

CET Focus Groups

From May through July 2018, the Envision Cambridge Team worked with the Cambridge Community Engagement Team (CET) to hold a round of focus groups designed to reach the City's underserved Cambridge families, including members from immigrant communities (Bangladeshi, Chinese, Ethiopian, Haitian, Somali, Spanish and Arabic speaking) and the American-born Black community. A total of approximately fifty (50) members of the public participated in the focus groups, which were held on:

- May 24, 2018 – Community Learning Center
- June 12, 2018 – CHA Windsor Street Care Center
- June 19, 2018 – Peabody School
- July 10, 2018 – CHA Windsor Street Care Center

The objectives of the focus groups were to receive feedback and additional input from participants on the draft Envision Cambridge recommendations and to begin a high-level conversation on how to manage future growth and development.

Focus Group Priorities

To begin these sessions, the Envision Cambridge Team revisited what had been identified in past focus groups sessions as concerns and priorities throughout the city on the following topics:

- **Housing** – increased costs for housing are pricing out residents, especially families, resulting in an ever-changing Cambridge
- **Transportation** – buses and trains are unreliable, the traffic is getting worse, and it's harder to find parking
- **Jobs** – a desire for more local jobs for residents, better access to job training, and jobs that attract residents regardless of skill and educational attainment
- **Environment** – cool shelters during summer days, and more parks and open/green spaces
- **Community** – more opportunities/events to celebrate the diversity of Cambridge, better access to information on the great programs and services that the City provides, more opportunities for work and play for those between the ages of 16-24 years, affordable childcare services, community gardens, and opportunities to be heard across the city
- **Development** – more affordable housing, and diversity in housing types

Housing

Overall, participants agreed with the summary of what had been previously discussed and reiterated the pressing need for more housing to address a variety of issues: opportunities for larger families to reside in Cambridge, homelessness, and growing wait-lists for affordable units. Here are additional comments on housing concerns and priorities:

- Certain restrictions with housing through the City's programs aren't well known until after you get the house, such as the inability to pass it down to children or next of kin.
- There should be a centralized place for all housing programs in the city.
- We should lower the baseline AMI for the middle-income threshold so that more are eligible for available programs.
- The city is getting overcrowded – buildings are being sited on very small lots or alleys, and parking is both more expensive and difficult to find. In some newer developments, you even must pay for a biking spot

Transportation

Participants agreed with the summary, and echoed similar sentiments heard throughout the Envision Cambridge process regarding the need for overall infrastructure improvements, and better enforcement of traffic and parking regulations. There was mixed feedback regarding parking, with some feeling that the City is too accommodating with parking permits (i.e. resident, visitor, senior, etc.), and others expressing that their visitors and friends cannot find parking at all. Finally, there were also mixed reviews of the increase of bicycle lanes around the city. Participants stressed the need for fairness and balance in transit infrastructure as repairs and renovations continue.

Jobs

Overall, participants agreed with the summary, and again focused on the importance of diversity as it relates to employment opportunities. Specific comments on jobs and employment opportunities include:

- When we talk about job training, we ought to be more specific: Which jobs are we talking about and for whom? One idea is to provide “mobile” classes that target families with small children.
- Internship are learning opportunities, but there are too many barriers for young people looking for internships. Sometimes, it’s all about getting a good reference for a job – it’s about who you know. How can we connect young people with more networking events?
- Can the City open a space or help create opportunities where people of all ages can access STEM/STEAM education?

Environment

Overall, participants agreed with the summary of what had been previously discussed and reiterated the need for more parks and green spaces to better respond to increasingly hotter days.

Recommendations included a call for more pools and water play areas, especially for children, and cooling shelters. Participants also shared that the city needs more open spaces. New development projects sometimes provide open spaces, but they are barely big enough for anything other than a few chairs. Aside from the provision of appropriately-sized parks and open spaces, participants also wish for them to be well-maintained and cleaned, particularly from animal waste.

Community

The focus for this section remained on safety and opportunities for young people. Participants expressed that, while Cambridge is generally a safe city, there are some areas that are still dangerous – recent shootings have kept several residents on edge, while others do not feel safe to be outside of their homes. Teenagers are especially vulnerable since there are few activities available to them after a certain age. One suggestion was to incorporate into the City’s youth centers opportunities for kids who are interested in tech, and to provide affordable options for young people interested in organized sports (currently, the YMCA only extends this to members). Participants also suggested membership models that work better for families and individuals who have financial constraints. Here are additional comments on the Cambridge community:

- The city needs more community gardens, and better access to them. Is there a way to repurpose spaces around buildings for small plots for community gardens?
- There ought to be an alert or notification system for individuals with special needs. How can we better prioritize their safety?
- The city needs facilities and/or special activities for Muslim women. For example, the YMCA in Roxbury has a designated time for Muslim women to swim.
- The city also needs affordable childcare.

- There have been instances of racism and discrimination. This hasn't been the case for all participants, and it wasn't said that this is a constant occurrence. But, it exists.
- Central Square used to have stores where people can buy home or personal goods at an affordable price. Now, everything is a restaurant or a bar. Where are the places where residents can purchase basic goods at a reasonable price?
- The city needs more tutoring programs to help students with their homework, and more affordable after school programs.

