



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

SUSAN B. SCHLESINGER

*Assistant City Manager for
Community Development*

ELIZABETH EPSTEIN

*Deputy Director for
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To: Robert W. Healy, City Manager
From: Susan B. Schlesinger, Assistant City Manager for Community Development
Date: February 26, 1997
Re: Council Order #094, October 21, 1996 Re: report on all pending
neighborhood study reports

Status of Reports

Six neighborhood studies have been completed and published. Those include East Cambridge(1989), North Cambridge (1990), Wellington-Harrington(1995), Area 4(1995), Riverside(1995) and Neighborhood Nine (1996). The Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Study will be published by the end of March. Two new study committees have formed and will begin meeting shortly. These reports on Cambridgeport and Strawberry Hill will not be completed until Spring of 1998.

The Neighborhood Study Program

During the 1980's the City of Cambridge, along with the surrounding region, witnessed a wave of commercial growth and economic development. This growth expanded the City's tax base and created new jobs and opportunities for its residents. While many residents welcomed the prosperity, it also brought about an increasing awareness of issues which are of concern to neighborhood residents. In order to establish an action plan to address these issues, the Community Development Department initiated a program to work with neighborhood residents to identify residents' opinions regarding their neighborhood and help residents articulate their concerns and recommendations about a variety of issues in their neighborhood. Over the course of a six-to-nine month study period, the Neighborhood Study Committee reviews and discusses information about their neighborhood in regular meetings. These meetings deal with land use, housing, traffic and transportation, economic development and other issues, with information to the committee coming from a number of sources. One source of information is through presentations by staff in the Community Development Department as well as other city departments, such as the Department of Traffic, Parking and Transportation and the Historical Commission. CDD also provides to the committee an analysis of the most recent census information for the neighborhood with comparisons to past census years and the city as a whole, as well as the results of a phone survey on neighborhood perspectives on such issues as open space, development, housing and parks. This survey also is an opportunity for the Committee to gain information on key issues in the neighborhood. Another source of information for each study is input from neighborhood meetings, with the study schedules designed to be flexible enough to allow each committee to seek out public opinion in one or a number of public forums. The Committee and Community Development develop a joint set of recommendations that are intended to provide a workplan and a set of priorities for Community Development and other City departments for their work in that neighborhood.

How Neighborhood Studies Are Used

Neighborhood studies are used in a variety of ways. They are used both by the Committee and CDD to identify areas where the neighborhood is most in need in the areas of housing, open space, economic development and employment, land use, transportation, urban design and open space. The studies are used to develop appropriate strategies to address specific problems in the neighborhood, and to prioritize the use of resources in existing programs. As part of their function in setting both goals and priorities, the Neighborhood Studies may be used to set initial direction for a new planning initiative, or act as a supporting voice in establishing priorities. Often, smaller, simpler recommendations are implemented during the course of the study, while larger more complex recommendations may take a few years to integrate into the workplan of CDD and other City departments (e.g. significant roadway work). Following are examples of the programs and actions that have been taken by CDD and other City departments which have come about in part or whole as a result of the recommendations of the neighborhood studies:

Open Space and Parks

In open space planning, the neighborhood study supplements the open space inventory and provides the Open Space Committee with more detailed and neighborhood specific information on the priority for park renovations as the Committee makes recommendations for the capital budget. Program initiatives which were recommendations of neighborhood studies include the establishment of park design standards, community garden standards for operation and the open space inventory. Parks which were given high priority in neighborhood studies and subsequently recommended for renovations by the Open Space Committee include Hoyt Field, top priority in the Riverside Neighborhood Study, Harvard Street Park, recommended in the Area 4 Neighborhood Study, Gore Street Park, Kennedy Field and Silva Park in East Cambridge, Cooper Playground in the Mid-Cambridge Neighborhood Study and Don McMath Park, a recommendation of the North Cambridge Neighborhood Study.

Land Use/Urban Design

In land use and urban design, the neighborhood studies indicate the interest and need for planning studies, zoning analysis, and particular areas where density, height and streetscape are of concern. Significant planning studies which were undertaken as recommendations from neighborhood studies include the Alewife Study and the Comprehensive Planning for Trolley Square and Sheridan Square, both recommended in the North Cambridge Study, and the Harvard/Riverside design guidelines urban design study which will begin this year, a recommendation from the Riverside study. CDD efforts with the Planning Board and Board of Zoning Appeals to clarify the Special Permit criteria of the Massachusetts Overlay District was also a recommendation from the North Cambridge Study. Improving the traffic and pedestrian patterns around Porter Square, which will be important elements of the upcoming planning process to begin this spring, were recommendations in both the Neighborhood Nine and North Cambridge Studies. The current planning on Cambridge Street is an outgrowth of recommendations of the three neighborhoods along Cambridge Street (East Cambridge, Wellington-Harrington and Mid-Cambridge) to address issues of urban design and land use in this area.

