

Envision Cambridge Advisory Committee Meeting #18

December 5, 2018

Attendance

Committee Attendees: Josh Gerber, Bill Kane, Zeyneb Magavi, Alexandra Offiong, Tom Sieniewicz, Robert Winters

City of Cambridge: Melissa Peters, Cliff Cook
Consultants: John McCartin (Utile)

Eight members of the public.

Overview

Melissa Peters provided an update on the planning process and led a discussion on the indicators and targets for each planning topic.

Discussion

General

One member asked where the targets came from, saying they didn't feel they feel briefed on whether these would make a real impact. City staff said the targets were crafted with the working groups in relation to the baseline measurements. They represent realistic progress towards goals.

Mobility

One member asked what was meant by bicycle comfort level. City staff clarified this doesn't imply a single type of infrastructure built on every street. Rather, comfort level is measured relative to the type of street being measured.

There was a discussion on intersection density. One member said they don't know why this would be a citywide target, as some areas of the City don't need more intersection density. They felt the target should be measured against places where more intersection density is desirable.

One member said that there was an indicator missing that would measure pedestrian level of comfort. They said we should have the expectation that every intersection should feel safe for pedestrians.

One member said there should be some indicator around obstruction for pedestrians with baby strollers and people with disabilities. City staff stated that there is an action to create a pedestrian plan that would rank sidewalks for pedestrians and plan for targeted improvements.

One member of the public asked if there was any discussion around pedestrian environments in winter, i.e., is the prevalence of plowing, salting, etc. Members of the committee agreed. One member of the committee suggested see-click-fix data as a source. Another member said it is worth making a distinction between high priority walks, as well. Another member of the committee brought up the ability of the elderly to shovel sidewalks or (pay for shoveling) during the winter. City staff clarified that the elderly can

get an exemption. One member suggested it should be a community wellbeing indicator, whether neighbors shovel the walks of those who cannot. Another member said if the City is serious about pedestrianism as an alternative to cars, why wouldn't the City take on shoveling sidewalks, the same way they do with streets.

Regarding the indicator measuring prevalence of single-occupancy-vehicles: one member asked if those taking Ubers/Lyfts alone are considered "driving alone." City staff said yes, they are counted as driving alone.

Another member asked if single-occupancy vehicle rates are going down because traffic is bad, because parking is so expensive, or because Cambridge is investing in transportation alternatives? City staff stated it's likely some combination of the above. One member stated they learned that it is not City policy to directly mitigate traffic, but to provide as many high-quality mobility options as possible to move demand away from automobile traffic. There was concern among some on the committee about autonomous vehicles, and what they could mean for traffic. Will they exacerbate the issue? Another member also brought up new personal mobility devices, like electric bikes and scooters.

Climate & Environment

Regarding the tree canopy indicator, staff and members of the committee agreed any decrease in canopy must be stopped before trying to achieve a target for increased canopy. One member raised the likelihood of tree deaths over time. They asked if there were any projections of likely tree death by 2030.

One member was unsure about the potable water usage target and suggested listing the target as average consumption per day (rather than annual consumption).

One member asked if the goal for trash was measuring landfill waste? Staff said yes, it measures landfill and incinerator waste, and thus it would measure the success of diversion actions like composting.

One member said that measuring albedo/green roofs should be easy with infrared satellite data.

There was a discussion about impervious surface. One member asked if the land area devoted to streets served as the floor for reducing impervious surface. Other members suggested that smart/green/blue streets could act to infiltrate stormwater and water street trees. Staff and consultants said that this target is more to measure the impacts on urban heat island, as well as some flooding (though in some places, the soil still would prevent infiltration). Much of the discussion centered on tree health. Members suggested keeping this indicator but changing the framing language.

One member said the goals around flooding need to be much more ambitious. They said the 100-year floods are not unusual and even larger floods will occur. They felt the current target is unacceptable in this context.

Urban Form

During the Urban Form discussion, in response to targets on street activation, there was discussion on the role of independent businesses along corridors. One member felt that

“activation” was not just about the physical design of the street and the mere presence of retail and restaurant businesses but must include thriving independent businesses. They felt that there should be more to track that.

One member said the street wall indicator was not popular at the Planning Board. They felt it could be used against good urban design and development. City staff asked if the committee wanted such specific indicators. They said the Planning Board’s sense was that it should be negotiated at a finer level.

One member asked how “active” uses was defined. They asked if bars and clubs would count as active or is its retail servicing needs. They also said zoning should have a say about hours of operation and other contributing factors to street activation. Another member added that there should be a way to measure “chainification”, as well as offices and coworking spaces taking up ground floor retail space. Another member said that corridors are where scrappy retail startups begin, and if retail rents are driven by Kendall Square office rents then the city will lose this vitality. City staff noted they could tailor the indicator on active uses to include only those that added to street life.

One member recommended removing the retail transparency indicator.

One member suggested only measuring the squares and removing corridors from the activation indicators, but other members disagreed.

Staff asked if the activation indicators as written were too specific. Members of the committee felt some of the indicators related to activation worked, while others didn’t. The committee decided to remove indicators related to curb cuts and building frontage within 5 feet of the parcel boundary.

One member said height and density were missing from the indicators. Another member said this related back to the discussion on channeling density into areas serviced by transit. They suggested a measure of transit-oriented development.

Community Wellbeing

One member of the committee said they appreciated what the City was accomplishing but said a portion of the community feels excluded from new retail and programming like skating rinks. They wondered how we can design for a more inclusive community. They also said they know this feeling is driven by changes in employment makeup in the city but felt that there must be a way to overcome differences.

One member felt the rates of foreign-born residents should also be tracked.

One member noted that public schools are more diverse than the greater population, and that’s where the energy for inclusion should be built.

One member said there should be a concerted effort to create spaces through urban design that feel more public, and less like these spaces belong to a corporation or higher education institution.

One member said the inequality between racial groups is not being tracked in these indicators. Another member said it should track education and income inequality.

Housing

One member said that Cambridge has diversity but not inclusion, and that evictions contribute to a loss in communities of color. They felt evictions must be tracked. They also said there should be a way to compare evictions in Cambridge to other cities.

Economy

No comments were offered on economy targets.

Public Comment

One member of the public said Cambridge already has a high population density. They felt if the City is making dramatic changes, those changes should be put to a referendum. They felt there wasn't enough engagement with residents of Huron Village, particularly regarding the 100% Affordable Housing zoning overlay that was advanced by Envision Cambridge's Housing Working Group and underwent an analysis and public discussion in Fall 2018. Staff noted that engagement is still underway.

One member of the public felt there was tension between the plan's goals, such as tree canopy growth and affordable housing, as well as solar generation and affordable housing. They said existing solar panels would be impacted by tall buildings. They said any redevelopment should be subject to both economic and environmental impact studies, whether the requirement was legislated or required by Planning Board norms.

A member of the public asked what policies were recommended that would relate to the indicators. City staff pointed to draft recommendations online, with existing and proposed goals, strategies, and actions. A member of the public asked about the role of demolition and the Cambridge Historic Commission. City staff said there is a specific strategy and set of actions around historical preservation in the recommendations.

One member of the public stated that diversity and equity should be supported in the zoning code. They felt there should be some way to sidestep bad feelings in the community generated by Harvard. They also said they are not in favor of segregating housing through zoning.