

Envision Cambridge Advisory Committee Meeting #13

May 23, 2018

Notes

Attendance

Advisory Committee: Ruth Allen, Jon Alvarez, Josh Gerber, Zeyneb Magavi, Alexandra Offiong, Zuleka Queen-Postell, Ruth Ryals, Tom Sieniewicz, Tom Stohlman, Robert Winters

City: Iram Farooq, Melissa Peters, Cliff Cook

Utile (Consultants): John McCartin, Jessica Robertson

5 members of the public

Summary

Melissa Peters introduced the agenda and gave an update on the process to date. John McCartin then explained the purpose of doing scenarios and emphasized that they help to assess the scale of change; they do not represent what will actually happen. He shared the projections for development under current zoning and a proposed alternative scenario. The Advisory Committee then discussed the findings of those projections and the proposed alternative.

Discussion

- A committee member said they agree with the idea of balancing jobs and housing and using scenarios to find the right balance.
- A committee member asked what kinds of jobs are being discussed. Consultant staff responded that the model isn't that detailed, and City added that most jobs proposed are in Kendall and would be higher-wage jobs. Therefore the Alewife plan expands industrial uses, adding 900 industrial jobs.
- A committee member asked how City services will keep up with growth. City staff responded demand for new city services will need to be considered as it will have an impact on capital expenditures.
- A committee member said they are interested in the urban form impact of these projections; they are concerned that some parts of the city will be bedroom communities for Kendall. They were also concerned that it is impossible to build a nice 11-story building in Harvard because it's not in line with the historic context. The consultant pointed out there are existing 1920's-era 10/11-story buildings, but that the consideration of historic context is key, especially in Harvard Square.
- A committee member commented they were struck by the imbalance of jobs and housing. They said it seems like the City is going in the right direction but it's hard to comment specifically based just on the precedent images, and asked for clarification on the jump from 6 to 11 stories. Consultant staff explained that building code limits wood construction at 70' and steel construction is more expensive so it doesn't work until you get to 11 stories (or maybe higher).
- A committee member asked if these areas would be zoned for only housing. The consultant responded that the zoning will still allow different uses but allowed density would be much higher for residential. The committee member said they support higher density near MIT. It would help development of grad student housing and wouldn't have an impact on residential neighborhoods.
- A committee member asked what the outputs would be under proposed zoning and raised that it's a regional issue. They said they can imagine a scenario where we dramatically up-zone but it's still not enough to move the needle on housing affordability.
 - Consultant responded that we wanted feedback on densities before they undertake the full analysis. They added that while the regional issue is a big unknown, new development will definitely produce new deed restricted affordable units.
 - City staff added that the emphasis is on affordability.