Housing

In housing, neighborhood studies provide a focused examination of specific housing issues and offer recommendations which are unique to the neighborhood, as well as articulating general housing policy recommendations. A number of neighborhood studies recommended increasing efforts to support programs which support affordable homeownership, low interest loans for home repair, and increasing the supply of affordable rental units. The City has established a number of programs to address these concerns, including the Home Improvement Program and the Lead-Safe Cambridge Program to provide for increased opportunities for affordable family housing, and the Cambridge Neighborhood Apartment Housing Services to provide low-

interest loans for the rehabilitation of multifamily buildings. In response to a recommendation for improved information on housing programs and affordable homeownership, CDD produced a brochure detailing the City's housing programs, and through the Cambridge First Time Homebuyers Programs regularly offers classes in homeownership and special mortgage programs. Three neighborhood studies recommended an active role for the City in protecting the City's expiring use properties from converting to market rate housing. The affordable units in two properties, 808 Memorial Drive and 402 Rindge Avenue have been secured as affordable as a result of the City's efforts. The development of the Blouin site into affordable homeownership units was recommended in the Area 4 Study, and resulted in the sixteen unit Hampshire Homes development.

Traffic, Parking and Transportation

Traffic and transportation recommendations range from small scale extremely local issues, such as changing a crosswalk, to larger neighborhood scale issues related to traffic speed and parking. The traffic calming program formally beginning this year is the outgrowth of recommendations in numerous neighborhood studies to slow traffic on neighborhood streets. This program will also be able to take advantage of the list of specific streets and intersections of concern which are noted in a number of the studies. The Railroad Safety Study addresses a recommendation of the North Cambridge Neighborhood Study to study the feasibility of creating a pedestrian overpass in the Danehy Park area. Both Neighborhood Nine and North Cambridge recommended improvements to the pedestrian environment along Alewife Brook Parkway and Fresh Pond Parkway. CDD has worked with the MDC on the recently completed Alewife Brook Parkway improvements, and continues to work on improvement for Fresh Pond Parkway. Additionally, CDD meets with both the Traffic, Parking and Transportation and the Public Works departments when discussions related to allocation of Chapter 90 funds as well as priorities for traffic signs and signals are being determined. The Neighborhood Study recommendations are incorporated in these Department's priorities.

Economic Development and Employment

Recommendations for economic development and employment in neighborhood studies range from providing support for neighborhood business development to the establishment of job training programs. Increased assistance to small businesses, through the Cambridge Business Development Center as well as CDD Economic Development staff, was recommended in two neighborhood studies. The Women's Business Directory was an outgrowth of a recommendation in the Riverside Neighborhood Study. The current work by CDD with businesses on Cambridge Street, including a new facade improvement program, is the result of recommendations to work with residents and businesses to improve the Cambridge Street corridor. The newly established Loan Program for Small Business supports a variety of recommendations in the studies.

As noted above, the recommendations contained in Neighborhood Studies have resulted in a wide range of actions by City departments. The more specific and small scale recommendations are often effected most quickly, sometimes during the study process. Recommendations which are longer term or require significant staff and/or financial resources may take a number of years to implement. Some recommendations which are broad policy initiatives and have city-wide impact are more difficult to implement without substantial city-wide interest and support. In addition to interdepartmental efforts cited above, we will be convening a meeting with all relevant City Departments including DPW, Traffic, Parking and Transportation and Inspectional Services to further pursue implementation of recommendations from neighborhood studies.



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EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT
ROBERT W. HEALY
City Manager

RICHARD C. ROSSI
Deputy City Manager

March 3, 1997

To The Honorable, The City Council:

In response to Awaiting Report Item Number 4, relative to a report on all pending neighborhood study reports, please find a response submitted by Susan Schlesinger, Assistant City Manager for Community Development.

Very truly yours,

Robert W. Healy
City Manager

RWH/dls
attachment

Consent Agenda #11

S-128

Relative to Awaiting Report Item
Number Four, regarding a report on
all pending neighborhood study reports.

In City Council March 3, 1997

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