

City of Cambridge

NEIGHBORHOOD AND LONG TERM PLANNING

In City Council April 2, 2001

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Councillor Marjorie C. Decker, Chair

Councillor Kathleen L. Born

Vice Mayor David P. Maher

The Neighborhood and Long Term Planning Committee held a public hearing on March 20, 2001, beginning at 12:43 P.M. in the Sullivan Chamber to discuss the issue of the status of neighborhood planning committees, what has been done, implementation and feedback.

Present at the hearing were Marjorie C. Decker, Chair of the Committee, Councillor Kathleen L. Born, Councillor Kenneth E. Reeves and City Clerk D. Margaret Drury. Also present were Beth Rubenstein, Assistant City Manager for Community Development Department (CDD). Stuart Dash, Director of Neighborhood and Long Term Planning, CDD, and Elaine Thorne, Planner, CDD.

Councillor Decker convened the hearing and explained the purpose. She stated that the committee is interested in a progress report on neighborhood studies and would also like to look at the studies in conjunction with the new citywide rezoning. The meetings will take place in the neighborhoods in which the studies took place.

Ms. Rubenstein stated that the Neighborhood and Long Term Planning Committee's plan will fit well within CDD's new strategy to revisit the neighborhood studies. CDD has done neighborhood studies since the early 1980's. They have been intensive, year-long efforts, approximately two per year. About twelve have been completed. Ms. Rubenstein said that it has been noted that there is an issue of what happens when the study is completed. CDD feels that these studies have done much more than just sit on the shelf after completion. For example, renovation of parks, traffic studies, zoning changes have often come out of recommendations from neighborhood studies. CDD could have done more to inform the public of the actions that have been initiated as a result of the study committee recommendations.

With regard to this committee's interest in follow-up of neighborhood studies, CDD has proposed as part of the budget in the next fiscal year to go back to three to four neighborhoods that have been studied to review what has happened since then. CDD started this with Cambridgeport. The staff brought a spreadsheet of all of the recommendations to see what has been done. CDD's proposal is for a "sequential refreshment" of studies.

Councillor Born asked what is the ideal cycle for revisiting these studies. Ms. Rubenstein said that the staff wants to try a cycle of about three years, doing three to four

each year. The second look would not be another year-long study, but would involve substantial effort.

Councillor Born asked how the public outreach is done. Mr. Dash said that generally there is outreach to each household when the study begins. For these studies follow-up meetings, CDD will advertise widely.

Councillor Decker said that she sees a disconnect between the work that the city is doing and the City Council's knowledge of this.

Ms. Rubenstein suggested that perhaps one of the "revisit" meetings that CDD holds in the neighborhood about the neighborhood study committee report can be a joint meeting with the City Council and the Long Term and Neighborhood Planning Committee.

Councillor Born stated that she believes that this would be a good idea.

Councillor Decker emphasized the importance of integration of the work of the City Council with the neighborhood study committee recommendations. For example, when new zoning petitions come to the neighborhood, she would like to see information come to the council on how the petition relates to the neighborhood study committee recommendations.

Ms. Rubenstein said that Cambridgeport is the first neighborhood that will get a "refresher" look at the progress in implementation of the study committee recommendations.

Councillor Born asked whether the three to four-year cycle of review can be used as an opportunity for updating demographic data. She encouraged the use of GIS Technology in this regard.

Ms. Rubenstein agreed that there could be opportunities for incorporation of some of this kind of information.

Councillor Reeves suggested stepping back and looking at why the City does the studies. He likes the idea of the studies but he has not seen the impact of the studies. What is the ultimate goal of these studies?

Ms. Rubenstein said that the idea has been to take a look at what is happening in the neighborhood and to end up with a series of action items that come from the people in the neighborhood. Mr. Dash stated that as he has been looking back at the studies, he has been surprised at how many recommendations/action items are still relevant.

Councillor Reeves said that he is not sure that it is fruitful to focus on these studies.

Councillor Decker stated that the neighborhood studies are important – we could decide to broaden the focus of the studies.

Councillor Reeves asked what other cities do to look at neighborhood planning. Ms. Rubenstein said that a lot of other cities, especially progressive cities like Seattle and Portland, utilize these neighborhood studies. Councillor Reeves asked what else cities have done. Mr. Dash said that there is also topic-based planning, such as affordable housing planning.

