

Advisory Committee Meeting #15 July 25, 2018 Notes

Attendance

- Committee: Jon Alvarez, Josh Gerber, Alexandra Offiong, Ruth Ryals, Tom Stohlman, Robert Winters
- City Staff: Melissa Peters, Wendell Joseph, Gary Chan
- Consultant Team: John McCartin (Utile)
- Three members of the public were present.

Summary

Melissa Peters updated the committee on the process, and framed the discussion on the actions proposed by the Working Groups in conjunction with City staff and consultants. The committee then offered comments on the proposed actions for each focus area.

The numbered actions in the discussion refer to ID numbers given in a document found [here](#).

Discussion

Housing

Action 2: Affordable Housing Overlay

- One Advisory Committee member said they don't want the overlay to be a net negative for the neighborhood, particularly in terms of urban form. They said tall buildings everywhere and a lack of open space are not good things. They added if the only goal is affordable housing, without keeping the quality of the neighborhood, it is a net negative.
- City staff explained there has been ongoing analysis of how this might be implemented, including a determination of what densities would be required to make an overlay work. They said that analysis would be presented at the next Advisory Committee Meeting (August 15).
- One member said they didn't like that the affordable housing developers were the only ones who would be able to get zoning relief. They said homeowners should be able to add to their homes or build accessory dwelling units, either for intergenerational families or to earn modest side-income. They felt it was unfair to limit this action while granting lots of relief to affordable developers. Consultant staff said they wouldn't want to grant the equal relief to market rate development, however, as that would open the neighborhoods up to speculation.

Action 12: University's provision of housing

- One member said this action should be expanded to include large businesses.
- Two members said this action's language had gotten much more heavy-handed, and the "requirement" for new housing is a concern. They asked if it should be more of a collaborative process with the universities. The City explained this language is a compromise from what was initially proposed by the housing working group, particularly in the phrasing "identify opportunities," which adds contingency requiring collaboration. A third committee member felt the language as written was meant to bring the universities to the table, creating a more collaborative process with the community.
- One member felt this action was misaligned with what graduate students want. Perhaps this needs to be about aligning university housing with graduate students' needs. Another

member suggested including the word subsidize. Another member suggested just requiring universities to charge below-market rents for the housing they provide.

The group had a discussion on middle income housing:

- One member asked a clarification question about the meaning of “affordable housing,” as it appears in actions 2, 4, and 6. They were curious if this meant affordable housing according to HUD definitions or a different definition.
- That member said their understanding is that because of rules on federal subsidies, it is easier to produce low-income housing than middle income housing.
- That member wanted to see more that specifically speaks to moderate- and middle-income housing. They noted it is said in goals, but did not have an explicit mechanism in the actions.
- Another member noted the primary method of production is inclusionary housing, since it isn’t influenced by federal subsidies.
- One member of the public who served on the housing working group asked to speak. They explained the City’s Inclusionary Housing Program is aimed at households with incomes of 50-80% the regions Area Median Income (a range often called moderate-income), and that this roughly translates to about \$50,000-80,000 in annual household income. They said most inclusionary units are for rent (also noting that homeownership units can target middle incomes, but that few of those are built).
- The housing working group member also said in the regional picture, middle-income households still have many options for housing when compared to low- and moderate-income households. They said that is why the housing working group chose to focus more actions on those lower income households.
- Several Advisory Committee members underscored that the plan needs a more explicit action for middle-income housing.
- One member suggested broadening the scope of the affordable housing trust to include middle-income housing.

There was a discussion about unit sizes and the need to right-size people’s home size to their desires.

- One member said there needs to be more opportunity for seniors and young professionals to move into non-family units.
- One member said there should be at least one action about senior housing, saying it doesn’t necessarily need to target low-income senior housing.

There were several additional comments on housing.

- One member made a meta-comment, saying that the plan should include “good ideas,” even if those recommendations don’t solve the biggest problems in the city, but rather make small improvements.
- One member brought up the success of triple decker rentals to provide affordable market rents, and that this was lost when all these buildings were converted to condominiums.
- One member suggested having a program to ensure vacant properties are used, citing logic from UK laws.
- One member suggested giving priority and housing subsidies to people living and/or working in the city. Another member noted the city’s affordable housing waiting list already prioritizes existing residents, and there are so many residents on the list that it effectively only provides housing to Cambridge residents.

Economy

Action 4: Require light industrial uses in certain areas

- One member asked why this action was a requirement, rather than encouragement. City staff and consultants explained light industrial wouldn’t get built on its own in the region’s

inner core cities due to competing demand for lab space, making a requirement necessary if the public wants to maintain light industrial uses. City staff also noted the requirement in Alewife (where this action is relevant) includes a mix of uses with office and lab. The member said mixed-use is better. They said they didn't want to enforce a land use monoculture.

There was a discussion about targeting education and training to low-income populations vs. everyone in the city.

- One member said early education should be for all. Several members agreed. One member said the City shouldn't be reinforcing the class structure in its programs.
- One member disagreed, saying they don't want limited resources spent on the rich. Another member said that perhaps it could be universal, but affirmatively targeted to lower income people. The initial person who disagreed said they felt that was unlikely to work if there's a free option.
- One member said their top priority was putting Cambridge residents into a position that they can take part in the booming Cambridge economy.

There was a discussion about aid to small businesses.

