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Cambridge City Councillor

Attached is a copy of the December 2018 design review comments and recommendations regarding the Envision illustrated plan for the Quadrangle. This document highlights the plans missing elements that directly relate to the Council and surrounding neighborhood's goals. It has been three years since this document was first released, and still no response or actual urban design plan has been prepared or discussed.

The approved Envision Policy Order was supposed to include planning policies and urban design solutions. A good urban design plan must include analysis, vision, implementation strategies and design guidelines – all unified to balance a design that integrates all actors' needs.

The attached memo contains basic urban design principles, needs, and approaches based on known observations and many discussions.

Please respond to the content and realistic approach presented in this document and inform us as to what urban design progress has been achieved since the Envision plan was last printed.

Alewife Urban Design Presentation - Design Review Comments

Neighborhood & Long-Term Planning, Public Facilities, Arts & Celebration Committee
Chair/Councillor Carlone Design Review Comments and Recommendations

INTRODUCTION

Recently the Neighborhood & Long-Term Planning* Committee met to review the City's Envision Plan, including the proposed Alewife Urban Design Plan. Any urban design plan, and its resulting build-out, affects the entire city and region. Just as we should maximize all opportunities, we must also fully address any constraints.

My recommendations, found on pages 2-5, include specific design refinements and additions that will more directly reflect the City Council's goals (highlighted below).

CITY COUNCIL GOALS, 2017-2021

1. Increase access to affordable housing for all income groups.
2. Ensure that Cambridge offers economic and educational opportunity [in particular Pre-Kindergarten programs] to all.
3. Deepen our commitment to sustainable use of energy and strengthen our capacity for resilience.
4. Expand and deepen community engagement [with necessary social infrastructure].
5. Develop more proactive, inclusive, and transparent city planning process.
6. Make it easy to move safely through the City, especially by sustainable modes of transportation.
7. Increase opportunities for all residents to enjoy the City's open spaces.
8. Ensure that Cambridge remains an Innovation Hub that integrates businesses of all sizes into a thriving ecosystem.
9. Improve Council's capacity to collaborate more effectively, make better decisions, and increase its accountability to the public.
10. Ensure City's budget allocates resources responsibly and responsively.
11. Ensure Public Safety efforts reflect current and emerging challenges and opportunities in a way that incorporates Cambridge's core values.
12. Eliminate Bias within the City workplace and wider community.

* Neighborhood & Long-Term Planning, Public Facilities, Arts, & Celebration Committee

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Envision: Urban Form Recommendations Hearing November 29, 2018



Cambridge Community Development Urban Design Plan

OVERVIEW (CITY COUNCIL GOAL 5)

Community Development's updated plan, a significant improvement over the previous Envision plan, incorporates many of the concepts highlighted by the Envision community process and several City Council public policies. However, there are unmet public policy issues and implementation aspects that need to be fully addressed, including the Quadrangle's isolation, lack of social infrastructure, housing and transportation concerns, environmental needs, and more.

URBAN CONNECTIONS (CITY COUNCIL GOALS 3, 6, AND 10)

1. Necessary Connections to Redline Station and Triangle

The Quadrangle's development, viability, and future livability are linked to the quality of its connections to the surrounding area, which presently are minimal. The plan currently includes one pedestrian and bicycle bridge over the railroad tracks. Unless this bridge incorporates a bus shuttle system, public access will be greatly limited for at least 3-4 months due to winter weather. Given the Quadrangle's large size, a second bridge should be added to connect Smith Place, the area's logical main street. Having two bridges would increase the likelihood of a successful shuttle-bus system that would link the Red Line and Triangle to the Quad and nearby Cambridge Highlands.

2. Future Commuter Rail Station:

The area's development will justify a regional commuter rail station on the existing rail right-of-way. The most likely station location is adjacent to and between the existing Fresh Pond Parkway Bridge and the city proposed pedestrian (and shuttle) bridge. The station will provide the MBTA with at least one significant air rights development. Both opportunities should be included in the plan.

3. Concord Avenue

A coordinated system of Concord Avenue traffic lights at two block intervals is required for the Quadrangle & Environs to have safe and clear pedestrian/bicycle access south to the adjacent Fresh Pond Reservation.

BALANCE OF LAND USES (CITY COUNCIL GOALS 1, 2, 4, 5, AND 10)

4. Use Projections

Cambridge's past emphasis on commercial development over residential development inadvertently helped create the current scarcity of housing. This has resulted in dramatic rent and purchasing cost increases over the last 20 years. Although the City Council has emphasized a greater priority for new housing, Community Development earlier presentations indicated a development goal of 60% commercial and 40% residential square footage, which matches the 1990's strategies for Kendall Square and Cambridge Crossing. The most recent urban design plan appears to propose even greater commercial (industrial/office uses) density than previously stated. What are the actual square footage projections of each basic use as shown in the plan: residential, office, industrial, institutional, public space, and roads and ways?

