



## CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

Alanna Mallon  
*City Councillor*

TO: Donna Lopez, City Clerk

FROM: Councillor Alanna Mallon

DATE: May 2, 2019

SUBJECT: Submission - Arts Task Force Meeting Notes

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Please place the attached notes from the seventh meeting of the Mayor's Arts Task Force on the City Council Agenda as "Communications and Reports from Other City Officials" for the April 11<sup>th</sup> meeting.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alanna Mallon".

Councillor Alanna Mallon

## ***Mayor's Arts Task Force - Meeting #7***

*Cultural District*

*Location: The Dance Complex*

*Date: April 11th, 2019*

*Start: 5:39PM*

*Attending as members of the Task Force were: Councillor Alanna Mallon, Chair; Liana Ascolese, Executive Assistant to the Task Force and Legislative Aide to Councillor Mallon; Afiyah Harrigan, Mayor's Office Liaison; Ellen Ellen Shakespear, Co-Founder of Spaceus; Geeta Pradhan, President and CEO of the Cambridge Community Foundation; David De Celis, Public Art Commission; Kristina Latino, CEO of Cornerscape; Jason Weeks, Executive Director of the Arts Council; Michael Monestime, Executive Director of the Central Square Business Association; Jero Nesson, Founder of Artspace; Lisa Peterson, Deputy City Manager; Khalil Mogassabi, Community Development Department; Eryn Johnson, Executive Director of the Community Art Center; James Pierre, visual artist; Kelly Sherman, visual artist; Peter DiMuro, Executive Director of the Dance Complex; Luis Cotto, Program Manager at the Massachusetts Cultural Council*

Councillor Mallon thanked everyone for attending and thanked Mr. DiMuro for offering to host at the Dance Complex. Tonight's meeting is about the Cultural District in Central Square, which is an exciting conversation for us, because we've been working up to talking about this special place. Luis Cotto is joining us once again to talk about Cultural Districts Statewide and inform us of best practices. She informed the group that we would be doing three breakout sessions tonight to talk about different aspects of the Cultural District:

1. Events and programming
2. Marketing and branding
3. Equity and community

Councillor Mallon informed the group that the Cultural District was just re-designated, so we should ask where we want to be in five years when we re-designate again, and backwards map from there. We need to ensure diversity, inclusion, and equity that we know can exist in the Square. We need neighborhood representation and equity in the arts mediums so that everyone can feel represented and empowered.

Councillor Mallon introduced Mr. DiMuro to give a brief welcome, and stated that Mr. Monestime and Mr. Weeks, who are co-directors of the Cultural District, will give a presentation of the District, and Mr. Monestime will talk about the possibilities that will be available with the BID. Next, we'll move into the breakout sessions and do an idea swap to wrap up the meeting.

Mr. DiMuro welcomed everyone to the Dance Complex. He explained that there was a theater tech class going on above us, with five more studios above that. They also have an after-school program, modern dance, Afro-Caribbean dance, and something generally going on every night. He joked that he infiltrated our handouts with information about the Dance Complex and what they have and do, plus information about their budget and money serves as a reality check for what arts organizations deal with day to day. He also announced that we may have some surprise visitors throughout the meeting, and not to be surprised if they burst into song or dance.

Mr. Weeks presented a deck of images that were original to asset mapping when Central Square was first designated as a Cultural District. He stated that this was a recommendation from the *Red Ribbon Report on the Concerns and Delights of Central Square*. The Cultural District began when Anita Walker from the Massachusetts Cultural Council began to think about Cultural Districts and communities, along with cultural economic development. Central Square was seen as an opportunity for this and the City applied for the designation. Much of this work contained asset mapping seen here, along with community conversations and gatherings. He stated that the team looked at the cultural assets in Central that were significant: schools, churches, open space, and more - and that the boundaries originally started all the way at Broadway because the Central Square area had so many assets. He stated that although MCC wanted to only designate a small, walkable space, there's also a larger constellation of assets that are still part of the District. The map was a negotiation that took several conversations to figure out the map. The Mayor and City Council also needed to buy into the process and did so fully, as the language of the resolution states that the City is totally behind this. He stated that most importantly, the residents and community organizations were very supportive of a Cultural District designation.

Mr. Weeks continued with the slideshow showing the original banners on cross streets announcing the Cultural District. They had to think about branding. Originally, no money was attached to the designation. He stated that Central Square and its values led it to become an area of focus for the City once it became a Cultural District. The River Festival was moved to Central to energize this opportunity and was therefore 2 years before the jazz festival was moved to University Park for 3 years. He stated there was a combination of historic and new events. He gave examples of the Dumpling Festival, Taste of Cambridge, and the Together Festival.

