



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

PLANNING BOARD

CITY HALL ANNEX, 344 BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139

Date: March 26, 2024

Subject: 2023 Town-Gown Reports and Presentations

To the Honorable, the City Council,

On February 13, 2024, the Cambridge Planning Board met to hear the annual Town-Gown presentations from Lesley University, Harvard University, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Each of these schools had submitted a 2023 Town-Gown report, which were reviewed by the Planning Board and made available to the public. Hult International Business School provided a report but did not give a presentation, because they are only asked to present every other year.

The Town-Gown reporting process provides information about the educational missions of the universities, their current and future programs, and development plans for the physical campus. The presentations and reports cover topics such as enrollment and staffing, housing, facilities needs, sustainability and resilience, connections with the broader community, and efforts around diversity, equity, and inclusion. This knowledge gives the Planning Board a better understanding of how individual projects fit into an institution's broader plans.

After the institutions' presentations and public comment, Planning Board members made observations and asked questions of the institutions. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Planning Board voted to send the following summary of Board questions and comments to the City Council:

- Overall, Planning Board members thanked the institutions for their participation and for their contributions to making Cambridge a wonderful place. Board members were impressed by the institutions' reports and presentations and were encouraged by their commitment to the Town-Gown process over more than two decades. It was noted that the relationship between the institutions and the community had been much more contentious in the past, and that relationship has improved due to better communication on the part of the institutions.
- There is much to be gained from institutions working together on important planning issues both locally and globally. Board members would appreciate more focus on how institutions work with each other on shared issues such as sustainability.
- Board members appreciated the overview provided by Scott Walker, the City's new Senior Manager for Data Services. It would be interesting to know more about how

Cambridge's characteristics compare with other communities that are home to major educational institutions.

- The ability for community members to visit shared spaces, often at no charge, is one of the valued contributions the universities make to Cambridge. Board members praised the recent decision to make the Harvard Art Museums open to the public and asked if other institutions would consider similar policies. MIT's "open house" event held years ago was hailed as an example of a positive way to connect with the community, along with everyday campus spaces like food courts and open spaces that are open to the public. Some campus spaces have felt less accessible since the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Harvard and MIT were commended for their focus on independent, local, women-owned and minority-owned businesses as a way to promote economic inclusion in campus programming and procurement. Board members also praised the institutions' support of longstanding community service organizations such as Food for Free. A Board member recognized the contributions of Paul Parravano, MIT's Co-Director of Government and Community Relations, who passed away recently.
- As large owners of land, institutions play an important role in supporting retail. Board members noted that vacant ground-level space has had a negative impact. The retail character in Porter Square was raised as a particular concern. To benefit their own campuses and the community at large, institutions should work to activate ground-level retail, even if some subsidy is needed.
- Board members asked about the future of other important institutionally owned sites. One is Harvard's Loeb Drama Center, currently home to the American Repertory Theater which is moving to a new facility in Allston. The Lesley-owned surface parking lots on Massachusetts Avenue at Porter Square were also identified. Lesley's representatives said they were working with a broker to market those sites.
- It would be helpful to hear more about the institutions' vision and approach to the public realm, not just building projects, in future Town-Gown reports and presentations. Board members appreciated Lesley's focus on landscape, native plants, and accessibility for people with disabilities as it goes through substantial campus transformation.
- While the institutions' tree inventories are very helpful, Board members would appreciate more information on tree canopy and how it has changed over time, reflecting the goals of the City's Urban Forest Master Plan.
- The institutions have shown strong leadership on sustainability and climate resilience. In the spirit of collaboration, Board members encouraged institutions to measure the overall impacts of their efforts and share data with each other and the larger community. Other institutions and entities could learn lessons to make campus environments more resilient. MIT was also commended for mitigating environmental impacts on the Charles River as an example of how similar efforts could be undertaken.

- Board members asked for more information about how on-site renewable energy is being implemented on campuses. Board members also encouraged more indoor secure bicycle parking to encourage bicycling as an option for community members.
- Affordable housing remains a major priority of the city. The institutions were commended for recent actions to support housing production for their own communities and the larger community; they were encouraged to keep up those efforts. In future reporting it would be helpful to clarify how student housing for families is counted in the institutions' housing supply.
- The proliferation of telecommunications antennas on significant campus buildings remains a concern because of their visual impact on neighborhoods. Institutions were again encouraged to reconsider what they have allowed in the past and what they will allow in the future.

Respectfully submitted for the Planning Board,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary T. Flynn". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped "M" and "F".

Mary Flynn, Chair.