

# ENVISION CAMBRIDGE

Advisory Committee Meeting #14  
June 20, 2018  
Notes

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## Attendance

Committee: Frank Gerratana, Robert Winters, Alexandra Offiong, Tom Sieniewicz  
City Staff: Melissa Peters, Gary Chan, Cliff Cook, Chris Cotter  
Utile: John McCartin  
Two members of the public.

## Summary

Melissa Peters provided an update on the overall planning process. The Advisory Committee, along with city staff and consultants, discussed indicators and related targets for community wellbeing and urban form.

## Discussion

### Community Wellbeing

Indicator 1: Median length of housing tenure

- One member said that if there are only four to six indicators for each focus area, they should be very broad, and that for community wellbeing this is especially true.
- One member said that they felt the related goal, access to opportunity, was the most important consideration, stating that access to opportunity for people who grew up in Cambridge is more relevant than access for newcomers. Another member agreed. A third member asked if the measure tracks that. The City said the census stopped asking this question.
- One member suggested designating certain neighborhoods as appropriate for certain demographics, such as Alewife for newcomers with a need for small apartments, and traditional neighborhoods for families. Another member noted they have friends going into retirement homes, but virtually all outside the city.
- One member said part of the vibrancy of Cambridge is the new people, and another said they don't know how to balance between keeping opportunity for new people vs. maintaining opportunity for people from here.
- One member said jobs also affect whether people can stay here.
- One member suggested using voter rolls as a proxy. The City said Arlington used a similar tactic, but that this method would not count residents who were are not registered to vote (including many students and other transient residents), skewing this indicator.
- One member asked if this is really a measure of community wellbeing. Pittsfield probably has a very high length of tenure, but that might not reflect a desire to leave for some people.
- One member said this could be a good indicator if it's properly caveated saying that it doesn't show everything.
- The city suggested disaggregating this indicator to see the trend for owner vs. renter households. The committee agreed.

Indicator 2: Change of racial/ethnic composition over time

- One member said the current trends look stable. City staff said ACS shows it dropping, but that's not definitive until the 2020 Census. They noted that black school student population dropping, but it could be incidental and having to do with normal demographic churn.

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- One member said it stands to reason that because our city is so unequal, this indicator would reflect that inequality. One member said that historically “black” neighborhoods are anecdotally leaving.
- One member said they wouldn’t call it progress if the city stabilized these figures only through public housing. They would rather see stabilization or growth across all housing types and all economic levels. City staff responded there is an economy indicator around income, and the city could cross-tabulate it with race, but it would not account for housing type differences.
- One member said that we shouldn’t exclude indicators just because they may get worse. For honesty’s sake it’s important to keep them.

## Indicator 3: Diversity of City boards and commissions

- City staff explained there is no data right now, but the City began tracking it this year on all committee member applications
- One member said there is a criterion on some boards for different life experiences. Another member said that is often written into the enabling law.
- City staff said they want the focus to be on race. One member said it should be written into the recommendation and legislation.
- One member noted that in the past it has been hard to get applicants of different backgrounds. City said part of the new strategy will be better at advertising, and going through better channels.
- The City asked if we should include this? One member said they thought it is important, but there are a lot of consideration for who goes on commissions. One member of the public noted the Civic Unity Commission is already pushing on this. Another member said there can’t be goals of diversity without having this. A different member said they wouldn’t want the City Manager to be able to hold up a commission through demographic appointments. They thought a goal might be better than a quota. The City noted there was no recommendation for a quota.

## Indicator 4: Percent of survey respondents that rate Cambridge good or excellent when asked if the city is welcoming to all races, broken out by race

- One member asked if this is this language from the survey? City staff said yes.
- One member worried being “welcoming” could be misinterpreted. Another member disagreed.

## Indicator 5: SNAP recipients

- One member asked how we know if we’ve actually helped the people in need or if they’ve just left. Another member said a decline might also be people not receiving benefits they’re entitled to due to immigration fears or some other reason.
- One member asked why not set the target at zero?
- One member said it is too unclear what movement on this indicator means, and suggested dropping it. A member of the public asked if it the City should track it just in case. The committee member said they thought it was a good thing to track, but maybe not a great option for the indicators tracking progress toward community wellbeing. The City clarified they track this whether or not it is an Envision Cambridge indicator.
- One member noted this this is the only indicator related to health and food security, and dropping it would mean EC is not tracking these topics. Another member suggested working with the Food Bank to find a suitable indicator.
- One member suggested calculating the gap between those eligible for SNAP and those receiving it. The City noted it could be done, but it would involve many assumptions. The City also noted with SNAP specifically, those eligible can swing wildly due to federal policy.
- One member asked why there aren’t health and wellbeing indicators. Other members suggested tracking homelessness. The City responded it would be good to find an

alternative health indicator, using City data or 500 Cities data, which includes preventative health indicators.