Mr. Weeks continued on about the Cultural District Values, and that there were 4 key values and goals that were identified to the MCC. We have an opportunity to look at these again and rethink them to make sure what we're talking about and how we brand is something we all believe in.

Mr. Weeks stated that during year 5 of the designation, Mr. Monestime came on as the Director of the CSBA, which was an opportunity for the District to build on what they had done previously. The 25th anniversary of the Dance Complex was celebrated, there was a brand refresh and the Central Square Mural Project. Representatives from MCC and other Cultural Districts from all over the State were invited to come to Central Square for a celebration and all-day meeting and workshops as they were in the midst of painting the IDEO building.

Mr. Monestime pointed out the vibrancy of the Square within the Dance Complex and right outside the window. His presentation included highlighting events, the murals, brand presentation, and the Taste of the BID.

Mr. Monestime highlighted the events that have gone on in the Square recently: The Flea with over 100 artisans, food trucks, live performances with opportunities for community building from elders to youth to families, Joyce Chen's birthday celebration and dumpling festival, Dragon and Lion dancer, and the upcoming Mexican Street Food Festival on April 28th with mariachi bands, a sangria bar, and street food vendors. These events bring a lot of people to the Square, which supports small businesses who report higher sales during events.

Mr. Monestime highlighted the gala at Sonia with a pop-up performance by the Dance Complex and comedy by improv. He also highlighted the Loving Day Event, where they held an actual wedding that was contributed to entirely by businesses in the Square.

He talked about the pop up 5th Friday during the Taste of the BID, which featured a pop-up gallery with Bridgesound, and that even the folks who hang out in Carl Barron plaza during the day came in to participate in the event. It was similar to the City dance party.

He stated that the Central Square murals took \$140,000 to raise on their Patronicity platform to unlock the grant from Mass Development. MIT was a huge contributor as was the City, CCF, the Arts Council, and Biomed Realty. The mural project led to repurposed signs, added murals over old graffiti, and highlighted the duality of Central Square during the day and night, as a historic neighborhood and a social service node. The murals contribute to the vitality of the Square. The CSBA worked with Ms. Johnson and the kids at the Community Art Center to paint the electrical boxes. He stated that the murals were inspiring other young artists in the City, who based their projects off of them. The Central Square Library mural was recently decommissioned, but a photo of it will go up next to the new library mural which is coming later in the year.

Mr. Monestime stated that they re-branded the Square by replacing negative connotations with positive connotations. The CSBA went over the visual lens of Central Square by observing the colors of businesses and notable institutions, activity and movement, and spontaneous interactions. This all led to the color wheel C.

Mr. Monestime explained what a BID is by quickly saying that it's when property owners, government, merchants, and nonprofits come together for the good of the District. There are 8 in the Commonwealth and over 1,000 in North America. He explained that the enabling legislation in Massachusetts was 40-O. The BID can encapsulate our vision through the assessment of what property owners will pay, and supplemental services will be beyond the capacity of City government. This is a great time to think about the Cultural District through economic development and the community so that we can build, foster, and retain what we have. Mr. Monestime stated that he liked Ms. Johnson's saying that we should think about placemaking vs. place-keeping. We need to think about how we keep Central Square the authentic place that it is in the face of growing pressure.

Mr. Monestime stated that 70% of the District has signed on in support and the petition will be delivered to the City government. The City Council will vote, and he asked that everyone on the Task Force support the BID.

Councillor Mallon stated that this was an exciting time in Central Square. The BID is coming online, the City is getting involved with direct funding for the Cultural District, and a culmination of recent events makes the Square's standing more powerful: the success of the mural project and the fact that people are getting excited about Central. She described being at an arts fundraiser recently where all of the artwork was inspired by Central because it's funky and creative, but we should be asking ourselves how to bring it to the next level and really keep this a great place for the neighborhood as well. Two thirds of residents live in an around Central Square, and as we move forward we need to ask how we're integrating the neighborhood, maintaining equity for residents, and a diversity of art.

Councillor Mallon said she thinks about Malia Lazu's presentation every time she plans a meeting. We need to ask how we think about how bias comes up in our conversations as well as bias in art more generally. Equity is the lens we need to see these policies through. When we brand, who is it for? Do arts and events represent the neighborhood and people around us? She explained that members of the Task Force could choose a breakout session, but to remember to come to the session with a diversity and equity lens. She asked about a civic compact for the district and instructed everyone to think about the values that Mr. Weeks called out and how to reframe those in an equitable way.

*\*Task Force broke out into their three working groups\**

Before the groups reported back, Councillor Mallon asked Luis Cotto from the Massachusetts Cultural Council to speak. She stated that he was here to talk from not only his perspective as Program Manager but also as a resident of Central Square.

