable, especially in the Fresh Pond Parkway subdistrict.
- One member said on a recent trip to New Orleans, they saw a non-uniform response to flood mitigation, and were very happy to see the uniform plinth height in this proposal. They also supported the build-to line.
- One member said there ought to be more open space.
- One developer said they are concerned resiliency measures will act as a penalty to development rights. They urged the City to work with the state to modify building code to acknowledge resilience.
- One member noted there had been discussion about incentives and disincentives, and said perhaps the special permit approach could be augmented. They asked if there could be some other mechanism that could be written into the code to ensure the outcomes we want. Development fees were one suggestion.
- One member said Smith Place up to Wilson should also be prioritized for active use to create a continuous path. They also wanted retail allowed (though not incentivized) in all the industrial area. They asked about the retail in Fresh Mall, and whether it should be required, so that retail doesn't disappear.
- One member asked about the green area in the Quadrangle, and if there was an implementation plan. Staff said part of this is already happening through development review (noting the piece planned to be conveyed as part of the Wheeler St development), that some of the park can be constructed that way. Consultants noted the park was drawn there to minimize the number of transactions that would need to be made while still being a central connection for the subdistrict.
- One member asked if it made sense to only create the streets through incentives and suggested it be more efficient to mandate where a street would be. Staff said the incentive method had been working wherever there was redevelopment. The committee member said this was not sufficient. Another member concurred, noting that the streets were proposed in the 1970s. They said the only street constructed since the 2006 plan is a short dead-end street.

- One member brought up the discrepancy between the open space on several diagrams and asked if the plan now called for less open space. The City clarified this just a matter of presentation, and that the open space proposal hadn't been modified.
- One member said the big difference between this plan and previous plans needs to be a land acquisition strategy. They said there have been all zoning strategies, and none have resulted in a neighborhood.
- One member said it makes sense to break up Alewife for zoning purposes, but the plan will fail if Alewife doesn't overcome the disconnections. City staff said there was a connectivity plan that has not changed since the last discussion.

City staff said they're working now on pulling together the full implementation plan. They noted two outstanding pieces: CCPR recommendations that need to get incorporated into Envision; and urban design guidelines for this area. They noted that a public meeting on the Alewife district plan would take place the following Wednesday, May 15.

Public Comment

- One member of the public asked if four-foot plinth is only in flood plain. Staff said it's required on all east-west streets in the Quad.
- One member of the public said they hope design guidelines will address façade texture and movement, and they said a 200' façade length maximum will result in 200' facades.
- One member of the public said they hope the FARs have been tested against the Alewife scenario as presented.
- One City Councillor delivered a message from Patty Nolan, School Committee member: the plan needs to have school, library, or park. They said these amenities need to be drawn, or they won't be built.
- One member of the public said there should not be walls built around Fresh Pond, which is a natural area. They noted the walls' effects migratory birds, rabbits, geese. They said it was not clear if anyone has studied how animals will work through the proposed changes.
- One member of the public asked if light industrial generates a lot of emissions, and whether this plan can achieve the Net Zero standards. They asked if there are any additional incentives for Net Zero construction. They also wanted the City to look into micro-grid, which might be useful there. They also said trucking should be expected, and this generates pollutants and particulates.
- One member asked about the rationale for siting retail on Wilson Road. Consultant staff said part of the reasoning involved the pedestrian bridge, as siting retail on Wilson would be accessible to people both in the Quadrangle and those coming from the Triangle or the MBTA station via the bridge.
- One member of the public said they would love to see 100% buildout projections.