

City of Cambridge

The Housing and Community Development Committee held a public meeting on Tuesday, February 16, 1993 beginning at 5:55 p.m. in the Ackermann Room. Present at the hearing were: Vice Mayor Cyr, Chair of the Committee; Councillor Francis H. Duehay; D. Margaret Drury, City Clerk; and Michael Rosenberg, Assistant City Manager for Community Development.

Vice Mayor Cyr convened the meeting and proposed that the meeting focus on the rules that would create a more consistent outreach effort and some guiding principles for input. Vice Mayor Cyr said that past meetings had raised the issue of the need for notice and consistent posting that provides notification for many different kinds of meetings.

Michael Rosenberg noted that there was also discussion of how structured or unstructured planning meetings should be. He noted that some people expressed a desire to be a part of structuring the process, particularly some of those who were involved in the Cambridgeport zoning process. The Community Development Department has incorporated this input into the planning for the new open space in Cambridgeport. An initial meeting was held to discuss how the process should be structured.

Robert Simka, Director of Planning for M.I.T., said that it was striking how similar issues have been over the past 30 years. Throughout, there has been a consistent problem of how to get input from the non-activists, the ordinary residents. Mr. Rosenberg said that the Community Development Department has used surveys in several neighborhood studies to address this issue. The idea is to get data and attitudinal information and to be consistent across the neighborhoods.

Vice Mayor Cyr said that he thought the surveys were ignored by the North Cambridge Study Committee. One reason was that the committee did not shape the questions and also the committee was a self-selected group of people with a strong sense of what it wanted. Michael Rosenberg said that in all of the studies there have been marked attitudinal differences between those responding to the surveys and those participating in on the committee.

John DiGiovanni, 11 Story Street, said that it is very important that there be consistency in the rules once they are established. In response to Vice Mayor Cyr's request for an example, he cited the recent change in the fast food ordinance, which he said was done as a one shot response to a particular case. The growth policy process utilized by the Community Development Department represents a more preferable way to look at changes - within a much larger context than can be provided by one particular case. Overall, the city's processes work well. However, the issues are often so subjective that there will not be agreement.

Sue Hyde, Editor of the North Cambridge News, said that there are two parts of public input: the first is making sure that the public is informed and the second is gathering the input. She suggested considering selecting a sample from each neighborhood and canvassing that

sample. Michael Rosenberg said that that is what happens in the surveys done in connection with neighborhood studies. He asked whether there is a difference between surveys in person and by telephone. Ms. Hyde said that she thinks there is a difference. She also suggested making special efforts to contact the people who come to one meeting and then don't come back to find out why they didn't come back.

Robert Simka said that most people tend to come when they are personally impacted. Vice Mayor Cyr said that recurring problem is that the city has is in the area of whether the appropriate people are notified. Councillor Duehay said that when he was Chair of the Finance Committee, a lot of effort went into attempting to develop neighborhood budgets. That process did not work particularly well, perhaps because the neighborhood was not involved at the very beginning, with questions such as how many trees does the neighborhood want.

Vice Mayor Cyr noted that it is much easier to discuss long-term plans. The difficulties are essentially in the area of land use and municipalities have a very limited ability to affect the outcomes. It is a fundamentally contentious process. The question is how to manage this contention. Again it comes down to:

1. How do we involve people?
2. How do we get a better sense of what the consensus is?
3. How do we plan in general?

There must be a consistency and integrity to the process.

Councillor Duehay said that in some communities, where there are going to be variance requests, etc., there is a big red sign on the lot. If Cambridge had that, along with a community bulletin board, it would be beneficial.

Councillor Duehay said that if he were to spend time on the project, he would make a list of the processes, look at the legal requirement, ask the person in charge whether that notice is adequate, and then bring it all back to the committee for discussion. Thereafter, it could be codified in an ordinance. However, this would be an enormous project.

Michael Rosenberg said that the new ordinance on the disposition of public land is a good example of the questions that city agencies face regarding notification. The ordinance does not provide a list of who should be notified for the community hearing.

Councillor Duehay said that it is important to decide what level of participation is being sought. In some meetings, full participation is not sought. Ms. Hyde proposed that there be

a neighborhood group like the North Cambridge Stabilization Committee in every neighborhood.

Vice Mayor said that there is an issue as to whether these committees actually represent the neighborhood. Ms. Hyde agreed that this is a problem. She said that institutional help such as child care could make them more representative. Ms. Hyde added that another proposal is to improve communication within the neighborhood by having a newspaper like the North Cambridge Neighborhood News for every neighborhood. Councillor Duehay said that there is a new book which studies several communities with successful community processes.

Vice Mayor Cyr asked whether it would be possible for the Community Development Department to survey city departments to ask what kinds of meeting they have, who they have to notify, what are the legal notification requirements and how do they notify the public. Vice Mayor Cyr added that there should be some thought as to the quality of the notice - how to ensure that they are understandable. Michael Rosenberg agreed to do such a survey and said that the Community Development Department could also ask the departments for samples of the notices they send out.

Councillor Duehay said that legal notices are often very confusing and some explanation would help. Michael Rosenberg asked whether the City Councillors had received complaints from the public about the difficulty of understanding. Both Councillor Duehay and Vice Mayor Cyr answered in the affirmative.

John DiGiovanni suggested asking community organizations like the North Cambridge News how they notify people. Councillor Duehay agreed and said that it would be useful for the neighborhood groups to survey their neighborhoods. Vice Mayor Cyr said that West Hollywood uses a good neighborhood model. There is a requirement that the groups be democratic.

Vice Mayor Cyr suggested that the next meeting focus on looking at the data that the Community Development Department will collect data regarding how city departments notify the public.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:15 p.m.

For the Committee,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Ed Cyr", with the letters "DMS" written in smaller script to the right of the main signature.

Vice Mayor Edward N. Cyr
Chair

3.

5-94

Housing and Community Development
Report for a hearing held on
February 16, 1993 regarding the rules
to create amore consistent outreach
effort and principles for public input.

In City Council,

February 22, 1993

Report accepted
Placed on file