Mr. Cotto introduced himself as the Program Manager for the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a job he has held for six months. He stated that he would like to acknowledge this work and space of indigenous peoples. He stated that Central Square is unlike any other district because he lives here and has a responsibility for this space. He stated that it's important to ask who this space is for, and that the last three weeks have been good in Cambridge: the passing of the bike ordinance, the concept of an affordable housing overlay, but that art and culture do not belong in a vacuum, and that there are so many extenuating circumstances. It's great to have protected bike lanes, but if people can't afford to be here, who are they for? He stated that he is privileged to live in Central and be in a City with wonderful resources and that he loves the Square. He stated that he walks Central at 10pm with his family and that there's always something happening, but the same time it's not overprogrammed.

Mr. Cotto stated that there are 46 Cultural Districts right now and they are all very varied. He believes every City has a Cultural District, but the State designation only means that there's been a process. He spoke about the walkability of Central Square and the uniqueness of people being able to self-navigate, that they don't really need boundaries. He stated that he loves that the sign for Central Square is in the middle of the Square and doesn't define or mark boundaries of where culture "ends."

He used the example of Maynard's Cultural District as a small town, and that they do work with a lot of artists to focus on place-keeping. He stated that place-making is often for outsiders.

He cited the best practice example of Lowell, because they don't benefit from the resources or "shine" of Boston and Cambridge, but they have had an arts and culture plan since the 1980s. The job of MCC isn't to dictate what is arts and culture, that is up to the community. He stated that backwards mapping like we're doing in this meeting is a great exercise and used the example of Egleston Square and their identity of promoting literacy, and how that became central to their brand as a district.

He stated the impressiveness of Central Square's assets: dance, skits, improv. There's not much to compare Central to because it's an impressive district, and MCC is using Central as a context for how they want to be better. He stated the way the Task Force is run is unique – reports aren't just

written at the end of six months and left on a shelf, the City is actually responding to the direct need.

Councillor Mallon thanked Mr. Cotto for his comments and introduced Ms. Johnson's breakout group as the first group to report back.

*Ms. Johnson's group reported back on equity and community in the Square:*

Ms. Johnson stated that her group's work was a reminder of the Task Force's work from the second meeting. They discussed institutional, structural, and implicit bias, and that public art often favors national artists over local artists. They discussed how money and ownership equate to decision making power, and diversity "markers" vs. real commitment. Ms. Johnson stated that her group further discussed zoning, permitting, and licensing, and how they restrict artists who already have limited time and means. The group also discussed neutralizing art so as not to offend the general public, and how this isn't actually art for the whole community because it does not foster questions or curiosity. They discussed how visual arts are prioritized over performing arts and the barriers that reinforce this – music can't be played without a license, graffiti and hip hop often aren't considered art, and major institutions own much of the art in Cambridge. The group also discussed the challenges of philanthropy and where money goes, because 80% of money contributed to the arts in Boston goes to the Boston Ballet or Boston Symphony, which are both major institutions.

Ms. Johnson's group also made a list of to dos for the BID: having a diverse board that includes artists, arts organizations, and businesses and cultural institutions. We need mechanisms to check ourselves and multiple ways to interact and belong. The BID needs to take care of artists, including having studios with live-in areas. The BID should have a set of bylaws that says they'll work only with companies with diverse boards. They also addressed existing inequities of Central, such as arts organizations not working together, the T station not being accessible, and the ability to perform in Carl Barron Plaza.

Mr. Cotto replied that he liked the idea of diversity of board for the BID, because property owners have to sign off on having a BID, but who are they representing? They probably don't have diverse boards.

Mr. Monestime stated that he added into the BID petition that the BID would be a convener for nonprofits and businesses to build relationships that didn't already exist.

Councillor Mallon asked the group if they had thoughts about Ms. Johnson's point about mechanisms to check ourselves on diversity.

Mr. DiMuro stated that these were great suggestions but there's conflict and territory over art forms. We need ways to problem solve and state our policies, and a living document that changes when problems change. He described that at the Dance Complex, they take all suggestions from the year and have a series of community meetings from December through January to discuss changes to recommend to the board. They then change operations and even bylaws if necessary.

Councillor Mallon stated that we can build in equity and diversity into the values of Central Square statement, which could be a way to always go back and check ourselves.

Ms. Johnson stated that there was a turning point in her group's conversation when they discussed the difference between hitting diversity markers and actually emphasizing diversity. We need to highlight certain cultures and ask what the actual positions of power are and who is in them. Who is empowered to make decisions and what is their long-term commitment? We need to be truly critical about where power lies.

Mr. DiMuro stated that power and equity shift, and at a future time, there may be a different "other" in the room, and we need to be able to hold the future accountable to always bring someone new to the table.

Ms. Harrigan suggested that Carl Barron Plaza be a street performing area where performers could bypass zoning and licensing issues, which would put the arts at the center of the Square. Arts and culture can connect here and be seen, and there are also seats where people can gather and appreciate art.