- One member was concerned that there was not a statement that Cambridge would help facilitate, encourage, or subsidize small business rents.
- One member said the small business actions kept getting outweighed by big business actions on the economy working group.
- One member brought up exemption of ground floor retail in floor area ratio calculations for new development. They said they wished they could oblige the developers to offer that space for a reduced rent.
- One member seconded the small business comments. They said it seemed a lot of the small business actions got filtered out. They said there should again be a focus on small business networks.
- They also said the City should step back and assess the user experience of someone trying to start a business. They said it's much harder for someone very small to jump through the permitting hoops than it is for a large business who can hire lawyers to take care of permitting. They said the user experience of all public interactions with the City should be assessed and made simpler for everyday people.
- One member suggested the City should hire a small business coordinator.
- One member suggested expanding action 6 (new financing mechanisms for light industrial businesses) to small businesses.

One member said they were very happy action 1 (adapting land use rules to allow for flexible retail models) was included.

One member said they have an overall issue about regulations on small, local, brick and mortar businesses vs. those on businesses like Amazon. They felt whatever good work and good intentions the City has for small businesses, their inability to regulate Amazon in the same way undermines small business.

Mobility

- One member noted several duplicate actions.
- One member said in action 30 (funds for improving pedestrian comfort and safety), pedestrian crossing design should be standardized, so that they're familiar to pedestrians and motorists.

ENVISION CAMBRIDGE

- One member suggested having a greater focus on the future beyond actions 12 (flexing curb regulations) and 35 (rules for autonomous vehicles), including all its potential modes (motorized scooters, skateboards, etc.).
- One member said there should be more acknowledgement of drivers in the actions, saying drivers weren't going to disappear. Another member agreed, saying they felt the City is not just trying to incentivize sustainable transportation, but make driving difficult.
- One member felt there should be more about ride hailing services like Uber and Lyft in the actions. One member of the public noted that CDD and Traffic and Parking are both looking at this, particularly related to where they can pull over, etc.
- One member said that restructuring the residential parking permit program (action 15) would be damaging to the neighborhoods and low-income residents in the city.
- Two members suggested more actions related to parking availability, so as to limit the number of people looking for parking.
- One member wondered if the City understands what the saturation number for bike commuters will be, and how they will assess when they are reaching that limit.
- One member said that for all the specific actions around parking and loading, the impacts of double-parking and loading were not felt as much when street lanes were wider and the uses of each part of the street were less prescribed.

Climate and Environment

- Regarding action 21 (density incentives for net zero adoption):
 - One member reiterated concern about using density incentives to accomplish goals without concern for existing neighborhood fabric.
 - One member noted that the focus on new buildings misses the need for energy improvements to old buildings. They said that for owners of older buildings to do add any environmental infrastructure, there are often many requirements for additional work that make those upgrades infeasible. They gave as an example the need to upgrade all knob-and-tube wiring in outer walls before improving insulation.
- One member said there should be more actions related to the permeability of sidewalks and roads, suggesting the City install more porous pavement sidewalks and roads.
 - Another member said the ADA essentially ended the practice of building brick sidewalks.
- One member asked if there are any thoughts about making city vehicles renewable. City noted there is an action about a Zero Emissions Transportation Plan.

Urban Form

- Regarding Action 24 (planning board review of initial development design concepts), the wording should be "encourage" or something similar, rather than "allow," since this practice isn't currently prohibited.
- Regarding Action 3 (increasing maximum heights to accommodate taller ground floor retail spaces), one member said this could be done through the BZA flexibility. Another member suggested writing the rules directly into zoning.
- Several members expressed reservations about waiving minimum parking requirements along the corridors (Action 5).
 - One member suggested only applying this rule where there is ample parking nearby. Another member said this would eliminate Porter entirely for this action. Another member brought up issues for accessibility of buildings there. One member brought up allowing people who work in an area to use resident spaces during certain hours.
 - One member noted 20 years ago, many spaces weren't resident spaces, and the City might consider removing resident parking zones in certain places.

- One member suggested formalizing the ability to park in existing underutilized parking lots and garages, which is already widely practiced informally (and sometimes illegally). Many members agreed actions should do more to better allocate uses of existing underutilized parking.

Community Wellbeing

- One member suggested eliminating Action 1 (allowing live-work artist spaces), saying that it's already allowed in many places.
- One member said the idea for a Cambridge History Museum (Action 12) sounded nice, but wasn't the only way to meet the overall goal of encouraging awareness of Cambridge's history. They asked why this, and not other actions like a Cambridge Freedom Trail, made it to the list. City staff suggested making it more open ended. The member agreed open-ended could work, or they could explicitly encourage a Freedom Trail or "Tech Trail".
- One member said a medium-term action to give new residents information on affordable groceries sounded insufficient. They felt it seemed to give up on the real goal of getting people affordable food options.
- One member felt new residents should be given information about businesses, not just food. One member said their neighborhood organization created a map of local businesses they distribute, and that the City could do this citywide.
- Several members expressed the need for more informal recreation opportunities for adolescents. They felt the community centers would not be patronized by some teenagers no matter what.
- One member said there should be more actions that assist and encourage neighborhood organizations in their work.

Comments from the Public

- One member of the public stated there are many neighborhood groups who would like more help from the city, including easier access to meeting spaces. They said many do half their meetings with City staff or developers, providing a public service, but that they need space. They encouraged thinking about the topic of each neighborhood organization meeting, and if City staff are involved, waiving the fee for City community space. They said the City could identify tasks that would be great to have volunteer help with, and promote those to the neighborhood groups. Completed tasks could then be exchanged for some benefit, like free meeting space, etc.
- One member of the Advisory Committee said the neighborhood school program should be revived.
- One member also said that neighborhood organizations can sometimes become the "fiefdoms" of an individual, rather than representative of the overall community. This member thought there should be pushback against giving these organizations City resources.
- One member of the public suggested providing space to organizations only if the groups adopt certain bylaws or take identified measures to become more diverse.