Development

As in public conversations across the city, there are mixed views regarding the appropriate amount of density – some favor low density, some favor high. Participants expressed that lower density feels safer and more secure, and that large development projects don't feel community-oriented. Other participants shared that higher density allows for more people, especially those who fall in the low- or moderate-income category, and that a mix of building types would be appropriate. Here are additional comments on development:

- Yes, we need more affordable housing, but not cheap housing. It seems like, once the units or buildings are run down and falling apart, that's when things open for other people to move in who end up paying more than the ones who came before them.
- It's very difficult to find a 3 or 4bd units, and it's almost impossible to find ones that accept Section 8 vouchers.
- Sometimes, you think you're leaving public housing, but things don't really change – it's just a nicer version. The more you make, the more they take. The economics are still designed to keep you down – there's no economic mobility, there's no housing stability. It's not about what you can afford: it's about where they want to put you.
- The system of not being able to pass homes you buy down to your children doesn't help with economic mobility or housing stability, either. This is the reason why people want to buy homes in the first place.

Draft Goals and Recommendations

For the second part of session, the Envision Cambridge Team shared the draft goals and key recommendations. Participants were asked to weigh in on how well the goals and recommendations responded to the concerns and priorities that were previous identified.

Housing comments:

- We should also be mindful of maintaining the housing stock throughout the city
- Overall, units tend to be very small – too small. There's a need for larger units, or units with larger kitchens and family rooms. The city also needs more 3bd+ units. Currently, there aren't enough of these types of units and families are having a tough time staying in Cambridge. With what few 3bd units the city has, many only have one full bathroom, making it even more difficult for families with children. All 3bd units should have more than 1 bathroom (at least a half bathroom).

Transportation comments:

- The City should work harder to enforce the laws in place for all users and modes of transportation.
- We should also consider more shuttle services that provide free transit around the city.
- With unreliable transit, long wait periods are difficult with riders, especially those with children. This becomes even more difficult during the winter months.

Jobs comments:

- Just as there is a pool for the rental market, there should also be a pool for the job market to help individuals get a foot in the door.
- Having diverse jobs types is one thing. There ought to be integration and inclusion of job types within spaces, rather than segregation or concentration of job types.
- Many people leave their home countries having had successful businesses and/or high levels of education but cannot pick up where they left off once they come to America. Often time, the only barrier is language. How can we better integrate these individuals into the workforce?

Environment comments:

- It would be good for many communities to learn what to do to help the environment. Personally, I don't come from a country or culture that openly talks about these topics. How can we help?
- I like the goal of enhancing open space, but I don't see where we will do that. There's very little space left in Cambridge.

Community comments:

- The winter months can be depressing for many immigrant communities. We need spaces for gathering that are available all year, regardless of the weather.
- The city should consider neighborhood kiosks that advertise events, resources, and information, both locally and citywide.
- How are kids who live in areas with violence being engaged? What about children with parents battling addiction?
- There must be some level of trust for any kind of engagement to happen. Some city departments are trying, but there's not enough being done. There also needs to be an incentive – people want something for their time. If people come and express themselves, they want to know that they are truly being heard.
- Many leaders have promising ideas, but there's very little follow up or follow through. For example, 20% inclusionary housing is a good thing, but what's next? What's the next step?
- We need more community events where city policy-makers attend and interact with the community.
- The city needs more shelters for homeless individuals.

Managing Citywide Growth

The final part of these sessions involved a high-level look at how to manage future developments. This included identifying areas in the city that are experiencing development pressure and are likely to change over the next 10-20 years. The Envision Cambridge team asked how the focus group participants would like to see these areas develop: more/less housing, jobs? Type of housing and jobs? Form of development (low-, medium, or high-density)? Where should growth go, if any?

Here are their responses:

Housing

- We need more housing, both affordable and market-rate. I would like my children who grew up in Cambridge to be able to stay in Cambridge. What made Cambridge so unique was **community**, and we are losing that.
- I would like to see more affordable units, and places that feel more like homes, rather than hotels. I prefer 4-6 story housing.

- If we add more housing, then we need more of everything else: streets, parking spaces, schools, etc. We need a balance between these things. We may want more, but we may not have the capacity to do it.
- People are closer to leaving Cambridge than they are to staying. I would prefer more affordable housing to keep people in Cambridge and help maintain the diversity that we already have. We need less market rate units, and more affordable units. To keep people in Cambridge, we need a lot more affordable housing. We should increase the inclusionary housing percentage. If we don't, at some point, people who don't want to leave will have to live elsewhere.
- Does Cambridge want a more permanent community, or a more transient community? People who are here for a long time are invested in their communities.
- Taller buildings block out light and disrupt views. High-rise residences do not feel like home.
- The increase in density, the potential changes, would no longer look and feel like Cambridge. I would prefer smaller density.
- Mass Ave and Cambridge Street already have enough traffic with only one lane for vehicles. Density will only add to this problem.
- Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) might help with the concerns around traffic. We must be mindful of where we focus this type of development.

Jobs

- Who are these jobs for? Are these jobs for those in the community, for those who already live here, or will they just negatively impact us through increased traffic and change of neighborhood character?
- Even if there are more job training services, it will still be difficult to get a job in Cambridge. My community mainly works outside of the city.
- Many of the people that I know who work in Kendall Square don't want to live in Cambridge. They all live in the suburbs. Their companies provide transportation services to and from the suburbs.
- We need a higher diversity of jobs, not just those that require advanced degrees and unique skill sets. Many people, especially immigrants, simply need to work. They might not have the time or the opportunity to go to school and gain a higher education.
- We need to increase the number of jobs, but we also need to think about labor policies. For example, flexible hours for single mothers should be a policy that we pursue.