Councillor Mallon stated that the whole area is being redesigned and reimaged through a reconstruction, and that the committee should be able to incorporate ideas from the Task Force.

Mr. Mogassabi stated that there will be a community meeting which would be a good opportunity to bring our ideas.

Mr. De Celis emphasized the importance of institutions like, but not limited to, Harvard and MIT, and what they have to offer in terms of public-private partnerships. He stated that kids should be equally comfortable walking through Harvard Yard and walking through Central Square. How we include these initiatives is important.

Ms. Latino stated that we all have an individual responsibility to be checking ourselves and our own power, and how to bring new people into the conversation. Lots of people want to be more involved and there are more people who could be sitting in these chairs. We all need to ask ourselves how to create more space, and sometimes the best thing that we can do is step back and let others take over.

Councillor Mallon asked if the Cultural District had a committee or commission.

Mr. Weeks said yes but it hasn't been convened since redesignation.

Councillor Mallon stated this might be a good opportunity, because when you serve on a board too long, you need to step back and allow a fresh face.

*Mr. Monestime's group reported back on branding and marketing of the Square:*

Mr. Monestime stated that his group discussed other cities that know how to market and brand themselves, such as Salem, MA and Nashville, TN. These cities embraced their identities as music capitals or their history of witches, Halloween, spookiness. We need to celebrate who we are and what our brand is. The group discussed that Central is welcoming, inclusive, unique, spontaneous, and has a sense of discovery.

The group asked who we were attracting and the desire to utilize the neighborhoods as assets and attract residents in. Central is a special place in Greater Boston – it's just over the river and is connected to so many different communities. It has a student population of MIT and Harvard, a youth culture, and is home to young people and families. Can schools become an audience?

The group wanted the Square to be less regulated to evolve and grow on its own – too much regulation alters what the Square is. The group wants to bring in local youth to get people walking through the neighborhood, and employ them at businesses so they become invested, part of the ecosystem, and share in the Square's prosperity. We need to give communities access by going to their meetings and making ourselves present to speak about what's available.

The group talked about printing a monthly local zine that lists every event during a particular time. The group also wanted way finding to unique and hidden pockets in the Square.

Mr. Monestime talked about a recent field trip to an arts maker-space in Providence, RI called AS220. He talked about the idea of "community curators", which the group learned about in Providence, and wanted to bring the idea to Central Square to have "district takeovers." Different people from the community would be given the "keys" to Central Square so that they could produce their own event. This could also happen in the virtual world with list serves, hashtags, and logos. Efforts shouldn't be siloed but involved the entire community.

*Ms. Sherman's group reported back on events and programming in the Square:*

Ms. Sherman stated that her group focused on experiencing art and asking what we're doing, who it's for, and what's possible. She listed the events that already happen such as River Fest, food festivals, the dance party, programming on City Hall lawn, murals, and graffiti. She stated that spontaneous events capture imagination and the idea of collision was very inspiring.

Ms. Sherman asked what we imagine at each event, but also how we invite spontaneous artistic activities. We need to encourage people with smaller platforms. They also discussed architectural invitations like blank walls and areas with benches. The group discussed "audience hacks", which involve the mixing and mingling of audiences who would normally all go to a different event or bringing together people who were previously siloed. The Square could riff on the idea of little free libraries by hosting little free museums, something she's experience before. Ms. Sherman focused on spontaneous artforms like buskers who have real crowds for a short window of time, gospel singing that's happened, or partnering with Albertine or Bow Press for pop-up print making. The group wants to continue events like 5<sup>th</sup> Friday.

The group also talked about activating the busy time of 5pm, before night falls and activities start, but work has just let out. There is potential here.

They also discussed activities in the spirit of participatory budgeting – we can invite the community and youth to do something arts-related that's totally up to them.

The group also discussed partnering with property owners including City Hall to activate "endangered space" for artists, asking how artists can stake out these properties and make them their own.



Councillor Mallon asked about the proposal about youth activation and the process of getting some grant money. She stated that youth don't feel like Central Square is for them, but that they need to have a stake in the game.

Mr. Monestime stated that we don't have to create something new, we can use the Community Art Center or CCTV.

Ms. Latino asked if we could do a zine every month, getting different visual artists to make it every month.

Mr. DiMuro stated that we need to find a balance between the Arts Council and the Cultural District and take care of artists who have made a life out of their craft. We can't always just go for the low hanging fruit. Something deep needs to happen too.

Ms. Johnson stated the need to throw our net wider than just art. We need to ask who is creating culture in our communities, and we'll get so many more people participating in this way.

Councillor Mallon made closing remarks.

*The meeting was adjourned at 7:42pm.*