5. Social Infrastructure/Civic Needs

Local libraries, schools, and playing fields create a social fabric and sense of identity that foster casual interaction in every Cambridge neighborhood. The Envision process has also indicated a growing need for a new school (800 students) and pre-Kindergarten facilities within ten years. However, the urban design plan incorporates none of these civic necessities. Where will teenagers and adolescents play safely after school? Where can they and the elderly go in bad weather? An isolated neighborhood needs its own social resources – or it will fail as a community.

TRANSPORTATION IMPACTS (CITY COUNCIL GOALS 3, 5, AND 6)

6. Congestion Reality and Its Relationship to Building Use Type

Given Alewife's serious traffic concerns and the planned emphasis on office development (which we know creates 3 to 4 times greater traffic impacts than equivalently sized residential projects), the city must plan and build with increased urgency and responsibility. This means significantly increasing the amount of residential development and implementing the necessary, major transit improvements highlighted above. Otherwise, area residents and employees will neither easily enter or leave their neighborhood, nor will they feel like part of the greater Cambridge community.

GREEN DESIGN AND OPEN SPACE SYSTEM (CITY COUNCIL GOALS 3, 5, 6, AND 7)

7. Design Strategy and Detailed Calculation

The proposed plan consists of two residential scaled open spaces (one appropriately at each side of Smith Place) and one diagonally oriented linear park, which connects the proposed pedestrian bridge to Concord Avenue at the Smith Place intersection. While these three public spaces show well-designed intent, they do not provide the amount or kinds of open space needed for such a large district. Especially, a district that is cut off from other surrounding open space systems and playfields. Furthermore, it appears that most of the planned commercial properties are not depicted with adjacent open space as previously recommended by staff.

The greatest number of proposed trees appears to be street trees. What standards are being considered to enhance street tree viability? What is the percentage of porous versus non-porous coverage in the plan? Given the propensity for flooding, a greater amount of water retention open space and tree cover is required.

8. Diagonal Linear Park

Most, if not all, successful linear parks are bordered, on at least one side, by an active public access road, which provides an informal means of security. The Fenway in Boston is a nearby example for such a bordering public road. This could be a low-speed, one-way road given the overly tight width of the proposed open space.

9. Green or Solar Panel Roof

Given the area's environmental sensitivity, new buildings should incorporate a green roof (water retention, insulation and communal needs) or a solar energy system to offset the building's negative impacts on carbon generation. A community solar array would satisfy this requirement.

URBAN DESIGN STRUCTURE (CITY COUNCIL GOALS 4, AND 6)

10. Street Pattern and Block Size

The proposed residential areas have an appropriate fine-grain street pattern in the spirit of Cambridge. However, the northwest industrial/office sector has supersized blocks (as large as 350' x 1000') that need to be broken down in scale to integrate better with the residential blocks. Fortunately, the drawn access right-of-ways through these large blocks can easily become public streets to make this sector less office park-like and more urban, resulting in virtually the same amount of development.

11. Retail/Main Street Location

All existing Cambridge retail districts are on main travel roads with multiple intersecting secondary streets. Previous city presentations highlighted Wilson Road (approximately 700 feet north of and parallel to Concord Avenue) as the Quadrangle's retail street. However, Smith Place with its direct connection to the heavily travelled Concord Avenue and the potential second bridge over the railroad tracks to Cambridgepark Drive on the north, is a significantly more viable street for retail/neighborhood services including a greater number of street connections.

Future buildings on Concord at Smith Place should include retail to help announce this street to passers-by.

12. Alewife Square

This proposed public space located between Fresh Pond Parkway and Danehy Park appears to be more like an office park green than a city square and should be redesigned. An urban retail node and square should better reflect that intent. There are excellent examples of similar, successful developments.

13. Scale of Development Adjacent to Sancta Maria Facility

Although it is appropriate to have smaller residential development immediately abutting existing Cambridge Highlands residences, Concord Avenue sites next to Sancta Maria (which itself is a buffer to the neighborhood) require a more dense/urban scale of housing similar to other proposed buildings on the Avenue.

PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS AND GOALS (CITY COUNCIL GOALS 5, AND 10)

14. Public Works and Fire Departments

Both departments have lacked sufficient facilities for years. City officials considered purchasing land in the northwest of the quadrangle for a new Public Works center and Fire Department training center. Given the large amount of land presently under control by a few key developers, serious efforts should still be undertaken to incorporate these public needs. A district fire station should be considered through negotiation prior to and during the Special Permit process.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND NEXT STEPS (CITY COUNCIL GOAL 5)

A great opportunity exists in the Quadrangle & Environs. No one wants to repeat the past mistakes of the nearby Triangle with its disjointed development, dead-end street pattern, traffic congestion, insufficient public domain and lack of public activity. The most current urban design plan is a major step forward but needs to be more responsive and enhanced. The above urban design recommendations will hasten the transformation of the area to best reflect public goals and needs, which build on making Alewife a desirable and memorable part of Cambridge.

15. Additional Questions

Several important questions still remain. Who is the key landowner/developers in the area and what land do they own? What are their stated interests and plans?

What are the proposed Design Review Standards and Process? If the city does not lead the effort, how will developers contribute to building all needed civic infrastructure and amenities?

Respectfully submitted, Dennis Carlone