ENVISION CAMBRIDGE

- A committee member observed that building more housing in order to get more affordable units is a losing game because you have to build many more market rate units and it exacerbates the divide between rich and poor. They also questioned where the jobs number comes from.
 - Consultant responded that it's based on the square footage of commercial development.
 - Committee member added that there's a lot of housing growth in other parts of the region that could serve people who work in Cambridge. They member added that we can't look at the city as one unit because different parts of the city are different and other things besides jobs and housing units matter.
- A committee member said that 6-7 stories near Porter would be acceptable, but higher than that and the City would likely get pushback. They also suggested consideration of more office, not just residential, because there's a lot of open retail space.
- A committee member supports emphasizing residential and increasing density in some places, but they are concerned about design being human-scale and sensitive to location. However, the biggest question is the energy use of the new buildings. They said they would support high density if it's net zero.
 - City staff added that working group recommendations on various topics will apply to whatever scenario is put forward, including requiring net zero construction as dictated by the Net Zero Action Plan.
- A committee member asked if the zoning proposed is going up and down or just up. Consultant responded that it's all going up, but current zoning is complicated and existing buildings are often nonconforming under existing rules.
- A committee member commented that past conversations indicated that increased density on the corridors doesn't produce a huge number of new units, and asked is it worth it. They said building hundreds of units in order to get some affordable units isn't the same as making Cambridge affordable. They emphasized there is a big affordability issue beyond deed restricted units.
 - City responded that increasing supply is necessary to at least slow the rate of increase in housing prices for non-deed-restricted units. The committee member responded that they agree, but doesn't think that adding luxury units will help
 - City staff added that this issue is being worked on by Metro Mayors coalition, which is developing recommendations presently.
- A committee member commented that the city has the lowest tax rate in MA because of the robust commercial base (despite huge nonprofit land ownership). They asked if adding a lot of housing would erode that and lead to tax increases.
- A committee member commented that the affordable housing projection is still low. They asked if the City could purchase land and develop low- and middle-income housing. Consultant staff noted that the scenario only accounted for inclusionary housing, not 100% affordable housing development.
- A committee member said commercial has to be promoted as well to maintain small businesses.
- City staff asked what level of affordability would be necessary to make these higher densities acceptable.
- A committee member commented that middle income units are very important.
- A committee member commented that mixed-income developments are best. They also emphasized the importance of what goes in the buildings and whether it supports community. They asked: how will that block feel to a 16-year-old or a 60-year-old?
- A committee member noted that affordable housing and other community benefits can be extracted in return for additional height. They asked whether up-zoning in these areas will decrease the City's leverage to extract the community benefits.
- A committee member asked if there's a way to get property owners to cooperate rather than getting bought out and one giant building going up.
- A committee member suggested that much higher densities are OK when there is transit nearby.
 - A committee member expressed concern about condo conversions, and asked whether new housing units would be for owners or renters. Consultant staff explained the scenario model could not predict whether development would be for rental units or condominiums.

ENVISION CAMBRIDGE

City staff also explained that rental vs. condo isn't controlled by zoning and condo conversions are infrequent because rental is currently more profitable.

- A committee member asked how the community can stop residents suing developers, which causes strife and ties things up for years. The City responded that as-of-right development is much harder to appeal in court. They said Envision Cambridge is considering an affordable housing overlay that would allow 100% or mostly affordable developments as-of-right, conditional on design review.
 - A committee member asked what the percentage of affordable is and where it came from. Consultant staff said it is modeled at 17.5%. City staff explained this is lower than the 20% required under the Inclusionary Housing Program, because the Inclusionary requirements are only triggered for larger buildings and because the requirements are for 20% of square footage, not units. They also noted some of the pipeline projects predate the increase in the inclusionary requirements, so these percentages are at the earlier 11.5% level.
- A committee member asked if the City can require the universities to build more student housing
- A committee member said they were struck by how little we know and wants to see the math behind what has been presented. They said they particularly wanted to know how much development would have to occur to bend the housing cost curve down.
 - Consultant responded that there is math behind this, which will be available as the scenarios proceed. They said unfortunately the sophisticated econometric analysis required to understand market effects on housing costs is not in the scope of this citywide plan.
 - The City added that the regional work on this topic will be more informative and should be available later this summer. A committee member asked if Arlington, Belmont, etc. are participating City said they're part of Metro Mayors and the hope is that once there is a regional goal those municipalities will step up but Cambridge has to continue doing its fair share. City staff emphasized that this is not growth for its own sake, but to meet the city's expressed values for affordability and livability.

Public Comment

- A member of the public asked if there are sub-goals. They also asked how the committee thinks any Envision Cambridge rezoning proposals should be implemented (whether incrementally or all at once). They said there were some bad feelings after K2, when the rezoning implementation wasn't communicated to the public and the zoning wasn't implemented all at once.
- A member of the public said that it feels like housing is chasing jobs. They support fully affordable housing, but were concerned about the as-of-right development, since it might end up with a bad design and cause stigma. They also asked about the zoning process.

Indicators/targets were tabled for an additional meeting to be scheduled in July.