## Indicator 6: Residents usage of parks

- City staff clarified that in 2016 Cambridge introduced online numbers, hence the split in the indicator.
- One member asked if the question is about public parks in *Cambridge* or public parks in general. Staff clarified just Cambridge. One member said access to healthy recreational opportunities is important thing, but they aren't necessarily in Cambridge. They said the City should be doing more education on regional recreational opportunities. City clarified there is an indicator about access to open space in urban form. City staff noted that the urban form indicator is about access, and this indicator is about use.
- One member stressed the importance of access to different types of parks, to accommodate the diversity of people's needs.
- One member said they suspected most of the people using the parks are people with small children. Another member said dog walkers are another large group of park users.
- City staff asked if there is a better indicator.
- One member asked if this question includes the riverfront. City staff said it's up to interpretation by the survey respondent, but that would be the commonsense interpretation.
- One member said the indicator should be more about recreation, including gyms or climbing walls, not necessarily parks. Another member said recreation could also mean restaurants, or non-active recreation. That member said they interpreted this question as being about enjoyment. City staff clarified there is also a public health element.
- A member of the public asked if there is a "gold standard" of park usage from another municipality that Cambridge should be aiming at.
- One member said Mass Ave serves as the primary public space for many people near Porter Square, and that wouldn't be caught in this question.
- City staff said the Council usually comments that there isn't the right distribution of recreational opportunities. Too many baseball fields, not enough cricket, etc. They suggested the question could be "do you feel you have access to the recreational aspects you would want?"
- One member suggested using both questions.

## Indicator 7: Tracking participation in the arts

- City staff said Arts Council wanted to make the distinction about live performance.
- City staff also noted the Arts Council also tracks art venues, not a huge change year to year. One member said they felt it was more important to track attendance.
- One member said the City needs to specify that the performances are in Cambridge

## Indicator 8: Rates of volunteering

- City staff clarified they are proposing a new survey question, which would be the source of this indicator.
- One member said historically much of the volunteering was done by "church ladies."
- The committee unanimously agreed this is important to track.

## Indicator 9: Good or excellent sense of community

- City staff noted this indicator decreased in 2016. Several members suggested this could be the effect of the federal election.
- One member asked if the question should be clarified to say the sense of community *in Cambridge*. A different member said respondents should have the flexibility to define it however they like.

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- There was a debate about whether it should be tailored to citywide or left vague. One member asked whether the citywide feeling is what you are tracking. Consultant said specifying citywide might get to neighborhood divisions seen during engagement.

## Urban Form

Indicator 1: Frontage along Mass Ave, Cambridge St, and squares that result in positive urban design outcomes

- One member asked for clarification. They said they expected the City to list active retail as good and parking as bad, but weren't sure what else would qualify. City staff said the list of positive urban design outcomes is to be determined and would be updated every few years.
- One member said it would be better to measure how many people are there as stated preference, rather than trying to guess what positive urban design outcomes would be. One member suggested mapping the number of doorways as a proxy. The members disagreed on whether these two measures got to the same idea. Members suggested tracking both urban design outcomes and the number of people on each section of the corridor.

Indicator 2: Percent of population in ¼ mile of tot lot or ½ mile of a neighborhood park

- The committee unanimously agreed to this indicator without comment.

UF3: Percent of housing units 1/3 mi of 3 or more different types of park

- City staff said this indicator needs to include non-Cambridge parks.
- The committee unanimously agreed to this indicator without comment.

UF4: Percent of respondents that rate Cambridge's appearance as good or excellent

- One member suggested only tracking excellent appearance. Other members were unsure.
- The committee unanimously agreed to this indicator.

Indicator 5: Percent of block face with street trees at no more than 30'

- One member said this is too long. Another member said a tree needs between 25 and 30 feet to survive. Another member said achieving this depends the location within the city. They said 25'-50' is typical, but it depends on driveways etc.
- One member said the City was encouraging sponsoring trees on property. They asked as an indicator, is the presence of tree on public way more important than just street trees. They said it was not possible to install street trees everywhere, such as in the Port. They suggested tracking trees within 10' of pavement edge. City staff noted this might be collected in next flyover.
- One member suggested measuring tree canopy. City staff said that was an indicator in Climate and Environment. Another member said, in terms of urban form, if the indicator is tracking about great civic spaces, it would be more about street trees (or trees nearly on the street), not canopy.

City staff asked if any indicators are missing from community wellbeing or urban form.

- One member said there is no indicator about building height. Another member, asked if it would be in the first urban form indicator. City staff clarified that no, building height was not intended to be included in the first indicator.
- One member suggested an indicator on how many lots conform to zoning. They noted the Riverside planning study included this information.
- One member noted there was no indicator on visual intricacy or interest. They said many recent developments have good planning outcomes, but boring architectural outcomes, and said historic buildings bring architectural interest to a street. They suggested adding an indicator on proportion of historic buildings. One member said that historic buildings

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are an OK proxy, but there are recent buildings that also add visual interest, citing Lesley University's new art center. The first member said there are exceptions, but common new stuff looks poor. They specifically noted the setback requirements creating boxy, odd looking buildings. A third member said they wouldn't want to come up with a standard of architectural significance.

- One member said Cambridge's zoning code is far behind form-based codes like in Denver. Another member said that should all be in Envision. The first member said Cambridge should find some way to make good looking buildings, whether that is through form-based zoning or whatever.
- One member said this vague architectural quality is captured in urban form indicator 4.
- City said one indicator that's missing, given the actions, is one for the development review process.
- One member said that there is an indicator missing on safety in community wellbeing. City staff said there is probably a question in the City Manager's survey that would get to that.