Councillor Decker described another type of neighborhood planning, which involves bringing together issue groups, neighbors, business people and holding a charette over a couple of weekends. The goal is to facilitate honest dialog on topics where there can be conflicts, such as density and affordable housing, perhaps with a facilitator who does conflict resolution.

Councillor Reeves said that Cambridge pioneered something of this kind with the Central Square process. Central Square had a process and then it got derailed. Now there is going to be a Wendy's. If there had been a real process ongoing, could Wendy's have been stopped? Ms. Rubenstein said that she doubted it.

Councillor Reeves pointed to the Riverside issue, where the Riverside group cannot get the funding they want. Often these meetings are not grounded in history. He does wish that there could be a process like the Central Square process for Riverside that would determine whether a museum should be there.

Councillor Decker asked how the Cambridgeport study could have gotten to issues like the need for Pacific Park. Ms. Rubenstein stated that this is the kind of issue that would come out of the land use discussions in the neighborhood study committee. She emphasized the need to make choices as to the levels and issues for focus.

Councillor Decker requested a list of all the neighborhood studies and when they were done. She stated that she would like to work with Ms. Rubenstein on when these meetings will happen, and which neighborhoods should be looked at first. Councillor Decker also asked if there is a way to get the information that will be discussed distributed to residents and participants before the first meeting.

Councillor Reeves said that he wants to know what are the ingredients of a good neighborhood, and how does Cambridge measure up. For example, it is clear that in the not-too-distant future, we are going back to the neighborhood school concept. Area Four should have had a new school to remain competitive. Perhaps these committees should involve school personnel.

Councillor Decker stated that equitable distribution of benefits and resources among neighborhoods is very important and is a matter of concern for this committee. She then turned to public comment.

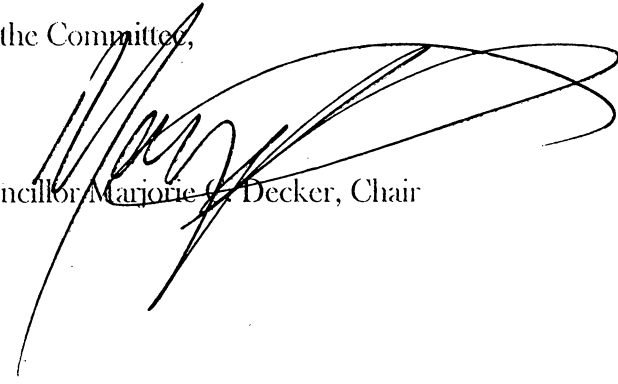
Elie Yarden, 143 Pleasant Street, stated that neighborhoods are people, and their networks have a very important effect on neighborhood planning. The census should include all ages of residents. He suggested that looking at earlier neighborhood studies as well as the most recent one would be useful. He gave the example of the need for a pedestrian way through Trader Joe's parking lot for kids going to the Morse School, which has been brought up for years.

Stash Horowitz, 12 Florence, praised CDD for its work over the three years of the citywide rezoning. The September recommendation was the envy of many surrounding cities. He hopes that Cambridge can return to this. Mr. Horowitz said that Cambridge can return to this. Mr. Horowitz said that there is the factor of citizen apathy with regard to public meetings, for example, he got three notices of the upcoming Housing Committee Community meeting. He would like to see neighborhood planning councils like the ones in Boston. They are built upon neighborhood associations to which the mayor appoints additional members. All developers must first go before the neighborhood council. Such a process would empower individual neighborhoods.

Councillor Decker thanked those present for their participation.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:55 p.m.

For the Committee,


Councillor Marjorie G. Decker, Chair

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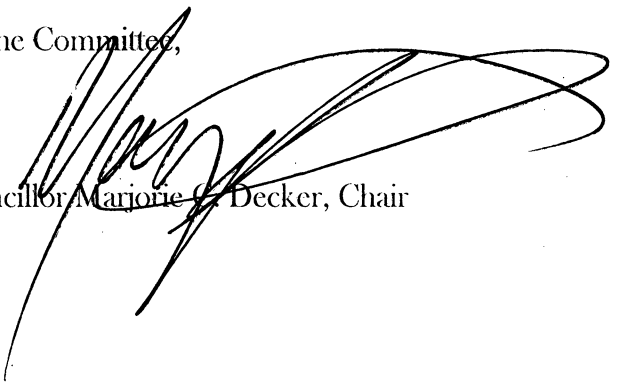
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For the Committee,


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Committee Report #4

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Report Accepted

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