

City of Cambridge

The Housing and Community Development Committee held a public hearing on November 12, 1992, beginning at 5:30 p.m. in the Ackerman Room, City Hall, for the purpose of discussing the agenda for a series of hearings on the issue of citizen participation in planning and community development projects. Present at the hearing were Vice Mayor Edward N. Cyr, Chair of the Committee, Councillor Francis H. Duehay, Councillor William H. Walsh, Councillor Alice K. Wolf and City Clerk Margaret Drury.

Vice Mayor Cyr convened the hearing at 5:35 p.m. and emphasized that he viewed this meeting as an opportunity for those present to talk about what they would like to have addressed in a series of meetings on the topic of improving the processes for citizen input in city planning activities. He then introduced Councillor Wolf, who had to leave shortly for another meeting, and requested that she share her views on the matter before she had to leave.

Councillor Wolf said that this issue has long been of concern to her, and that although many times the City engages in appropriate citizen participation activities, many times it does not. She hopes that the City can institute in almost every department effective strategies to encourage and utilize citizen participation.

Councillor Duehay said that there are so many aspects to this discussion. Many City departments have boards, and involve citizens in that way. But many others do not. So many decisions are made that affect residents. In some neighborhoods there are active neighborhood associations that are involved, while others have no such involvement. In general, the City gets better decisions when residents are involved. This does not mean citizens will always be happy with the decisions. For example, where industrial and residential areas backed up to each other, different members of the public will have very different expectations. There will be differences of opinion requiring people to make compromises that they really don't want to make.

Vice Mayor Cyr said that his concerns are that too often citizens view whatever citizen participation process is being offered as a shallow one in which they are window dressing for decisions already made; and on the other hand, City professional staff view citizens as coming in to stop things that need doing from getting done. He then requested the views of the public in attendance.

Karen Larsen, 7 Austin Park, said that often people don't know about the various kinds of meetings. She suggested that meeting notices be standardized. In addition, she recommended notification of tenants as well as abutting land owners in land use issues, public endorsement by the City of neighborhood associations, and a more positive focus of meetings on what neighbors want rather than what they don't want.

Hugo Salemmé, East Cambridge Planning Team, said that there are numerous boards relating to specific functions. He strongly encourages review of where boards are needed and how boards can function in a way that directs the activities of the department head, or even replaces department heads so that as budget cuts are needed, the City can eliminate the department heads and keep the workers necessary to ongoing functioning.

John Pitkin, Chair, Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Association, said that he would like to focus on the planning aspect. A large part of planning involves developing a continuing and evolving consensus. One problem with this is the different time scales that different interests bring with them, for example, universities have long time frames, while neighborhoods often focus on a particular and immediate issue. He suggests standards (such as democracy, frequency of meetings) and a process for certifying neighborhood associations as a part of the planning process to work as partners rather than harassers or critics. Since all issues don't fall into the boundaries of neighborhoods, he also suggests having groups focused on the major squares.

Vice Mayor Cyr noted that a concern that he often hears expressed is that consulting the neighborhood groups is not contacting the neighborhood.

John DiGiovanni, 11 Story Street, said that the growth policy process conducted by the Community Development Department (CDD) worked well, even though it did not aim to develop consensus. He added that the Harvard Square Defense Fund is not a good model for neighborhood groups - it is a private corporation with closed meetings. He said that better methods of notifying parties are needed.

Geneva Malenfant, 75 Henry Street, observed that planners tend by nature to want control, while citizen participation is messy and uncontrolled, and this underlying contradiction or tension needs to be understood. She also said that in her experience, to reach resolution on difficult issues, it is important to start with the assumption that everyone in the room is seeking the best solution for the City. She added that perhaps a facilitator could be helpful in some meetings.

Jean-Robert Richard, Haitian American Cultural Center, said that more education about the process would allow for more citizen participation.

Robert Simha, 6 Blanchard Street, Director of Planning for MIT, said that this is a city made up of many subcommunities, with many gaps and divisions. There is a long history of trying to bridge gaps, and that history contains some successes and some

notable failures. In thinking about forums for debate without crisis, three examples provide direction: (1) CDD's growth policy process, which brought together diverse interests on a level playing field with a congenial attitude; (2) the Cambridgeport rezoning effort, where every conceivable technique for resolution was tried over a 20 year period. Finally there was a consensus that there had to be a resolution. But couldn't this have occurred more quickly? (3) The Town/Gown Committee, where CDD has helped by providing real information to guide decisions.

Julia Gregory, 11 Market Street, said that she was a member of the Town/Gown Committee and it left her with a question of planning for what? It takes an enormous amount of energy to be involved in so many different committees and groups and it is often not clear what meetings have to be attended to make a difference.

Richard Vendetti, 28 Winter Street, East Cambridge Planning Team, said that there needs to be a process of setting up one main group for each neighborhood that will represent the neighborhood and can consider all the issues that concern the neighborhood. He noted that there can be a problem of who controls the committees. Mr. Vendetti also added that there are problems with notification that the city does in connection with various issues. For example, for license issue, only property owners are notified, not tenants. Another example is the potential closing of the East Cambridge fire station - residents get angry when they hear things only "through the grapevine." He has found the most effective notification of residents is by going door-to-door.

John Pitkin added that he would like to see notice posts in neighborhoods to put up notices for issues affecting the neighborhoods.

Vice Mayor Cyr said that he thought that cable television could be used more for broader notification.

Scott Levitan, 11 Bigelow Street, urged the development of some better notification and process to avoid the present situations in which a citizen is presented with an action of the professional staff of the city as already decided, is frustrated and feels the necessity to go to the City Council.

Vice Mayor Cyr noted that on the part of the professional staff, there is often the experience of people being asked to participate, little interest or participation expressed, plans are created, then citizens are not happy with the result and go to the Council.

Michael Rosenberg, Assistant City Manager for Community Development, pointed out that a process that doesn't work for the public does not work for the city either.

Vice Mayor Cyr suggested that at the next meeting, the Committee look closely at a couple of past processes for decisions or projects. It was agreed that the next meeting would focus on the Cambridgeport Rezoning and the renovations of City Hall.

Vice Mayor Cyr thanked the people present for their attendance and interest and adjourned the meeting.

For the Committee,

Edward N. Cyr DMD

Councillor Edward N. Cyr
Chair

1. S-25
COMMITTEE REPORTS

Report from the Housing and Community Development Committee for a hearing held on November 12, 1992 regarding the issue of citizens participation in planning and community development projects.

In City Council,

January 11, 1993

*Accept report
Placed on file*